

Exit the Simulation: Lessons in Mental Wellbeing from the AI-Mediated Intimacy Economy

The digital landscape is transitioning from an attention-based to an AI-mediated intimacy economy, presenting both new therapeutic opportunities and profound challenges for human mental wellbeing. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, this presentation examines how AI companions create powerful emotional connections that may feel authentic but are, in fact, simulated. The core question is: how do we empower ourselves to "Exit the Simulation" and cultivate genuine human connection in this new reality?

This talk will explore key lessons learned from the rapid evolution of AI companions. We will examine the critical importance of digital literacy and critical reasoning, using real-world examples to illustrate the dangers of emotional dependence on AI and the need for safeguards. We will discuss the ethical complexities of "digital resurrection," where the voices of the deceased are cloned by AI, and its implications for the grieving process. These challenges, while significant, offer invaluable insights into how we can proactively shape the future of our digital interactions.

In addition, recent studies and reports from 2024-2025 highlight a growing but controversial relationship between psychedelics, AI companion chatbots, and mental health therapy. Experts strongly caution against replacing human therapists with AI during psychedelic experiences, noting that therapy in these contexts often requires minimal conversation and careful attunement to emotional and physiological states that AI currently cannot provide. Psychedelic therapy involves inward-focused states where human presence offers a nuanced balance of silence and support, difficult for chatbots designed for engaging dialogue to replicate. The risks include poor emotional attunement, the potential for misleading advice, and safety issues during altered states of consciousness.

This session proposes a framework for future research. This framework aims to develop metrics and impact scales to measure the influence of AI companions on a user's perception of authenticity and their preparedness to critically evaluate advice.

Ultimately, this presentation offers a roadmap for moving beyond the pitfalls of simulated intimacy. By understanding the mechanisms of AI-mediated connection, we can develop the tools, technologies, and educational guidance—supported by initiatives like TrustElevate and IdentifAI—to protect human wellbeing and build a digital world grounded in genuine, authentic connection.