

FULL PAPER • 2026

Beyond Empathy as a Property

How Three AI Chatbots' Designs Interact with Vietnamese University Students' Dispositions

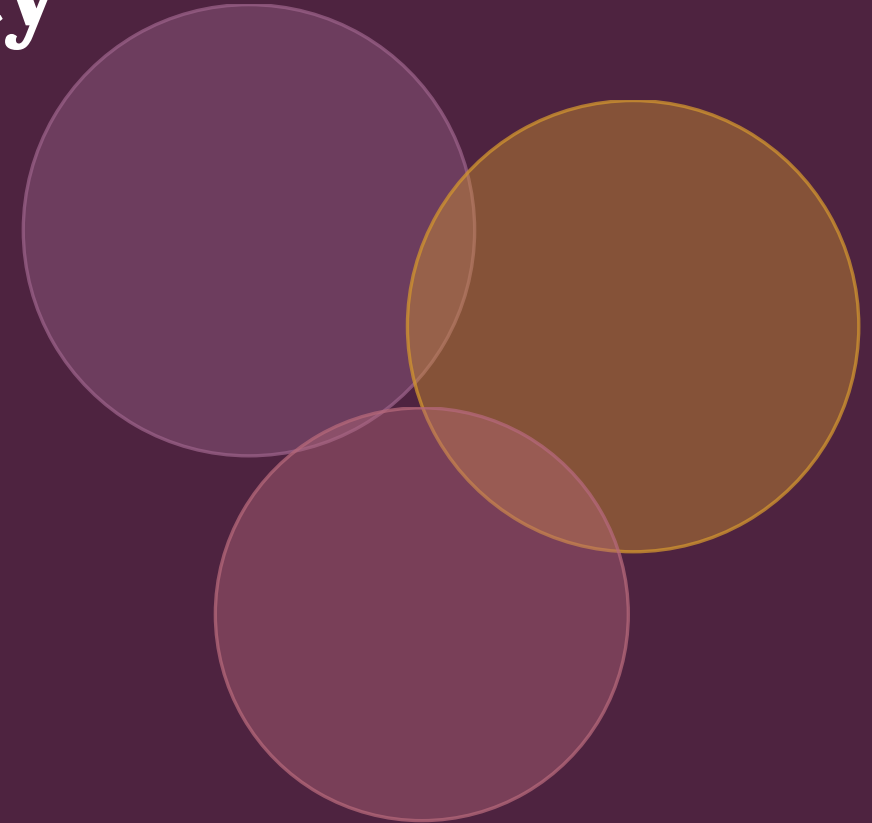
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AI chatbot • Social-Emotional Learning • Empathy • Vietnam



Pressure is rising; help-seeking is not

DEMAND

Academic, career and social stress outstrip what counselling services can carry [1, 2].

BARRIER

Stigma, perceived burden and limited resources keep students from seeking help [3, 4].

GAP

CASEL names emotion regulation a core competence — but not how to scaffold it at scale [5].

Two blind spots in the evidence

Almost all of it comes from English-language contexts, and almost all of it studies **one chatbot at a time**.

Comparative work on how students experience different chatbots — and how culture shapes that — is scarce.

Three research questions

RQ1

How do students perceive each chatbot's empathic responsiveness?

RQ2

How does each tool influence students' emotional self-regulation?

RQ3

What factors moderate chatbot effectiveness in emotional interaction?

Perceived AI empathy is not a fixed property of a chatbot — it is an interactional product, co-constructed by chatbot design, user disposition and situational context.

Three literatures meet here



Social-Emotional Learning

CASEL's five competences [5]. Well studied in K-12; underdeveloped in higher education, where scaffolding is far weaker.



Chatbots as emotional support

Therapeutic bots (Woebot, Wysa), companion bots (Replika), and general LLM assistants that now absorb emotional disclosure [6–11].



Empathy in human-AI interaction

Computers Are Social Actors [12]: users apply social rules to machines. Is empathy a design property, user projection, or emergent?

Our answer to that last question — an interactional emergent — is what the findings build toward.

