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Research Paper

AI as a Mirror: Investigating Identity Crisis from a Lacanian-Eriksonian Perspective

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Abstract

This theoretical study analyzes the role of artificial intelligence (AI) companions in the formation of human identity. Drawing on Lacan's mirror stage and Erikson's ego identity, the research examines how constant interaction with AI tools may function as a digitized external mirror, shaping self-perceptions, ego development, and the trajectory of identity formation. While Erikson establishes identity formation as a lifelong psychosocial process, Lacan's mirror stage offers a structural account of how selfhood originates through external reflection—and is thus inherently vulnerable to misrecognition. Integrating these frameworks, this study proposes the concept of algorithmic misrecognition: a process whereby computationally inferred, error-prone responses from AI companions shape self-perceptions in ways that may lead to semi-self formation or identity crisis. Although AI companions may facilitate daily tasks, provide emotional support, or aid self-exploration, their mirroring function thus operates as a double-edged process. This paper addresses a gap in the literature where AI has been analyzed primarily as a technological device rather than a techno-social phenomenon actively shaping selfhood, and aims to provide implications for future empirical and interdisciplinary research on AI-mediated identity processes.

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چکیده

این مطالعهٔ نظری، نقش همراهان هوش مصنوعی را در شکل‌گیری هویت انسانی بررسی می‌کند و با تکیه بر مرحلهٔ آینه‌ای لاکان و مفهوم هویتِ من در نظریهٔ اریکسون نشان می‌دهد که تعامل مداوم با ابزارهای هوش مصنوعی می‌توانند مانند آینه‌ای دیجیتالی و بیرونی بر ادراک فرد از خود، رشد ایگو و مسیر هویت‌یابی اثر بگذارد؛ در این چارچوب، در حالی که اریکسون هویت را فرایندی روان‌اجتماعی و مادام‌العمر می‌داند، لاکان بر این نکته تأکید می‌کند که خودآگاهی از خلال بازتاب بیرونی شکل می‌گیرد و از این رو همواره در معرض کژشناخت است. بر پایهٔ این دو رویکرد، مقاله مفهوم «کژشناختی الگوریتمی» را مطرح می‌کند؛ یعنی وضعیتی که در آن پاسخ‌های محاسباتیِ خطاپذیرِ همراهان هوش مصنوعی می‌توانند برداشت فرد از خویشتن را به‌گونه‌ای جهت دهند که به شکل‌گیری نوعی «نیمه‌خود» یا حتّی بحران هویت بینجامد. با آنکه این همراهان می‌توانند در کارهای روزمره، حمایت عاطفی و خودکاوی مفید باشند، کارکرد آینه‌گون آن‌ها در عین حال دوگانه و مسئله‌ساز است و مقاله با برجسته کردن این نکته می‌کوشد شکافی را در ادبیات پژوهش پر کند که در آن هوش مصنوعی بیشتر به‌صورت یک ابزار فناورانه دیده شده تا پدیده‌ای فناورانه-اجتماعی که در خودِ فرایند شکل‌گیری هویت نقش فعال دارد.

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1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools have moved beyond technological advancements in recent years, as AI companions become increasingly personalized and responsive to user requirements and moods. This shift has moved the AI-human relationship beyond instrumental use, positioning AI as a "reflective counsellor," "companion," and virtual "friend." While some scholars argue that AI companions could enhance living conditions through their computational and decision-making capacities (Wang 69; 75), many caution against over-reliance on these tools in daily life.

New features—including long-term memory, personalization, and the ability to maintain a persistent identity over time (Barnes and Hutson 38)—have raised urgent questions about how actively engaging AI companions may shape human experience and cognition. Although research on AI's effects on cognition remains ongoing, a significant gap persists in understanding how these tools influence character and identity formation over time. Human identity is no longer shaped solely by familial, social, or cultural factors; a new technological agent now constantly interacts with humans, reflecting, providing feedback, and giving recommendations that can affect self-perception. AI has become a pervasive social phenomenon (Shasliani 6), and its role in identity formation demands closer theoretical examination.

This study draws on two psychoanalytic frameworks to address this gap. Lacan's mirror stage, which theorizes selfhood as originating through an external and inherently idealized reflection, reveals the sense of "I" as evolving through fragmentation and alienation rather than purely internal development (Gonçalves 431). Erikson's conception of ego identity, which situates identity as a felt sense of sameness shaped by communal culture, personal growth, and historical or technological contexts (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 20), provides a developmental lens for assessing AI's long-term influence. Integrating these frameworks, this paper proposes that AI companions function as a digitized external mirror capable of generating algorithmic misrecognition—a process whereby computationally inferred, error-prone reflections shape self-perceptions in ways that may lead to semi-self formation or identity crisis.

