

From Mourning to Manipulation: Navigating the Psychological Terrain of AI Grief Therapy

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Abstract

This literature review explores the psychological and ethical dimensions of virtual conversations with AI-based digital representations of deceased individuals. Specifically, it examines the therapeutic affordances of these interactions, as well as potential maladaptive coping mechanisms, including prolonged mourning, emotional exploitation, and memory distortion. Based on a review of 13 academic studies from 2021 to 2024, this paper critically analyzes ethical dilemmas related to informed consent, data commodification, and the autonomy of grieving individuals. Digital afterlife technologies, often utilized for grief therapy, significantly impact the grieving process by allowing sustained, albeit artificial, interaction with loved ones. The review draws attention to the mixed nature of these technologies, recognizing their potential to offer comfort but also expressing worries about how they can worsen emotional dependence or obstruct normal grieving processes. It investigates the ways in which cultural norms and individual values impact people's experiences with these tools, illuminating a range of responses in various demographic and cultural contexts. Along with the significance of protecting vulnerable users' emotional wellbeing, the ethical dilemmas raised by the monetization of personal data and the possibility of consent violations are also thoroughly investigated. The review also considers the cultural context of grief, with a focus on how cultural relativism shapes attitudes toward digital afterlife practices. The study ends with suggestions for creating ethical standards and legal frameworks to lessen any risks, highlighting the necessity of interdisciplinary cooperation and more study to fill in the gaps in this developing sector.

Keywords: Therapeutic affordances, prolonged mourning, emotional exploitation, digital afterlife, grief practices

INTRODUCTION

Background on AI Grief Therapy

The rise of AI Grief Therapy represents a critical development in bioethics, particularly related to digital afterlife technologies. Innovations such as Thanabots and Deadbots enable individuals to interact digitally with deceased loved ones utilizing user-generated data. This evolution raises ethical questions regarding authenticity and intent, as it creates new modes of communication that blur the distinctions between life and death [1]. As users engage with these systems, they often develop profound emotional connections with their departed relatives.

The Digital Resurrection sector is poised to challenge traditional views on mortality by offering services that create highly realistic avatars of deceased individuals, providing companionship and comfort to those mourning their loss. However,

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these technologies raise concerns about the potential distortion of memories and identities due to extended interactions with AI grief therapy [2].

As users participate in virtual conversations with the deceased, it is crucial to explore how AI can support technology while preserving personal agency. Cultural relativism significantly influences grief practices and coping mechanisms across various societies, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how technology intersects with cultural traditions [3].

To address these complexities, establishing regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines for the implementation of AI in grief therapy is essential. Ensuring transparency in interactions with AI systems and thoughtfully examining the implications of these technologies on perceptions of life and death are vital steps as we advance [4].

Purpose of the Literature Review

This literature review examines the use of AI technology in facilitating virtual dialogues with deceased individuals, emphasizing both therapeutic benefits and ethical concerns associated with AI grief therapy [5].

AI grief therapy can offer significant advantages, such as helping individuals feel a connection and achieve closure with loved ones who have passed away. However, there are valid concerns regarding the potential for maladaptive coping mechanisms that might develop from prolonged engagement with AI representations of the deceased .

The autonomy of grieving individuals must be carefully considered to ensure that supportive technologies enhance rather than undermine personal agency . Cultural factors also play a crucial role, as varying cultural norms shape individuals' coping strategies and their perceptions of AI-driven grief therapy [3].

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In conclusion, this review sheds light on the intricate dynamics of virtual interactions with deceased individuals facilitated by AI. By evaluating both the therapeutic potentials and ethical challenges of AI grief therapy, the research aims to contribute valuable insights into a developing field that offers unique opportunities and difficulties for individuals processing grief in the age of digitalization.

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Traditional Grief Counselling vs. AI Grief Therapy

Coping with the loss of a loved one is an emotionally complex experience that often requires support. Traditional grief counselling has been a cornerstone for individuals facing the challenges of mourning, assisting them in processing their emotions, making practical decisions, and adjusting to life without their loved ones [6]. This method emphasizes understanding grief, fostering resilience, and finding meaning amid sorrow.