Every student met every chatbot in every scenario

	ChatGPT <i>"academic assistant"</i>	Grok <i>"humorous companion"</i>	Replika <i>"listening friend"</i>
Acute exam pressure			
Group-work conflict			
Online-learning isolation			

Design. Exploratory qualitative study, reflexive thematic analysis [14, 15], with reflective probes after every interaction.

14 interviews, 93 codes, 8 themes

14

undergraduates

5–24

minutes each

≈30,000

words

93

codes

Sample

- 8 sophomores or juniors
- IT, business and engineering majors
- Chatbot experience: none to extensive
- Size set by information power [16]

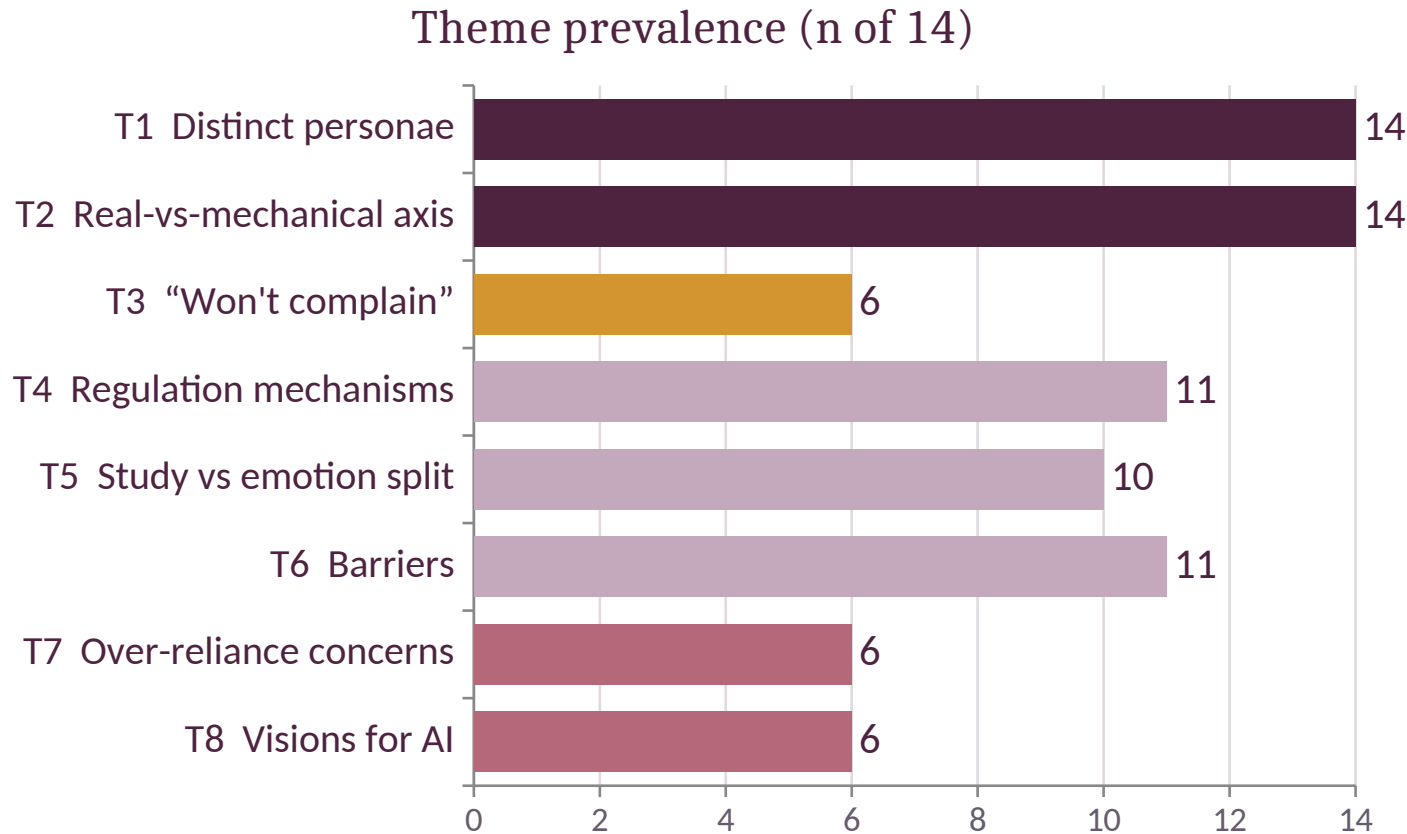
Collection

- Interviews in Vietnamese, recorded
- ASR, verified against audio
- One interviewer throughout
- Reporting follows COREQ [17]