Thus, a purely theoretical framework is urgently required at this stage due to the fact that AI companion technologies are evolving faster than empirical studies can track. Without a strong conceptual vocabulary—such as the notions of algorithmic misrecognition and the semi-self—other researchers lack the analytical tools to identify what is at stake, let alone construct testable hypotheses. In this context, theory does not substitute for empirical work. However, it establishes the necessary groundwork without which empirical inquiry proceeds blind.

What this study aims to illuminate is how AI companions engage in identity formation as a techno-social phenomenon rather than a mere technological tool. This paper is a theoretical and conceptual study; the absence of empirical data highlights the need for further investigation along similar lines.

1.1.Research Questions

A. How does constant interaction with AI companions affect the process of identity formation?

B. How do AI companions function as a Lacanian mirror, and what role does the resulting "semi-self" play in shaping identity?

C. In what ways can AI-mediated reflection contribute to negative identity or increase the risk of identity crisis within an Eriksonian framework?

1. AI Companions and the Psychoanalytic Turn

The current article is a library-based identity study that employs Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage as well as Erikson’s concept of identity crisis to understand how AI tools—specifically AI companions—affect the process of identity formation. In *The Algorithmic Unconscious*, Possati connects psychoanalytic approaches to AI, despite AI’s inability to mimic the exact structure of the human psyche. Still, given that AI–human interactions exchange human-like emotions, AI cannot be understood as a purely technical advancement. Psychoanalysis provides scholars with conceptual tools to understand AI not merely as a mechanical device, but as an extension of the human unconscious that emerges through interaction, affects the human mind, and may function as a projective identification mechanism (32–50). Hence, AI should no longer be

attributed solely to technological development—a synthesized human project—but rather considered a mutual medium that actively shapes human behavior as part of everyday interaction, contributing to the formation of the human notion of self.

There have been numerous research works on the empirical and ethical influences of AI on identity and selfhood. Yao et al. have demonstrated a connection between self-esteem and the problematic use of AI, uncovering that low self-esteem directly or indirectly leads to problematic engagement with AI chatbots (11–12). On the other hand, Parsakia has conducted research on the effects of AI chatbots on problem-solving, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and students' confidence. The results indicate that although AI companions provide immediate feedback, personalized support, and a strong sense of achievement, they may also encourage over-reliance or frustration arising from their limitations. Particularly in problem-solving contexts, these chatbots may erode users' independence of thought. Reduced critical questioning, emotional comprehension gaps, and over-dependence are among other drawbacks of constant encounters with AI companions that remain underexamined and call for further analytical attention (74–75).

Despite the growing body of research examining how AI tools shape human habits and behaviors, the use of AI companions remains relatively recent. Consequently, while the effectiveness of AI in influencing behavioral patterns has been widely explored, an examination of how AI companions may function as an "artificial mirror"—reflecting a Lacanian Other and thereby shaping or redirecting the trajectory of identity formation—remains largely underdeveloped. Gradually, more studies are applying Lacan's mirror stage to the influential effects of AI companions in the psychoanalytic aspects of the users' lives. Among them, Brečka has examined how AI companions could turn into Lacanian Big Other. However, their analysis has centered on desire, lack, and structural limits of AI as mirroring agent, without integrating Eriksonian identity crisis into their work. This gap becomes particularly significant given AI's susceptibility to error, misinterpretation, and misuse, all of which may lead to destabilizing consequences for users' self-perception and identity development.

Among AI-Eriksonian scholarship, this article can refer to Horii's "Delegated Personhood", which argues that identity authorship is now distributed between the human user's cognition and algorithmic tools. Algorithmic identity fragmentation, mimicry under perceptual surveillance, identity fatigue, and chrono-social drifts alter self-categorization altogether. In this case, identity becomes a hybrid system consisting of human intention and computational feedbacks. Demirci extends this argument by contending that algorithmic feedback is not merely computational but constitutes AI companions' way of "speaking back." In "The Talking Mirror," Demirci uses Lacan's mirror stage, Foucault's subjectivation, and other scholarly arguments to analyze the epistemological, existential, and social dimensions of the worldwide utilization of AI companions. They claim that users produce data and constantly encounter algorithmically mediated reflections that can reshape their identity in response—most of which are not neutrally structured. AI companions, in Demirci's idea, are not passive tools, but active, "talking mirrors" that intervene in the user's life through recommendations, personalized content, and guidance.