In recent years, AI grief therapy has emerged as a new form of support, leveraging technology to provide comfort and companionship to those dealing with loss . Through AI-driven platforms, individuals can engage in virtual dialogues with departed loved ones, maintaining a sense of connection and continuity. This digital interaction can help restructure emotional bonds and provide an opportunity for closure.

Both traditional grief counselling and AI grief therapy provide valuable methods for navigating the grieving process. The former focuses on human connections and therapeutic interventions, while the

latter utilizes technology to encourage virtual communication that may aid in healing and achieving closure [2].

Impact of Digital Afterlife Technologies on Grieving Process

The digital afterlife landscape is evolving rapidly due to advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR), which enable the creation of virtual representations of deceased individuals [7].

Engaging in conversations with these digital avatars prompts significant ethical and emotional challenges. Key concerns include issues of consent, privacy, and the psychological effects on the bereaved. As users interact with these replicas, they may uncover hidden aspects of their loved ones' lives, altering their understanding of the deceased [2]. This interaction highlights the complexities of grief in the digital age and the deep emotional journeys involved.

Additionally, technology is transforming traditional burial sites into interactive memorials. For instance, platforms such as E-Memoria utilize QR codes on graves to provide access to online spaces where memories, photographs, and stories can be shared, offering more engaging farewell options compared to conventional cemeteries [7].

THERAPEUTIC AFFORDANCES OF VIRTUAL CONVERSATIONS WITH DECEASED INDIVIDUALS

Role of AI in Providing Support and Comfort

The evolving landscape of grief therapy has seen a significant shift towards utilizing AI to provide support and comfort to individuals dealing with loss. Various studies have highlighted the emergence of digital necromancy and the development of digital avatars, such as Ameca and ChatGPT, which offer unique avenues for interacting with deceased individuals [8].

Research indicates that engaging in virtual conversations with deceased individuals through AI technology can help individuals establish continuing bonds with their loved ones. For example, a study illustrated how a bereaved mother found solace in interacting with an avatar of her deceased daughter in a pre-scripted VR setting, aiding her in the grieving process and allowing her to bid farewell. This process provides emotional closure, which might otherwise remain unresolved.

Potential Benefits for Individuals Coping with Loss

Conversations with deceased loved ones in virtual settings can significantly aid individuals in the grieving process. Utilizing AI technologies, such as "griefbots," allows for the creation of profiles that facilitate communication between the living and the departed through chat interfaces. This innovative approach helps ease emotional burdens associated with loss [9].

AI legacy tools also play a crucial role by capturing life stories before memory loss occurs. This preservation enables future generations to engage with their deceased family members, ensuring cherished moments are not forgotten [7]. Companies like StoryFile are pioneering this shift from traditional memorialization methods to AI solutions, emphasizing the importance of maintaining personal identities and narratives digitally [2].

Death Tech innovations, including personalized chatbots and avatars, aim to mimic human characteristics and movements, facilitating continued interaction following a loved one's passing. Platforms like Story File enable users to record personalized narratives, which can be accessed by family members, fostering feelings of connection and remembrance through digital means.

MALADAPTIVE COPING MECHANISMS IN AI GRIEF THERAPY

Prolonged Mourning and Emotional Exploitation

The use of AI to create virtual dialogues with deceased individuals raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding prolonged grieving and emotional manipulation. Engaging with digital representations of the departed can lead to complicated grief, characterized by intrusive memories and emotional distress. This ongoing connection may hinder the natural mourning process, making it difficult for individuals to let go and find closure [7]. Individuals experiencing complicated grief might feel consumed by thoughts of the deceased, struggling to achieve acceptance and purpose in life.

It is crucial for AI technologies to find a balance between honoring the memories of the deceased and empowering individuals to cope with their grief independently. Maintaining emotional ties through digital means risks obstructing healthy coping mechanisms and disrupting the natural process of mourning. Therefore, establishing responsible guidelines for implementing such technologies is essential to safeguard emotional well-being and support healing for those experiencing loss.

While AI offers intriguing opportunities for reconnecting with loved ones who have passed away, it is vital to consider the long-term effects and ethical implications of using these technologies in grief counselling.