Analysis

- Braun & Clarke, six phases
- In-vivo codes preserved
- Audit trail; negative cases flagged
- Positionality acknowledged

Eight themes, three core findings



1 Personae, but unstable

Roles shift across users and contexts.

2 Opposite effects

One design feature soothes one student, irritates another.

3 No social cost

AI is valued because it never complains.

Finding 1 — Three distinct personae

ChatGPT

The academic assistant

Detailed and neutral, but “stiff” in emotional contexts.

“ChatGPT answered quite stiffly, and I didn't feel any empathy.”

— SV08

Grok

The humorous companion

Playful and detail-rich, with proactive suggestions.

“Grok had jokes that felt close to me, like talking to a friend.”

— SV06

Replika

The listening friend

Probes by asking back — though a minority found it cold.

“Replika is friendly — I felt as if I were talking to a friend.”

— SV03

All 14 participants characterised the three chatbots in distinct stylistic terms, unprompted.

...but the personae are not fixed

Prior experience flattens the differences

SV09, a frequent ChatGPT user, found Grok “almost identical” to ChatGPT.

The most-praised bot drew the harshest words

Replika: “NPC in a game” (SV09), “stiff” (SV10), “like a busy person” (SV13).

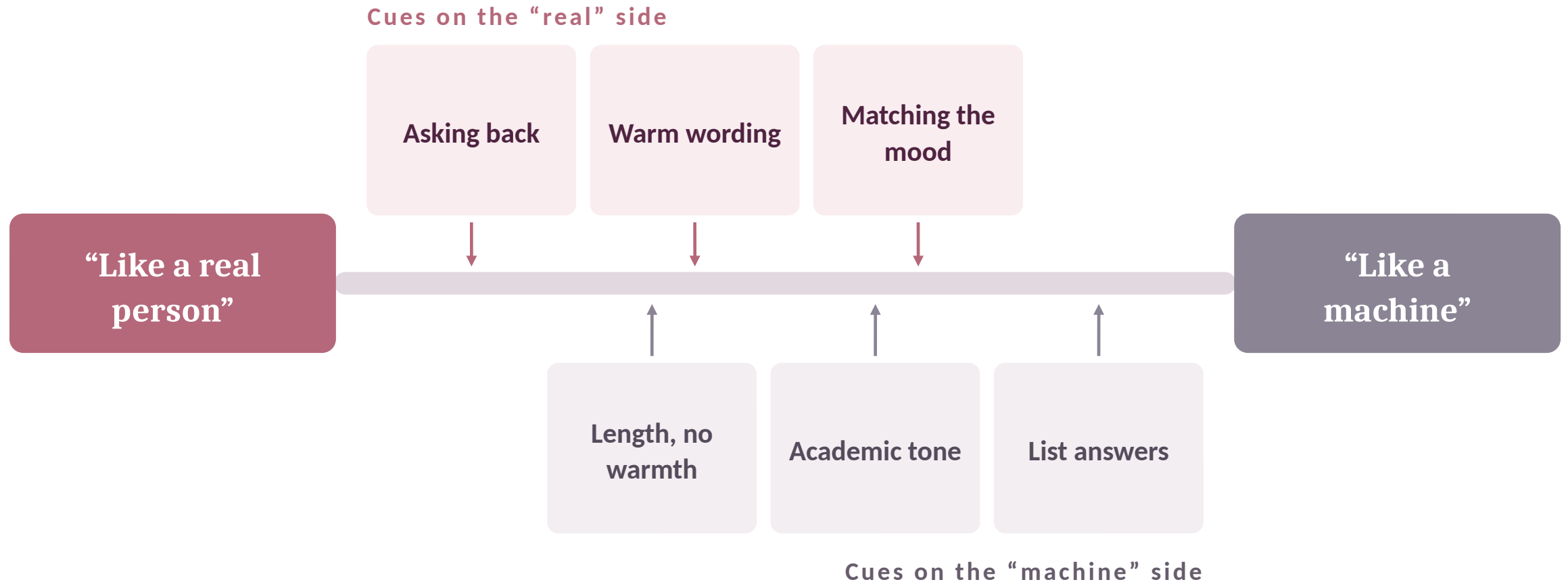
The same chatbot moves along the axis

Across all 14 transcripts, one axis recurs: “like a real person” versus “like a machine” — and the same chatbot moves across it.

*“Too academic” in the exam scenario —
but “like a friend who comforted me” in
the isolation scenario.*

— SV06, on ChatGPT

What puts a response on the “real” side



A judgement axis, not a fixed rating — the same chatbot slides along it as the situation changes.

Finding 2 — Same mechanism, opposite effects

Replika's asking back

Opened dialogue

"Its asking back made me open up."

— SV04, SV05, SV08, SV11

Blocked resolution

"Asking me back so many questions that I couldn't find a solution."

— SV06

Grok's humour

Relieved tension

"The humorous response helped me feel relieved."

— SV05

Trivialised the problem

"The joke was bland and made me feel my problem was taken lightly."

— SV04, SV06

Systematic, not incidental. Students who came to be heard welcomed questions and humour; those who came for solutions read the same moves as deflections.

