

The Rise of AI-Therapists: a Systematic App Review of an Emerging Digital Care Industry

Mental illness remains a substantial burden due to a worldwide shortage of mental health providers (World Health Organization, 2025). In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has been an influential force in mental healthcare, altering how individuals access therapeutic aid and practice mental well-being (Boucher et al., 2021). AI-driven conversational agents, such as Replika, Wysa, and Youper, have emerged as prominent actors on the market, offering support to individuals seeking therapy. By providing cost-effective, hyper-personalized, and human-like therapeutic aid, AI-therapists may have the potential to address the shortage of mental health providers (Pham et al., 2022). In doing so, AI-therapists may alter how mental health care is accessed and conceptualized in contemporary societies. Despite its growing societal relevance, little is known about the industry of AI-therapists. To address this knowledge gap, this paper maps and systematically characterizes the industry of AI-therapists, aiming to create a holistic understanding of the industry across multiple levels.

This paper presents a systematic app review of AI-therapist apps available on the Apple App Store and Google Play Store, following the seven-step method proposed by Gasteiger et al. (2023) for systematic health app reviews. This entails scoping searches, setting eligibility criteria, screening apps, extracting data, and synthesizing findings, among other steps (Gasteiger et al., 2023). By employing a systematic app review, the paper aims to identify the app repertoires of key actors and characterize monetization strategies and app features within the industry. The results are not yet available, but preliminary analyses suggest that the AI-therapist industry is characterized by fragmented ownership structures, diverse monetization strategies, and strong dependencies on dominant app platforms. By conceptualizing the AI-therapist industry, the paper contributes to discussions of the platformization and productization of care, demonstrating how therapeutic aid and self-help is increasingly reconfigured through app-based infrastructures and market logics. Through this

systematic review, the paper examines how ownership structures, monetization strategies, and app features shape the emerging AI-therapist industry, providing a nuanced account of their influence. By systematically characterizing the industry, this paper provides crucial insights into a rapidly growing industry that is increasingly influencing the platformization and productization of mental health care.

Keywords: Systematic app review, AI-therapists, AI-therapist industry, digital mental health.

Bio:

Amanda Lundsgaard Boddum is a Ph.d.-student at the Department of Media and Journalism Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. She was granted a fully funded scholarship from Aarhus University for her Ph.d.-project “The Mediatization of self-help: A media industry- and user study”, which examines the intersection of the commercial interests of the media industry and the individuals’ need and/or want for mental well-being. The Ph.d.-project explores how the emergence of new artificially-driven self-help media, specifically AI-therapists, potentially influences media materiality and user practices.

Amanda is enrolled in the Ph.d.-programme ICT, Media, Communication and Journalism at the Graduate School of Arts, and is a member of the research programme Media, Communication and Society, both at Aarhus University.

References:

Boucher, E. M., Harake, N. R., Ward, H. E., Stoeckl, S. E., Vargas, J., Minkel, J., & Zilca, R. (2021). Artificially intelligent chatbots in digital mental health interventions: a review. *Expert Review of Medical Devices*, 18(sup1), 37–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17434440.2021.2013200>

- Gasteiger N, Dowding D, Norman G, *et al.* (2023). Conducting a systematic review and evaluation of commercially available mobile applications (apps) on a health-related topic: the TECH approach and a step-by-step methodological guide. *BMJ Open* 2023;13:e073283. DOI: [10.1136/bmjopen-2023-073283](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-073283)
- Pham KT., Nabizadeh A, & Selek S. (2022). Artificial Intelligence and Chatbots in Psychiatry. *Psychiatric Quarterly*;93(1):249-253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-022-09973-8>
- World Health Organization. (2nd of September 2025). *Over a billion people living with mental health conditions – services require urgent scale-up.* <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-09-2025-over-a-billion-people-living-with-mental-health-conditions-services-require-urgent-scale-up>