Reconstruction of Memories and Identity

The integration of AI into grief counselling presents intricate ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding the recreation of interactions with deceased individuals. Advances in AI technology, illustrated by avatars like Ameca, blur the boundaries between the living and the deceased by replicating facial expressions and facilitating conversations. This innovation offers new ways for individuals to connect with historical figures or lost loved ones, challenging traditional grief therapy methods.

Central to these ethical considerations is the issue of consent. The revival of deceased individuals through AI raises questions about whether explicit permission was obtained while they were alive. Additionally, the potential misrepresentation of the beliefs and nuances of the deceased poses a significant concern, as AI algorithms may fail to accurately reflect their complexity. Such distortions can alter a person's legacy and infringe upon their right to an authentic portrayal.

The influence of digital replicas on the grieving process is significant. Interacting with a simulated version of a departed loved one may hinder natural grieving and emotional healing, creating a misleading sense of companionship that could prevent individuals from forming new relationships. This disruption challenges the healthy progression toward acceptance and closure after loss.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN AI GRIEF THERAPY

Informed Consent in Using Digital Representations of Deceased Individuals

The integration of AI in grief therapy raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding the use of digital replicas of deceased individuals. Issues surrounding consent are paramount, as developing AI simulations without explicit permission can lead to psychological distress for users, including feelings of being haunted by these digital presences. Additionally, the potential for data manipulation and exploitation for commercial purposes underscores the need for individuals to retain control over how their information is used posthumously [10].

A proposed five-principle ethical framework for digital technologies in mental health includes non-maleficence, beneficence, respect for autonomy, justice, and transparency. These principles serve as a foundation for the responsible design and use of AI Grief Therapy tools, ensuring users are protected from harm and that their values and experiences are respected [10].

Furthermore, as AI-based systems develop more complex digital personas, ensuring informed consent from both the deceased and their families becomes crucial. The ethical challenges posed by

these technologies can only be addressed through a robust framework that emphasizes user protection, transparency, and control over personal data after death [9].

Data Commodification and Privacy Concerns

Leveraging the digital footprint of deceased individuals to recreate their likeness using AI technology exposes sensitive and potentially confidential information, raising concerns about data security and unauthorized access [9].

Commercial exploitation of digital personas through AI replicas introduces further ethical challenges. This includes concerns over dignity and respect for the deceased, especially when their identities are commodified for entertainment or marketing without the explicit consent of their families [7].

Developers must implement strict privacy policies, secure data storage methods, and informed consent processes to safeguard sensitive information. Such measures are essential to addressing the ethical concerns around privacy, commodification, and the responsible use of digital afterlife technologies.

AUTONOMY OF GRIEVING INDIVIDUALS IN THE DIGITAL SPACE

Balancing Supportive Technology with Personal Agency

The digital age presents challenges at the intersection of technology and grief, requiring a balance between supportive tools and personal autonomy. The emergence of AI technologies that facilitate virtual conversations with deceased loved ones has ignited discussions about ethical dilemmas and individual agency in grief therapy [6].

It is crucial to prioritize the dignity and autonomy of individuals who are grieving, focusing on their perspectives and experiences to understand how AI is transforming traditional communication norms and coping mechanisms [2].

Healthcare professionals emphasize the necessity of obtaining consent from patients, particularly vulnerable populations, even when they may struggle to grasp complex issues related to treatment through simulations. This focus on autonomy and consent aligns with established ethical principles in educational virtual reality environments, stressing the importance of privacy and respect for individual autonomy [11].

CULTURAL RELATIVISM IN GRIEF PRACTICES

Influence of Cultural Norms on Coping Mechanisms

Different faiths possess unique beliefs about the afterlife, impacting how followers perceive digital representations of their loved ones. For example, Christians may view the afterlife as a space of divine closeness, while Shinto adherents see spiritual essence in objects, highlighting the varied ways cultures approach grief and remembrance [12]. These distinct views of the afterlife suggest that the appropriateness and efficacy of AI-based grief therapy may vary significantly depending on cultural norms.

Concerns regarding racial biases in virtual environments also emerge, particularly in relation to representation and commodification of people of color. This emphasizes the need for inclusivity and cultural sensitivity in technologies developed for grief therapy, including virtual interactions with the departed. Ignoring these issues can exacerbate systemic racial inequalities, affecting user experiences in digital spaces.