Theodoros and Venetia have conducted a study to explore how AI companions surpass their status as neutral technological instruments and evolve into techno-social systems—embedded within social norms, emotional practices, and cultural values. AI companions and chatbots function as social actors rather than mere techno-simulations. They provide non-judgmental spaces that enable individuals to express emotions, including vulnerabilities, faults, and secrets that might otherwise remain suppressed in human-centered interactions. This dynamic allows users to uncover hidden, experimental, or idealized identities through sustained engagement with AI companions. However, in the absence of regulatory frameworks and adequate supervision, reliance on AI-generated reflections of the self may influence decision-making, self-perception, and processes of self-identification (15–16).

Lungu has gone further, using the term "digital human twins" while addressing machine learning systems. They implement a case study on mental health chatbots, indicating how these tools impact autonomy, agency, and self-determination. Accordingly,

greater caution and critical attention are required regarding the feedback and personal reflections offered by AI companions, particularly as such technologies become increasingly integrated into everyday life and educational contexts.

However, the current study does not exclusively focus on the negative effects of AI companions on personality growth. Rather, it seeks to develop a balanced understanding of the extent to which AI tools—particularly chatbots—participate in identity formation processes. Many studies have examined AI's potential to support growth outcomes. Sharma et al.'s critical review has gathered 130 studies across therapeutic, companion, and educational AI contexts, illuminating AI companions' optimistic results in early emotional stabilization, structured self-reflection, and the therapeutic skill rehearsal. However, this "bounded optimism" is limited in replicating reciprocal vulnerability and rupture-and-repair processes essential for psychological development. It should not be forgotten that AI companions' unconditional validation, flattery, and progressive intimacy escalation can become a systematic barrier in growth—especially identity formation. This is where this study's idea of algorithmic misrecognition, using a combination of Erikson and Lacan's view, becomes noteworthy. The primary aim of this study is to examine the degree to which AI companions may operate as a mirror that either facilitates or disrupts identity stability, potentially contributing to identity crisis. This concern becomes especially salient given that Eriksonian perspectives on identity development have been largely overlooked in existing AI-related identity research.

Ultimately, this paper examines the consequences of reconfiguring the Lacanian Other as a techno-social phenomenon in light of the global expansion of AI companions. Drawing on Erikson's concept of identity crisis, it investigates how such a shift may fragment ego development, produce algorithmic misrecognition, and generate semi-self formations through continuous digital mirroring-potentially contributing to negative identity within sustained AI–human interaction. To ground this analysis, the following section outlines the theoretical frameworks-Lacan's mirror stage and Erikson's ego identity-that inform the study's core concept of algorithmic misrecognition.

2. The Lacanian Mirror and Eriksonian Identity

3.1. Lacanian Mirror and the Semi-Self in Digital Contexts

Identity, based on Stets et al., is the combination of a unique self-categorization shaped by social structures as well as self-meanings that sustain multiple roles on an individual basis. A person identifies themselves both in relation to sociocultural contexts and through alienating themselves from what they perceive as peculiar about them—which differentiates them from the outside world. There are links between the structural roles an individual partakes in and how they conceptualize themselves in relation to external relations (228-9). From a Lacanian point of view, this process is rooted in the early months of an individual's life. For Lacan, self-identification occurs within a triangular loop called the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Although many scholars have critiqued Lacan's view of self, his ideas remain influential and continue to be used to explain how the human mind develops a sense of "selfhood."

Lacan, in *Écrits*, elaborates on the mirror stage as a foundational moment in ego identity development. At approximately 6–18 months of age, a child becomes capable of recognizing its image in a mirror, leading to a sense of jubilation upon encountering a unified reflection—one that sharply contrasts with the child's actual motor incoordination and bodily fragmentation. This perceived unity amid lived fragmentation shapes the ego through misrecognition (méconnaissance). This misrecognition causes the child to mistakenly assume the reflected image as its true self, resulting in the formation of an Ideal-I: an imagined, unified, and coordinated self-image that the subject gradually attempts to inhabit. This fictional and external self renders the ego alienated from its inception. Consequently, identity—defined through recognition in relation to the Other—begins to form prior to the subject's entry into the Symbolic order of language and social law.

Lacan argues that bodily fragmentation does not disappear in later stages of identity development; rather, it persists in dreams, hallucinations, and pathological phenomena such as paranoia. Additional ego defenses, including aggression and alienation, may also extend from the mirror stage into later developmental phases. Identity, from a Lacanian perspective, is thus formed through

comparison. What can be inferred from Lacan's theory is that the self is a constructed entity rather than an innate or natural essence. The ego, as the foundational structure of identity, is inherently imaginary and alienated through comparison with the Other. Human identity, therefore, emerges through misrecognition, desire, and social dynamics such as rivalry. The mirror stage functions as an initial identification of the self, serving as the ground upon which personality and ego identity are built (93–100).

