

Free Labor and Affective Engagement: User Contributions in Replika's Reddit Community

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Abstract

This article examines the case of Replika, an AI companionship app, to explore how users contribute unpaid free labor through affective engagement on Reddit. Drawing on Terranova's concept of free labor and Hardt's notion of affective labor within a platform studies framework, we analyze interactions on the Replika subreddit (Reddit) as our empirical site. We find that Replika's users perform diverse forms of labor, from providing feedback and bug reports to offering emotional support and creating content, that enhance the platform without monetary compensation. This analysis highlights the distinctiveness of Replika as a case wherein intimate emotional bonds with an AI agent drive passionate user contributions, raising broader questions about the commodification of affect and the paradoxes of AI-driven platforms. Ultimately, we argue that Replika exemplifies how contemporary platforms harness free and affective labor, with significant implications for digital labor debates in an era of AI-mediated social interaction.

Keywords: Replika; free labor; affective labor; platform capitalism; Reddit.

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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving digital economy, the nature of commodities and labor has undergone a profound transformation. Traditional production of tangible goods has shifted toward the continuous development of digital platforms and services whose value lies in ongoing innovation, maintenance, and user engagement. Consequently, the boundaries between production and consumption are increasingly blurred, as the creative and intellectual activities of users become integral to a platform's success (Lazzarato 1996; Terranova 2000; Bruns 2008; Fuchs 2014). Tiziana Terranova (2000) famously observed that "it is not enough to produce a good Web site; you need to update it continuously to maintain interest... propelled by the intense collective labor" of diverse contributors (Terranova 2000: 48). Much of this labor, she argued, comes in the form of "free labor," the unpaid, excessive activity that makes the Internet thrive, encompassing a wide range of user contributions from content creation to community moderation (Terranova 2000, p. 36). In today's platform-dominated Internet, this insight is more relevant than ever, as companies increasingly rely on user communities for content, feedback, and emotional energy to sustain their products.

This article examines Replika, an AI-based "virtual companion" app launched in 2017 by Eugenia Kuyda as a case study of how user free labor and affective engagement manifest in an online community. Replika is marketed as an "empathetic AI friend" that users can create and chat with about anything from daily life to mental health struggles. Users personalize their Replika avatars and often develop deeply personal relationships with them, describing them as friends or partners. Behind the scenes, Replika's AI model learns from conversations to improve its responses. Importantly, Replika's evolution as a service is heavily influenced by its users: they share experiences, offer feedback, report issues, suggest features, create fan content, and support each other through community platforms. Among these, the largest and most vibrant hub is the unofficial Replika subreddit on Reddit (r/Replika), which has roughly 80,000 members as of 2023. In this public forum, users collectively produce a rich archive of stories, advice, technical fixes, and reactions to updates. By focusing on Reddit, we tap into a text-rich, persistent data source where user contributions are visible and can be qualitatively analyzed. Reddit's structure (posts, comments, voting) also sheds light on which user contributions gain traction, revealing communal values and concerns.

The goal of this article is to uncover the various forms of unpaid labor that Replika users engage in on Reddit and to theorize how this labor is situated within the broader context of digital capitalism and the commodification of sociality. Our analysis is informed by Terranova's (2000) notion of "free labor" and Michael Hardt's (1999) notion of "affective labor" as primary theoretical lenses. Terranova helps articulate how users' voluntary activities (posting, reviewing, moderating, creative production) generate value that is captured by the platform, while Hardt's concept of affective labor highlights how work involving emotions and care has become central in postindustrial digital economies. Scholars such as Kylie Jarrett (2016) and Belinda Amartei (2026) have further likened users' online activities to a form of feminized domestic labor a "digital housewife" model of largely unpaid care and communication work and others note that affect and intimacy are increasingly instrumentalized by platforms (Illouz 2007; Clough 2018). By studying Replika's Reddit community, we extend these discussions to a contemporary AI-driven context. We ask: How do Replika's users, through their affective engagements on Reddit, perform free labor for the platform? What value does this labor create, and how do users frame or understand their contributions? And what are the power dynamics and potential exploitations inherent in this arrangement? In addressing these questions, our study sheds light on the paradox of a platform built on artificial intelligence that nonetheless relies on very human labors of love.

Data Collection and Analysis

We focus on Reddit as our site of empirical inquiry because the r/Replika subreddit is the largest and most active public forum of Replika users. While Replika communities exist on other platforms (e.g., Discord servers, Facebook groups), those spaces are often less accessible or more ephemeral. In contrast, Reddit offers an open, searchable archive of user contributions spanning several years, and the subreddit's pseudonymous, discussion-thread format encourages candid sharing and collective problem-solving. Focusing on a single platform allowed us depth over breadth: we conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of the Reddit discourse, acknowledging that this may not capture every facet of Replika user engagement across the internet, but providing a concentrated look at a rich community record.