Four mechanisms, three coping styles



Asking back

Replika

Meaning-focused

"Its asking back made me open up." — SV04



Humour

Grok

Emotion-focused

"The humorous response helped me feel relieved." — SV05



Concrete planning

ChatGPT / Grok

Problem-focused

"It gave me motivation and clear plans." — SV14



Affective comforting

Replika / ChatGPT

Emotion-focused

"Like talking to a friend who comforted me." — SV06

Mapped onto Lazarus & Folkman [20]. The three chatbots favour different coping styles — so a student's need could be matched to a chatbot.

Finding 3 — “It will never complain”

“Unlike a human, it will never complain. If I keep complaining to a person for too long, they may feel annoyed.”

— SV13, who self-identified as introverted

“An opportunity to express my feelings without fear of being judged.”

— SV07



A culturally specific friction

Six participants chose AI for a reason beyond convenience: the absence of social cost. AI does not judge, get tired, or feel burdened.

East Asian help-seeking research [18, 19] shows that face and reciprocal burden discourage disclosure to close others. AI sits outside that reciprocity loop.

A minority — but articulated deeply enough to matter.

To our knowledge, novel in the chatbot literature.

AI for study, humans for emotion — for most

10 of 14

drew a normative line: AI is fine for academic and informational support, but emotional support belongs to humans.

“For academic gaps students can ask AI; but for emotional matters, it is still better to find a friend.” — SV04

The split is not just descriptive: it limits how far students will engage AI even when it does show empathy.

Four resisted the split

SV05, SV12, SV13

endorsed AI as a viable emotional companion

SV01

framed AI as a reliable everyday partner

The same students who valued AI's freedom from social cost.

Barriers, concerns, and what students want



11 / 14

Barriers

- Replika's English requirement — the top barrier (7 students)
- ChatGPT's verbosity and academic tone
- Generic, one-size-fits-all answers
- The student's own prompting skill



6 / 14

Over-reliance

- Loss of self-direction
- Less social interaction
- Two saw AI as risky for introverts — two saw it as essential for them
- An unresolved tension