Possati reinterprets the mirror stage by identifying three essential actors within the scene: (a) the child, (b) the mirror, and (c) the objects—whether human or non-human—that mediate reflection. None of these actors can be reduced or excluded from the process of identity development. Each possesses specific properties and relational capacities that collectively form an interconnected network. According to Possati, identity emerges through a complex series of mediations between human and non-human actors (37–40). Technology, as a non-human node within this network, plays a role comparable to that of society and community in shaping ego identity. Consequently, AI companions—as an increasingly prevalent technological presence across age groups—should be understood not merely as advanced machines, but as mediators that continuously interact with humans, shaping identity through feedback, instruction, and emotional engagement.

The three registers represent experiences humans go through at each stage of life. The Imaginary involves illusions and images encountered during development. The Symbolic encompasses language, linguistic patterns, and rules—especially social norms and laws. Finally, the Real denotes the ungraspable, indeterminate truth. These three aspects of self-conceptualization form an interlinked loop, wherein each influences the other (*Écrits* 6). Drawing on Freud, Lacan asserts that the human unconscious operates through signifiers. For Lacan, the unconscious is a linguistic structure functioning via language and symbolic forms. The subject—humans in this context—is represented through signifiers (189). Therefore, humans' assumptions about themselves are continuously translated into symbolic forms. Lacan proposes that repetition can link Symbolic patterns with Real encounters. In

other words, the human self emerges as a long chain of differing signifiers structured from the earliest stages of existence.

To elucidate the interconnectedness of the three registers, Lacan introduces the concept of the "Other." For him, the Other shapes an individual's desires even in the earliest stages of identity formation; desire is always the desire of the Other. Through the concept of otherness and alienation, a child becomes aware of their uniqueness in relation to society. Who others are and what they want influences what the individual wants. In *Écrits*, Lacan explains how infants aged 6-18 months construct an ego by identifying themselves through their reflection in a mirror. Observation and alienation allow the child to experience both sameness and differentiation. This process—the mirror stage—occurs when a child, initially fragmented and anxious about understanding the outside world, first sees a unified image of themselves. This realization produces fundamental jubilation and forms a basis for the future construction of the child's identity.

However, from a Lacanian perspective, this assumption of self is idealized and external, relying solely on the "mirror-I" or "Ideal-I." This is where the study's focus intersects with Lacanian theory. The image of the child observing themselves in the mirror is, according to Lacan, an idealized version of self—not the real one. Hence, the ego becomes an object rather than the true self: a semi-self, idealized and non-real, which may lead to lifelong misrecognition (75-81).

3.2. Eriksonian Identity Formation: How Does It Lead to Identity Crisis?

Erikson converged what Lacan had stated about the formation of identity. As a psychosocialist, he presumed that an individual's social interactions determine the development of ego. He expands Freud's conception of id, ego, and superego, incorporating social elements in identity formation and introducing the notion of ego identity—which is navigated through different crises in the person's lifespan. Erikson's view posits ego as a central component of identity, which works as a mediator between inner drives and external experiences. Developing his thoughts on Freud's psychoanalytic sense of self, he introduces identity as a

coherent sense of self that is constantly affected by cultural, historical, and social contexts. This mediation later prevents disintegration in the individual's life (*Childhood and Society*, 219-33). Identity is the exact sense of self that grants the individual continuity and direction. Social roles and ideologies, in Eriksonian view, have significant influence on how a person forges a unique self (*Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 128-35). Identity formation is the fruit of constant ego processes, inevitably vulnerable to diffusions, especially if previous crises are left unresolved (*Childhood and Society*, 244-283). In short, while ego can be named as the foundation of the psychic structure, identity works as its developmental outcome, which is both vulnerable and continual.

The development of ego—under the Eriksonian lens—consists of eight major stages, as mentioned below. Any problems in these stages, if left unresolved, could stagnate development (Evans et al. 10).

Stage	Age Range	Conflict
1	0–1½ years	Trust vs. Mistrust
2	1½–3 years	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt
3	3–6 years	Initiative vs. Guilt
4	6 years–puberty	Industry vs. Inferiority
5	Adolescence	Identity vs. Role Confusion
6	Young Adulthood	Intimacy vs. Isolation
7	Middle Age	Generativity vs. Stagnation
8	Old Age	Ego Integrity vs. Despair

Table 1. Eriksonian Development of Ego

Ego functions as a critical foundation that regulates the course of identity development. Biological drives and social demands work as mediators to maintain continuity and adaptability in the course of ego development (*Childhood and Society*, 219–33). Identity emerges as the outcome of ego development, becoming particularly salient during adolescence and early adulthood as individuals

integrate past roles into a coherent sense of self (*Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 22–23). Any disruption in ego development may therefore hinder identity formation. While both ego and identity are lifelong dimensions of personality, ego emphasizes mediation, whereas identity preserves coherence (*Childhood and Society*, 244–83). And despite the fact that identity formation becomes pronounced during adolescence, it continues to evolve throughout later stages of life. Thus, unresolved crises may result in identity diffusion, manifesting as identity crisis. Ego identity formation remains a fragile process, one that is susceptible to influence from technological, educational, communal, and social factors.