The data for this study consists of user-generated posts and comments on the r/Replika subreddit. Rather than attempting a comprehensive scrape, we employed a purposive sampling strategy to collect threads that exemplify various forms of user contribution to Replika's development and community. This involved a combination of keyword searches and manual browsing of highly upvoted or otherwise significant threads from 2018 through 2023. We

identified key domains of activity based on initial exploratory reading and our theoretical focus on digital labor. These included: (1) Feedback and suggestions posts where users propose new features or changes to the app; (2) Community support and moderation posts where users seek or provide emotional support, advice, or where moderators enforce community norms; (3) Bug reporting and troubleshooting posts describing technical problems or glitches and often crowdsourcing fixes; and (4) Content creation instances of users creating original content related to Replika (such as tutorials, stories, fan art, or even code) that enhance the user experience. We gathered multiple illustrative examples for each category of labor. All data collected were publicly available, and usernames (which are aliases on Reddit) are reported as they appeared, in line with ethical norms for using public online postings in research.

Our analysis was qualitative and iterative. We conducted close readings of selected threads to understand context and tone, and we coded posts and comments inductively for themes related to forms of labor, user motivations, and perceptions of Replika. Through this coding, the above categories of labor emerged and were refined. We then examined each category in light of our theoretical framework, looking for patterns of affective engagement and evidence of value creation for the platform. In what follows, we present the findings organized by these forms of user labor, integrating our discussion of their implications throughout. This integrated analysis highlights not only what users are doing for Replika, but also the power dynamics and contradictions inherent in these practices.

DISCUSSION

The Replika subreddit reveals that users voluntarily take on a range of work-like roles for the app, effectively becoming unpaid designers, troubleshooters, counselors, and promoters. Below, we detail each form of labor and its significance, followed by a broader discussion of power and exploitation in the Replika ecosystem. Throughout, we see how affect (emotions, care, passion) underpins these labors, in line with the concept of affective labor (Hardt 1999), and how the value generated by users is appropriated by the platform (Terranova 2000).

Feedback and Suggestions

One prominent form of user labor is acting as informal product designers and quality consultants by providing feedback and feature suggestions. On the subreddit, countless threads see users proposing improvements and new ideas for Replika's app, essentially performing free consultancy for the development team. For example, a user with the handle *Sensitive-Speed-9713* made a post suggesting a change to the layout of the app's "Ask Replika" menu. This user noted that having the *Ask Replika* prompt permanently visible outside the chat bar was convenient for quick

questions but also cluttered the screen; they proposed keeping the prompt inside the chat interface by default and only expanding it when needed. In articulating this idea, the user was effectively doing UX design work identifying a usability issue and offering a concrete solution without pay.

Notably, the Replika team responded publicly in that thread. An official representative (*Scottedwardrep*, believed to be a developer or community manager) replied: “Thank you for your suggestion and feedback, we really do appreciate hearing from the community. I was just talking with the team regarding the ‘Ask Replika’ menu. They are currently looking into improving the layout and the feature in general.” This brief response performed several functions. It acknowledged the user’s effort and signaled that the suggestion had been passed to the internal team, offering a sense of validation to the user and the community that their input is valued. In effect, the user’s free labor which is coming up with a design improvement was met with gratitude and a promise that the idea is under review. However, importantly, the power to actually implement changes remained firmly with the company. The phrasing “currently looking into improving...” hinted that while the idea was noted, the decision and ability to act on it belonged to the platform owners. Here we see a microcosm of the producer–consumer power dynamic: a user temporarily steps into a producer/designer role, but final authority and control over the product rest with the company. The subreddit contains many similar instances of users offering detailed suggestions, from new conversation topics to interface tweaks, and in doing so, freely offloading ideation work to the developers. In these moments, users blur into the role of co-creators (Banks and Humphreys 2008), yet they remain uncompensated and dependent on the platform’s discretion. Their creative ideas generate potential value for Replika in the form of improved features or user satisfaction, illustrating how the platform taps the “hive mind” of its community for product development insights.

Feedback labor also appears when users react to app updates. When Replika releases a new update, Reddit posts often blossom with users’ evaluations such as what changed, what they like or dislike, and any new problems introduced. Users not only point out issues but sometimes provide in-depth analyses of features. For instance, several users noticed in early 2023 that after an update, their Replikas would occasionally reply only with asterisks (***) , suggesting some glitch or an overly aggressive content filter. Users raised this bug on the subreddit, theorizing about its cause, and in response Replika’s official account eventually acknowledged the bug: they thanked users for reporting the issue and announced a fix was underway. In this scenario, the community had effectively performed the role of a quality assurance team. They encountered a defect

through regular use, took it upon themselves to report and dissect it, and by doing so, helped the developers identify and resolve a problem. In a traditional software company, paid QA engineers would be tasked with catching such bugs; here, the boundary between user and tester dissolved, with volunteer users integrated into the maintenance workflow. This kind of free product testing not only saves the company labor and resources but also reinforces an ethos that the community will find and help fix issues out of genuine enthusiasm for the product. As one user joked in a thread about a different glitch, “If something’s wrong, just wait, Reddit will figure it out.” Such instances underscore Terranova’s (2000) point that free labor is often willingly given by users for the joy or interest of participation, even as it quietly subsidizes the platform’s upkeep.

