SYMPOSIUM

Therapeutic Encounters with Chatbots: The Social and Ethical Implications of Artificial Therapeutic Agents

1 July 2025 | College for Social Sciences and Humanities, Essen

This symposium will focus on chatbots in talk therapy. Developers, sociologists and philosophers will discuss the sociotechnical imaginaries, design assumptions and challenges that guide the creation of these chatbots. How can communication between humans and chatbots be designed to promote mental health and well-being?

Globally, digital mental health is a rapidly growing field. More than one billion people experience mental health problems, and depression is recognised as the leading cause of disability. Driven by the Covid pandemic, advances in artificial intelligence (AI) applications for mental healthcare offer hope for improving the accessibility of care and alleviating financial pressures on healthcare systems.

Current mental health chatbots use natural language processing and conversational interfaces to provide immediate responses to mental health needs and to identify users' moods and symptoms. Psychotherapeutic treatment methods are implemented in chatbots, such as Wysa or Woebot, to help individuals develop new skills and recognise emotions, thoughts, and behaviours to manage mental health problems.

Such chatbots are changing the nature of what we think of as communication. Sociology and related social science disciplines need to move beyond their anthropocentrism and recognise that

conversational AI applications, such as chatbots, can join humans in that most challenging of endeavours, communication.

Bringing together chatbot developers, sociologists and philosophers, this symposium will focus on how chatbots are being used in the mental-health sector to provide clients with talk therapy. It aims to discuss the sociotechnical imaginaries, design assumptions and challenges that guide the creation of these chatbots. Drawing on practical experiences of design and development and on empirical evidence of chatbot use, the symposium provides a unique space for developing our understanding of the communicative relationship between humans and chatbots.

A framework for human-chatbot communication may be essential for understanding the new sociotechnical relationships emerging in mental healthcare, harnessing their benefits and minimising their harms. It can provide important avenues for research and development and help explore whether and how we want to live with communicative machines, and how communication can be designed to avoid harm and promote mental health and well-being. The symposium addresses important implications of chatbot use, such as anthropomorphism and whether it leads users to place too much trust in chatbots and be unduly influenced by their "advice". By developing a framework for human-chatbot communication, the research project of Benjamin Marent and Sebastian Merkel aims to guide future research to explore the emotional support people find when engaging with chatbots. Can ubiquitous access to artificial communication partners lead to overuse and dependency? Or, on the contrary, will it remove barriers and increase equity in mental healthcare? Research into how to design chatbot encounters to deliver good therapeutic care is still in its infancy, and requires attention from the social sciences and humanities to explore the social and ethical implications.

Organisation & Chair

Assoc. Prof. Benjamin Marent | University of Sussex (UK) &
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PROGRAMME

Tuesday, 1 July

9:00   Arrival and coffee

9:30   **Welcome and introduction**
            Benjamin Marent, University of Sussex (UK) & College for Social Sciences and Humanities
            Sebastian Merkel, Ruhr University Bochum (Germany)

	SESSION 1
9:45	**Between an ethos of care, an ethic of access, and a logic of capital: configuring digital mental health** *Martyn Pickersgill, University of Edinburgh (UK)*
10:45	**Human-Chatbot-Interaction from a philosophical perspective – fictionalist and realist accounts** *Eva Weber-Guskar, Ruhr University Bochum (Germany)*
11:30	Coffee break
	SESSION 2
11:45	**Practice pitch: Clare&me, a startup company from Berlin on the mission to digitise mental health and close the gap between the demand and supply of mental health support** *Lea Maria Schäfer, Clare&me, Berlin (Germany)*
12:15	**Sociotechnical imaginaries held by developers of mental health chatbots** *Sebastian Merkel, Ruhr University Bochum (Germany)*
13:15	Lunch
	SESSION 3
14:15	**Interactions with LLM-powered chatbots: Technical foundations and interactional dynamics** *Ole Pütz, University of Bielefeld (Germany)*
14:45	**Human-AI communication in mental health: Sociological implications of chatbots as therapeutic agents** *Benjamin Marent, University of Sussex (UK)*
15:45	Coffee break
	SESSION 4
16:15	**Practice Pitch: Developing mental health chatbots for young people – insights from the Cady project** *Stefan Lüttke, University of Greifswald (Germany)*
17:00	**Digital mental health innovation: key points for a future research agenda** *Cornelius Schubert, TU Dortmund University (Germany)*
17:30	**Closing remarks**
19:30	Dinner

CONTRIBUTIONS AND SPEAKERS

Practice Pitch: Developing mental health chatbots for young people – insights from the Cady project

Stefan Lüttke | University of Greifswald (Germany)

Stefan Lüttke is a clinical psychologist at the University of Greifswald, specialising in depression in children and adolescents. He studied psychology and behavioural medicine at the University of Potsdam, HU Berlin and the University of Sussex, followed by research positions at the University of Tübingen and University College of London. His research focusses on digital mental health interventions for young people, in particular chatbots for diagnosing and treating mental disorders. He is currently building an interdisciplinary network for the development of LLM-based diagnostic and therapeutic chatbots for children with mental issues. Stefan Lüttke was funded by the renowned German Academic Scholarship Foundation (Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes) for both his studies and his PhD.

Human-AI communication in mental health: Sociological implications of chatbots as therapeutic agents

Benjamin Marent | University of Sussex (UK)

Benjamin Marent is an Associate Professor in Digital Technology at the University of Sussex. With a background in medical sociology and science and technology studies, his research investigates and informs the digital transformation of healthcare, with a current focus on telemedicine and the application of conversational artificial intelligence (AI). He serves on the editorial boards of the British Sociological Association's (BSA) flagship journal *Sociology* and the journal *Sociology of Health & Illness* (SHI), and is co-editor of the SHI special issue *Algorithms in Health and Medicine: Sociological Inquiries into Current Disruptions and Future Imaginaries*. He holds an International Senior Fellowship (2025) from the College for Social Sciences and Humanities of the University Alliance Ruhr (Essen, Germany) to investigate *Therapeutic Encounters with Artificial Intelligence*.