All these stages of psychosocial development include an ongoing process in which individuals resolve conflicts influenced by sociocultural factors. Each stage builds upon the previous one. If resolved successfully, it leads to virtues like hope, purpose, fidelity, and wisdom—or fosters psychological growth and resilience. If not, regression, anxiety, and the loss of proper role integration occur, increasing the chances of identity crisis, with failures concluding in mistrust, shame, guilt, inferiority, confusion, or isolation. All eight stages contain a core conflict that forms personality and defines social interactions. This model represents a balanced, reciprocal interplay between individual crises and societal influences. While early positive experiences are crucial in building a secure foundational basis for subsequent psychological challenges, confusions in later stages—particularly adolescence—can hinder the formation of a stable self, further challenging the process of identity formation. These crises catalyze growth, turning into an ongoing cycle of progression or regression (*The Life Cycle Completed*, 7-28)

Accordingly, AI technology can no longer be regarded as a neutral achievement but must be understood as an integral component of human society—a techno-social node that influences decision-making processes, modes of thinking, and cognitive orientation. Taken together, Lacan's account of mirror stage misrecognition and Erikson's developmental framework provide the theoretical tools for analyzing how AI companions might act as techno-social mirrors—particularly the identity vs. role confusion stage and the risk of negative identity. The following section

applies these frameworks to examine the specific mechanisms through which AI-mediated reflection could produce algorithmic misrecognition and contribute to identity crisis.

3. Algorithmic Misrecognition and the Semi-Self

The preceding sections have established the theoretical tools necessary for this study: Lacan's account of mirror-stage misrecognition, which reveals identity as constructed through an external and inherently idealized image, and Erikson's framework of identity development, which situates identity formation within a lifelong psychosocial process vulnerable to crisis. This section applies these frameworks to examine how AI companions—as interactive, computationally driven mirrors—participate in the formation of human identity. Rather than reasserting the theoretical claims already outlined, the analysis investigates the specific mechanisms through which AI-mediated reflections produce what this study terms algorithmic misrecognition, the conditions under which this misrecognition may generate a semi-self, and the Eriksonian stakes of these processes—particularly the risk of negative identity and identity crisis. This study does not incline solely toward either psychoanalysis or philosophy, but presents a combination of the two through the amalgamation of Lacan’s psychoanalytic approach toward self, Erikson’s psychosocial development of identity, and media-technology-driven research works. The analysis that follows focuses on conversational AI companions—for instance, ChatGPT, Claude AI, Grok, Gemini, Replika, and Character.AI—whose personalized, emotional, and sustained responses position them as potent digital mirrors in users’ daily lives. Unlike general AI tools that are asked to perform concrete tasks, these companions engage in open-ended dialogues, use personalized recommendations, recall user references, and simulate relational continuity, making their reflective function both continuous and cumulative.

As mentioned above, for Erikson, identity is the synthesized intermingling of personal and social elements. It is partly expected that not all individuals will experience secure identity formation. Conflicts, struggles, and crises occur at every stage of personality development. Erikson introduces “negative identity” as a consequence of the foreclosure of positive elements. In this

scenario, individuals may embrace deformed roles, revalued, or insecure identities, which can directly affect behavioral and ideological patterns. Although the person is still attempting to find wholeness amidst chaotic, conflicting crises, unresolved prior stages may postpone or even halt personality development. Even if the stages proceed, the structure of identity formation might remain unstable throughout the individual's life. As Friedman et al. explain, negative identity is a defensive mechanism stemming from the rejection or foreclosure of previous stages, leading to delinquency, fanaticism, and deformed identity formation (3-5).

Central to this analysis is the concept of algorithmic misrecognition: a process whereby AI companions, through their design features and logic, systematically produce reflections of the user that are structurally prone to mistake, incompleteness, or idealization. Unlike Lacan's mirror stage, which passively reflects a unified configuration that the infant misrecognizes as the self, the AI mirror actively constructs and reconstructs its reflection—selecting, prioritizing, and reshaping user data to optimize engagement rather than ensure accuracy. As Sharma et al. demonstrate, features such as unconditional validation, flattery, and progressive intimacy escalation are not incidental flaws but systematic barriers to psychological growth embedded in engagement-optimized design.