Cultural relativism should be central to creating ethical frameworks for AI therapy, promoting inclusivity and honoring diversity to enhance the effectiveness of therapeutic approaches for individuals from various backgrounds [13].

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS AND ETHICAL GUIDELINES

Recommendations for Ensuring Ethical Use of AI in Grief Therapy

The integration of AI technologies into everyday interactions, particularly those involving conversations with deceased individuals, requires transparency and informed consent to protect individual agency. This is crucial to prevent emotional manipulation and exploitation, emphasizing the need for ethical standards in the deployment of conversational AI [1].

Regulatory measures must enforce documented consent prior to creating digital representations of the deceased, alongside age restrictions to safeguard vulnerable populations. Clear disclaimers should be provided for transparency, while strict data privacy and security protocols are essential to honor the dignity of both the deceased and the living in the digital space.

Transparent practices are vital, including restricting access to adult users only and ensuring mutual agreement between data contributors and participants in AI-driven re-creation services. Developing sensitive procedures for retiring digital personas will further ensure the ethical advancement of AI systems within this context [9].

By integrating insights from established frameworks, professionals can responsibly address the ethical complexities inherent in virtual interactions with deceased individuals. These efforts are crucial to ensuring that AI technologies enhance rather than undermine autonomy and freedom in the digital realm [1].

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Current State of Research on Manipulation in AI Grief Therapy

Innovations such as Digital Resurrection and virtual interactions with deceased individuals have ignited significant debates regarding the ethics of engaging with intelligent systems. A key concern in AI grief therapy is the potential for emotional exploitation through hyper-realistic digital representations of the deceased. Companies like DeepBrain AI and HereAfter offer services that allow users to interact with AI-generated avatars based on data from the departed which raises issues of consent and privacy. Additionally, the pursuit of digital immortality and virtual avatars is often linked to narcissistic traits with studies showing a positive correlation between narcissism and the desire for digital representations of others. The blurring lines between past and present, as well as memory and reality, create a unique mixture of comfort and disruption that could significantly impact individuals dealing with grief in the digital age.

In summary, research on manipulation in AI grief therapy emphasizes the importance of developing comprehensive ethical frameworks to govern the responsible evolution and application of these technologies. By tackling these concerns, researchers can create a more ethically sound approach to utilizing AI in supporting those coping with loss.

Areas for Further Study and Exploration

A primary focus should be on the psychological effects of engaging with digital afterlife technologies. Understanding how these tools influence the grieving process is crucial for developing effective therapeutic interventions. Factors such as narcissism, fear of death, and the desire for eternal life could provide insights into how personality traits shape attitudes toward digital immortality.

Ethical dilemmas associated with AI grief therapy, particularly regarding informed consent, data commodification, and privacy concerns, also demand attention. Future research should focus on establishing robust regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines to navigate these challenges.

By investigating these areas, we can enhance our understanding of how AI technologies can effectively support individuals during the grieving process while addressing the complex ethical considerations involved in conducting virtual conversations with the deceased.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into grief therapy offers both promising opportunities and significant ethical challenges. Traditional grief counseling, which emphasizes human connection and therapeutic intervention, has long been a cornerstone for those navigating loss. However, the rise of AI-driven grief therapy presents an innovative shift, providing individuals with the ability to engage in virtual conversations with deceased loved ones, aiding in emotional closure and continued bonding. Despite its potential benefits, AI grief therapy introduces concerns about emotional manipulation, prolonged mourning, and the ethical implications of digital representations of the deceased.

The creation of digital avatars raises issues of consent, data privacy, and the accuracy of the digital representations, which can mislead users or fail to respect the complexities of the departed's identity. Furthermore, the commodification of digital personas for commercial purposes and the potential exploitation of grieving individuals necessitates the development of strict regulatory frameworks. These frameworks should include informed consent, data protection, and transparency to ensure the dignity and autonomy of both the deceased and the living.

Cultural relativism is also crucial, as differing beliefs about the afterlife influence how individuals perceive AI grief therapy. Future research should focus on understanding the psychological impact of digital afterlife technologies, particularly the long-term emotional effects and ethical concerns. By addressing these issues through thoughtful regulation and ethical guidelines, AI technologies can evolve to provide meaningful support for those coping with grief, enhancing rather than disrupting the healing process.

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