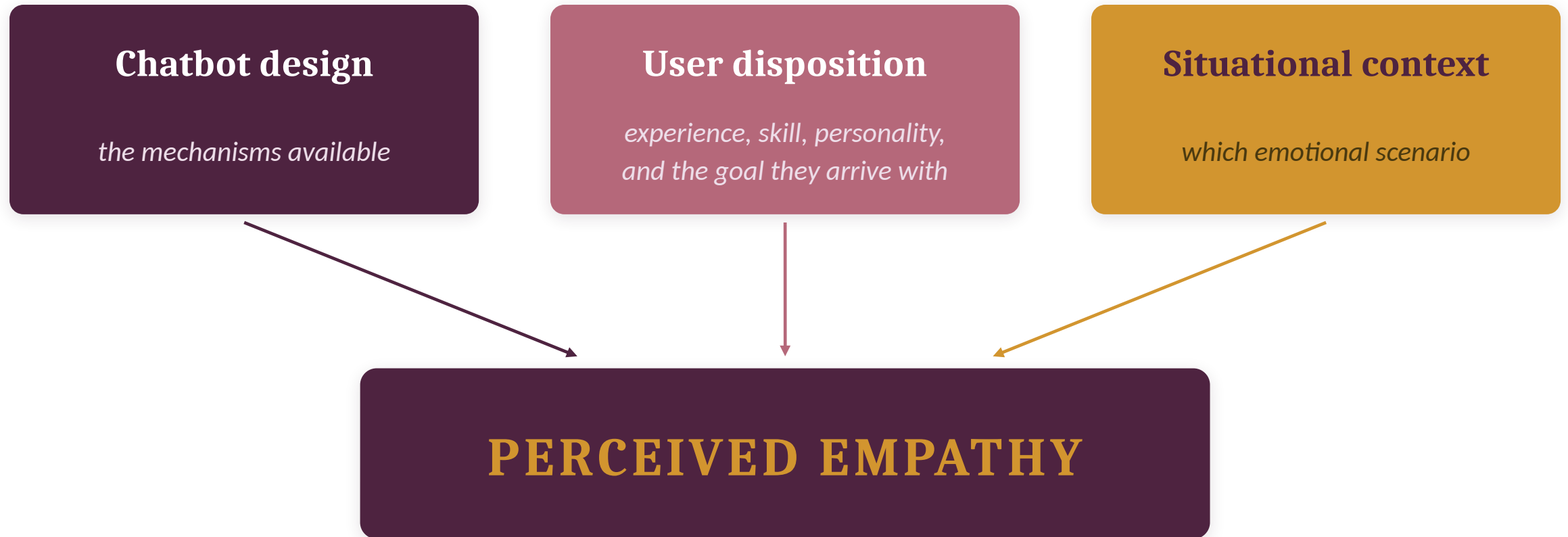


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Visions

- “AI should ask about the user before giving advice” (SV05)
- “Integrated into health systems to give early warnings” (SV07)
- Language localisation for Replika

Empathy is co-produced, not delivered



No single chatbot design can be optimal for all users in all situations. This extends Computers Are Social Actors [12] by specifying when and for whom a response registers as empathic.

What follows for design and for SEL

For chatbot designers

1

Expose the mechanisms

Questioning, humour, planning and comforting should be user-controllable.

2

Localise, don't translate

Replika's mixed Anglo-Vietnamese output undermined its empathic intent.

3

Escalate carefully

Wellness integration needs clear crisis-escalation protocols.

For SEL theory and practice

Self-management — where the four mechanisms operate.

Self-awareness — where asking back scaffolds reflection.

Relationship skills — equivocal: AI can rehearse social interaction, or substitute for it.

SEL programmes using AI should position chatbots as bridges to human interaction — never as replacements.

What this study cannot tell you

SAMPLE

n = 14, mostly from one institution and skewed to engineering. Demographics incomplete for four.

CODING

A single analyst, no inter-rater verification. Member-checking was not feasible.

TRANSCRIPTION

Automated speech recognition. Cited excerpts were verified against audio; others may hold errors.

EXPOSURE

Brief, scripted encounters. Novelty effects may distort first impressions of Replika and Grok.

Read these findings as hypothesis-generating, not as confirmatory claims.

Empathy is a product of interaction, not a feature of a product

01

Personae are unstable

All 14 read them as distinct characters — yet the same bot moved along the axis.

02

The same move cuts both ways

It helped those who came to be heard, frustrated those wanting solutions.

03

A three-factor model

Empathy is co-produced by design, disposition and context — so no one design fits all.

04

“It won't complain”

AI sits outside the reciprocity loop that makes disclosure costly in a Confucian-heritage setting.

Next: test the three-factor model with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs.

Thank you

Questions and comments are very welcome.

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