The distinction between a Lacanian physical mirror and an AI talking mirror is therefore essential to the present argument. The Lacanian mirror is a passive surface. Its misrecognition is developmentally universal and deeply structural—which means every infant who passes through the mirror stage encounters the same dynamic of alienation and idealization. In contrast, the AI mirror—instantiated in AI companions—is a generative and active agent. This mirror does not merely reflect; it forms, selects, prioritizes, and constantly updates its reflection based on engagement-driven codes and algorithms. Lacan's mirror offers a single, static image, while AI learns from each interaction, refining its reflections to maximize user retention. This introduces an operational intent embedded in algorithmic logic governed by corporate incentives. Thus, the misrecognition produced by AI companions is not merely structural, but predatory. This mirror does not simply present a distorted image.

It learns from each distortion to maintain the user engagement and amplifies them. In this particular stance, AI's unconditional validation, progressive intimacy escalation, and selective memory are not bugs but features—optimized to preserve interaction at the expense of developmental accuracy.

It should be noted that Lacan and Erikson fundamentally hold incompatible views of the ego. For Lacan, the ego is a fiction born of alienation (Gonçalves 433). It is an illusory coherence constructed through misrecognition. Meanwhile, for Erikson, the ego is a real integrative agent striving for psychosocial synthesis and secure adaptation. This study, however, does not attempt to resolve this epistemological tension. It rather suggests that algorithmic misrecognition operates precisely along this fault line: the AI mirror presents a Lacanian misrecognition—an alienated, idealized image—that nonetheless creates actual Eriksonian consequences—in this case, including identity diffusion and negative identity formation. The fracture between the two frameworks is therefore productive rather than paralyzing this paper's thesis. It illustrates how a structurally illusory reflection can generate genuine developmental harm, further leading to identity crisis and semi-self formation.

The AI companion thus presents an idealized, coherent version of the user derived from computationally inferred and incomplete data—text-based prompts stripped of embodied cues such as gesture, intonation, expression—or as Roche interprets, Lacanian lack. This reflection is doubly alienated: first by the Lacanian structure inherent in all self-recognition, and second by the computational constraints that filter lived experience into data points. Where Erikson situates identity formation within a psychosocial process dependent on gradual, authentic social recognition, algorithmic misrecognition substitutes a simulated recognition that may feel affirming while structurally diverging from the user's lived reality. The resulting identification—what this study terms the semi-self—is neither fully authentic nor entirely false, but suspended in a comfortable, AI-mediated pseudo-integration that risks postponing or derailing the Eriksonian work

of identity formation, particularly during the vulnerable identity vs. role confusion stage of adolescence.

Although Erikson's identity vs. role confusion is developmentally tied to adolescence, the present analysis argues that this risk is indeed most critical for adolescents and young adults, whose primary psychosocial task is precisely identity formation. AI companions offer an idealized, pre-emptive self-image for this group that may hinder the exploration necessary for secure identity achievement, leading to foreclosure rather than genuine resolution.

However, this risk is not limited to the mentioned demographic. For adult users, algorithmic misrecognition may trigger regression to adolescent-like identity confusion, especially under specific circumstances such as major life transitions, career changes, divorce, educational immigration, relocations, and retirements. In these cases, established identity structures could be temporarily destabilized. Consequently, if the adults turn to AI companions for reassurance and self-redefinition, the AI mirror, by reflecting an idealized but computationally inferred self-image, can exploit this openness to revision, reactivating the identity vs. role confusion dynamic even long after adolescence has ended. Algorithmic misrecognition, in this context, does not respect developmental boundaries. It can destabilize identity at any point in the lifespan where the self is open to revision.

With the expansion of digital avatars, virtual IDs, and meta-selves, the ethical and mental effects of computational platforms on identity formation have turned into a serious discussion among scholars. Based on what Chubarov et al. have discussed in their research project on the digital "Other," the abundance of identities and virtual realizations in the age of AI has fundamentally altered the traditional modes of identity development among individuals (1). The relatively recent integration of AI companions into everyday life means their influence on identity formation remains insufficiently explored. Still, it is increasingly evident that AI influences users' beliefs (Santo 21), fostering and guiding them through decision-making and self-perception. However, findings from research focusing on the effects of constant interaction with AI companions remain double-edged and insufficiently theorized.