Current publications include:

Marent, B., Merkel, S., Petersen, A., Tucker, I. (forthcoming 2025) 'Therapeutic encounters with chatbots: Towards a sociological approach to human-machine communication', in: Marent, B. (ed.) *De Gruyter Handbook of Digital Health and Society*. De Gruyter, Berlin.

Sociotechnical imaginaries held by developers of mental health chatbots

Sebastian Merkel | Ruhr University Bochum (Germany)

Sebastian Merkel is a Junior Professor for Health and E-Health at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Ruhr University Bochum. He has a background in political science, medical sciences and health services research. His research focuses on the co-design and implementation of digital technologies in healthcare and social care. He has been involved in several national and international projects with a focus on applied research and is currently responsible for a project on entrepreneurship in digital health in Germany.

Current publications:

Merkel, S.; Marent, B. (in preparation) 'Sociotechnical imaginaries guiding the creation of mental health chatbots', to be submitted to *Sociology of Health & Illness*

Between an ethos of care, an ethic of access, and a logic of capital: configuring digital mental health

Martyn Pickersgill | University of Edinburgh (UK)

Martyn Pickersgill is Personal Chair of the Sociology of Science and Medicine at the University of Edinburgh (UK), and serves as Co-Director of the Centre for Biomedicine, Self and Society. He is also Co-Director of the Wellcome PhD Programme in 'One Health Models of Disease: Science, Ethics and Society'. Martyn's programme of work in the social dimensions of biomedicine has been funded by sponsors such as ARIA, the British Academy, the Leverhulme Trust, the Wellcome Trust, *and Arts and Humanities Research Council* (AHRC), *Economic and Social Research Council* (ESRC), and *Medical Research Counsil* (MRC). Martyn is a member of the ESRC Strategic Advisory Network and is a member of the Scottish Science Advisory Council. He is a recipient of the Henry Duncan Medal from the Royal Society of Edinburgh and an elected Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences. Martyn's forthcoming book, *Configuring Psychology: Access to Therapy and the Transformation of Psychological Care*, will be published by Cambridge University Press.

Interactions with LLM-powered chatbots: Technical foundations and interactional dynamics

Ole Pütz | University of Bielefeld (Germany)

Ole Pütz studied Sociology at Bielefeld University, Göteborg Universitetet (Sweden), and the University of Notre Dame (France). He received his PhD in 2016 from Bielefeld University for

an award-winning study on strategic planning in social movement groups. Ole Pütz has worked as a lecturer for qualitative methods and in the university administration before joining the Semantic Computing Group in October 2017. He has recently received a grant to devise an interdisciplinary research project that combines sociology and computer science.

Current publications include:

Pütz, O., & Esposito, E. (2024). 'Performance without understanding: How ChatGPT relies on humans to repair conversational trouble.' *Discourse & Communication*, 18(6), 859-868.

Practice Pitch:
Clare&me, a start-up company from Berlin on the mission to digitise mental health and close the gap between the demand and supply of mental health support

Lea Maria Schäfer | Clare&me, Berlin (Germany)

Lea Maria Schäfer is a psychologist and Head of Psychology at Clare&me. Clare&me is a startup company from Berlin on the mission to digitise mental health and close the gap between the demand and supply of mental-health support. Clare&me specialises in AI-powered self-therapy for mental health. The company's platform offers an AI-powered voice coach designed to support individuals struggling with anxiety, stress and mild depression. Users can engage in voice-based conversations on smartphones, promising accessible and stigma-free support.

Digital mental health innovation: key points for a future research agenda

Cornelius Schubert | TU Dortmund University (Germany)

Cornelius Schubert is Professor of the Sociology of Science and Technology and Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at TU Dortmund University. His research focuses on the interactions between science, technology and society. Cornelius Schubert studies the emergence and diffusion of innovations and is particularly interested in topics such as repair and improvisation. Using micro-analytical perspectives, his research examines large-scale social transformation at the small scale: in research labs, hospital wards or everyday life. He engages in interdisciplinary research projects that explore new possibilities for cooperation and participation.

Recent publications include:

Schubert, C., & Schulz-Schaeffer, I. (Eds.). (2023). *Berlin Keys to the Sociology of Technology*. Springer VS.

Human-Chatbot-Interaction from a philosophical perspective – fictionalist and realist accounts

Eva Weber-Guskar | Ruhr-University Bochum (Germany)

Eva Weber-Guskar is Professor of Ethics and Philosophy of Emotions at the Institute of Philosophy I at Ruhr University Bochum. Her research in the area of philosophy of artificial intelligence focuses on ethics of affective computing. She is interested in a critical analysis of the understanding of emotions in AI contexts generally, and investigates the possibility of appropriate emotional relationships with social chatbots and similar applications. She was a PI in the interdisciplinary research group *INTERACT! New Forms of Social Interaction with Intelligent Systems* from 2021-2024. Before coming to Bochum in 2019, she held guest professorships in Berlin, Vienna, Zurich and Erlangen and was a visiting scholar at New York University.

Recent publications include:

Weber-Guskar, Eva (2024): Gefühle der Zukunft. Wie wir mit emotionaler KI unser Leben verändern. Ullstein.

Weber-Guskar, Eva (2021). How to feel about emotionalized artificial intelligence? When robot pets, holograms, and chatbots become affective partners. *Ethics and Information Technology* 23 (4):601-610.