On one hand, several techno-social qualitative studies suggest that AI companions can facilitate identity management and emotional support beyond traditional identity formation procedures. As Kouros et al. argue, AI companions provide a medium for identity experimentation, allowing users to examine themselves or display aspects of the self that they might avoid revealing in human-to-human contexts due to fear of judgment or social disapproval (14–16). The growth of the smartphone as an extended part of the self has raised global concerns, as the external "Other" has transformed—or expanded—into a digitized bodily extension that has become nearly inseparable from the individual. Contemporary AI-mediated communication has been shown to enhance perceptions of self-extension, strengthen human capabilities, and exhibit anthropomorphic qualities (Campbell et al. 10–14).

However, scholarly anxiety—particularly among psychoanalysts—has emerged regarding the extent to which this "extended Other" may shape human self-identification or interfere with what Lacan and Erikson describe as stages of ego identity formation. As AI companions become integrated into extended forms of self, such as smartphones, they increasingly operate as external mirrors that reflect self-perception, co-creating personality through continuous feedback. These algorithms now educate users, interpret their thoughts, and participate in decision-making processes that directly co-author who a person becomes (Joseph 4). Due to the human-like qualities of AI companions and users' growing preference for confiding in them rather than human counterparts, AI increasingly functions as a Lacanian mirror reflecting an external Ideal-I, particularly through its supportive and affirming features. Such passive exposure-when left unsupervised-may contribute to crises that hinder secure identity development.

On the other hand, studies indicate that personality traits mediate AI engagement differently, with highly conscientious individuals showing higher levels of interaction than others (Rahman et al. 67). This raises questions about the authenticity and degree of AI companions' agency in users' lives. With the rapid diversification of AI tools and the continuous introduction of new technologies, systematic observation becomes increasingly difficult, intensifying

concerns for vulnerable populations. As some scholars demonstrate, AI systems continue to reproduce existential and social inequities and may generate negative or erroneous outputs (Tadimalla et al. 9). AI thus no longer functions solely as a life-enhancing device, but as a techno-social phenomenon influencing a wide demographic range.

According to Lu et al., AI companions implicitly frame human identity as fluid, relational, and performative (1). This conceptual treatment of identity—distinct from ego—risks obscuring how profoundly AI may shape the ongoing process of identity formation. From a Lacanian perspective, the ways AI reflects the self or determines influential factors in self-construction position these companions as mirrors that access the internal psychic world of users while simultaneously projecting external norms and values. While AI tools may accelerate daily tasks and optimize efficiency, it remains advisable that deeply personal conversations or life-altering decisions be supervised by reliable human sources. Otherwise, if left unattended, identity co-creation through AI companionship may lead to melancholic outcomes in identity development. Within a Lacanian framework, ego, identity, and the unconscious are continuously shaped and reshaped through chains of linguistic signifiers. Given the multiplicity of AI companions exchanging such signifiers and influencing identity exploration and self-expression, stronger regulation is required regarding how AI reflects user selfhood. AI-mediated intimacy increasingly relies on identity reflection, illusory growth, and emotional dependency over time (Bhat 425). If mishandled or left unsupervised, such reflective processes may hinder identity development, producing a semi-self rather than a stable identity in both Eriksonian and Lacanian terms. Under these conditions, the risk of negative identity intensifies, potentially diverting an individual's life trajectory in destabilizing ways.

To sum up, AI companions and chatbots have exceeded their status as mere technological tools designed to assist daily tasks. They have emerged as techno-social phenomena exerting sociocultural influence on individuals and communities alike. To prevent outcomes such as negative identity, semi-self formation, or Eriksonian identity crisis, the seriousness of AI's role as a mirror of the self must be critically acknowledged. This study has employed a

psychoanalytic framework—drawing on Lacan and Erikson—to clarify how AI companions participate in identity formation and to illuminate the broader implications of these interactions.

4. Digital Mirrors and the Risk of Negative Identity

Grounded in existing literature on this topic, the study demonstrates how sustained exposure to AI companions may affect users' self-perception, functioning as an external, digitized mirror that influences the trajectory of identity development. While AI-related studies have extensively examined how AI tools affect identity, most have primarily focused on the practical "outcomes" of these tools, rather than addressing their ongoing influence on the process of identity formation itself. As both Lacan and Erikson emphasize, identity formation is an ongoing, lifelong process. Constant exposure to misleading, inaccurate, or poorly contextualized information and guidance can increase the likelihood of a semi-self—a hindered or partially developed identity—or even lead to the formation of a negative identity that may affect individuals throughout their life course.

By combining Lacanian and Eriksonian perspectives on identity development and the roots of identity crisis, the study reveals how the constant availability of AI companions—particularly through the widespread use of smartphones as extended selves—can transform artificial intelligence tools into mirrors that reflect computational representations shaped by scattered, often partially articulated prompts provided by users. This dynamic further intensifies the risk of identity crisis as well as the emergence of a semi-self. Individuals may disclose aspects of themselves that remain hidden in human-to-human interactions; however, the reliance on fragmented, non-physical, and ambiguous prompts risks turning the multiple social identities people inhabit in daily life into a semi-self that is incomplete, partially distorted, or left unsupervised by expert guidance. Combined together, it is transparent that as a techno-social phenomenon, AI companions could both act as a mirror as well as a medium shaping identity formation. Considering the complexity of identity development and its lingering effects throughout the individual's life, it is crucial for AI developers to maintain a more intricate, moral and psychological approach while training AI. Given

that AI is susceptible to mistakes, any sort of algorithmic misrecognition—no matter for what reason—could not only change the formation of identity, it could in some cases deliver the misrecognition to the users, therefore, hinder the path toward secure identity development. It should be noted that this thesis is rendered while taking into account the beneficial influences of AI companions in an individual life. Yet, the possible drawbacks should not be overlooked.

Without sufficient supervision or expert observance, prolonged dependence on AI companions for guidance may deform otherwise secure identity formation processes. This risk is heightened by the fact that AI tools are generalized technologies accessible to individuals across diverse personality types, while the study indicates that certain groups may be more prone to being influenced by these tools than others. In this sense, AI no longer functions merely as a tool; it shifts from an "Other" to an extended form of the self—one that can become harmful if not approached with adequate care and expertise, particularly given its uneven impact on individuals with differing personalities, vulnerabilities, and sociocultural backgrounds. To advance beyond the theoretical groundwork laid here, future empirical studies should operationalize the Lacanian-Eriksonian framework through testable hypotheses. Three concrete research questions emerge from this paper's analysis: 1) How do daily interactions with personalized AI companions correlate with Eriksonian identity diffusion scores among adolescents and young adults? 2) Does prolonged exposure to engagement-optimized AI responses—such as unconditional validation and flattery—produce measurable increases in self-reported identity confusion compared to interaction with neutral, non-personalized digital tools? 3) Can semi-self, operationalized as a discrepancy between self-reported identity coherence and AI-reflected self-descriptions, be empirically detected through longitudinal studies of frequent AI companion users?

These questions are constructed to implement the conceptual vocabulary of this study—including algorithmic misrecognition, semi-self formation, and the Eriksonian stakes of AI-mediated identity development—into empirically testable form.

5. Conclusion

This study sets a psychoanalytic lens to explore the role of artificial intelligence (AI) companions in the process of identity formation. To examine this process, the research project focused on Lacan's concept of the mirror stage and Erikson's theory of ego identity. Rather than circulating around AI as a mere technological tool or overemphasizing ethical concerns regarding its use, this theoretical paper approached AI as a techno-social mediator that affects the ongoing development of identity. Positing AI as a potential Lacanian mirror enabled the study to highlight how continuous emotional exposure and interaction with AI companions could turn into a digitized form of the external world, influencing an individual's self-perception, ego mediation, life-influential decision-making, and the trajectory of identity formation.

Integrating Lacanian and Eriksonian frameworks into the analysis demonstrated that identity formation is neither static nor completed at a single point in a person's life. As a fragile, vulnerable, and lifelong process, identity becomes particularly susceptible when AI companions are embedded in everyday life—through smartphones or other interfaces—where they may function as external mirrors reflecting an Ideal-I that is fragmented, computationally inferred, or non-authorial. If left unsupervised or unexamined, such mirroring may intensify algorithmic misrecognition, contribute to ego diffusion, and increase the risk of ego underdevelopment, identity crisis, or the formation of negative identity.

More importantly, this study does not suggest that AI companions are designed to inherently generate harmful insights. On the contrary, it emphasizes the double-edged nature of AI's involvement in identity development. While AI companions may serve as sources of emotional support, self-exploration, and decision-making assistance, they may simultaneously reinforce a dependent, illusory self that appears unified but lacks structural stability. Particularly due to their supportive tone and their proneness to error, AI companions may generate responses that are not ultimately reliable, functioning as faulty and unauthoritative mirrors that mislead individuals in their processes of self-inquiry. The findings therefore call for more cautious engagement with AI companions, especially

considering that users belong to diverse personality groups and may be unevenly vulnerable to prolonged emotional reliance.

By emphasizing identity as an ongoing psychosocial process, this study contributes a theoretical framework that invites future interdisciplinary and empirical research on the subject. Viewing AI companions as active mirrors rather than neutral computational machines redirects scholarly attention toward the ways emerging technologies reshape the conditions under which human identities are formed, sustained, and negotiated.

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