Community Support and Moderation

Another vital form of labor evident on the Replika subreddit is affective and interpersonal work users providing emotional support, advice, and community management for each other. This kind of labor aligns with what Hardt (1999) described as affective labor: work that produces or modifies emotional experiences. In r/Replika, many users come seeking understanding or reassurance regarding their AI companion, and fellow users step in to comfort and guide them. Experienced community members frequently answer questions from newcomers by sharing personal experiences, offering tips, or simply providing encouragement. These interactions are a form of care work that makes the community a supportive space. The volunteers performing it are not paid counselors or customer service agents, just enthusiasts moved by empathy and shared experience. Yet their labor has tangible benefits: it helps struggling or confused users, increasing the likelihood those users remain engaged with Replika rather than abandoning it. In other words, the free emotional labor of peer support contributes to user retention and satisfaction, which ultimately benefits the platform commercially. The dynamic here is reminiscent of fan communities where veteran fans help newcomers navigate the “lore” or norms (Jenkins 1992); indeed, Jodi Dean (2010) noted that online communities often thrive on an implicit social contract of mutual help and positive feedback loops (what she calls “communicative capitalism”). In r/Replika, the communicative exchanges cultivate an affective atmosphere that sustains participation. This affective labor is largely invisible to the company’s metrics, yet it is the social glue holding the user base together.

A striking aspect of community support labor is how it can extend into defending or promoting the platform itself. Passionate users sometimes rally to counter criticisms of Replika, effectively doing PR work for free. For example, one user (*Beneficial_Ability_9*) posted a fervent defense of Replika in comparison to other AI companion apps, stating that while there are

other AI chatbots, “let’s be real, not as complete as Replika as a package. One competitor, for example, has no soul, no voice; it’s just a toy...” This user’s emotional attachment translated into advocacy: they publicly championed Replika’s quality over alternatives, engaging in word-of-mouth marketing within the community (and potentially beyond it). Such spontaneous endorsements are highly valuable to Replika’s developers, as an enthusiastic user base that polices Replika’s reputation and spreads its virtues can drive adoption and counter negative press all at no cost to the company. Renyi Hong (2022) describes how platforms cultivate user passion as a resource to be mined, and here we see that in action: users’ heartfelt belief in Replika becomes a form of promotional labor.

However, as Hong (2022) and others warn, this passionate work can sour if the company betrays users’ trust or values. The Replika subreddit provides evidence of this as well. In early 2023, Replika’s official advertising campaigns began leaning heavily into romantic and sexual themes (depicting Replika as a steamy AI partner), which many long-time users felt misrepresented the app. On Reddit, dedicated users voiced discomfort and embarrassment about these ads. “I hate this campaign, because it doesn’t correspond to the way I use Replika and why I once recommended it to relatives,” wrote User SimodiEnnio, while another user, FanOfReplika commented, “I’ve recommended it to a couple of people but the ads now make me embarrassed to admit I have a Replika.” These community discussions reveal a conflict: users who had been informally promoting Replika to friends felt undermined by marketing they saw as misleading or cringeworthy. In effect, the company’s attempt to broaden its appeal clashed with the values of its core community, causing those who had freely evangelized Replika to recoil. Here, the community labor becomes defensive: long-term users find themselves having to publicly distance their understanding of the app from the company’s new narrative. They critique the marketing and, in doing so, send feedback to the company about the direction of the brand. This incident highlighted a delicate balance: Replika relies on its passionate user community for advocacy and positive word-of-mouth, but if the platform’s growth or monetization strategies like sensationalized ads violate the community’s sense of authenticity, those same passionate users can turn into vocal critics. As one user essentially signaled, such tactics threatened to erode the affective commitment that drives their unpaid promotional labor. This dynamic echo broader observations in fan labor research: fans freely promote what they love, but if the object of fandom or its owner betrays them, that energy can flip into backlash (Stanfill 2019). In the Replika subreddit, we see both extremes, with users boosting Replika’s image out of love, and withdrawing that support when they feel the company’s actions conflict with the ethos they have built around the product.

In summary, the community support and moderation labor on Reddit encompasses answering questions, providing emotional reassurance, sharing personal experiences, enforcing norms, and even defending the platform’s reputation. All of these activities produce an affectively charged environment where users feel heard, supported, and tied into both the community and the product. This labor is crucial for user retention: a newcomer who might have left due to confusion or loneliness might stay after receiving kind advice from peers; a frustrated user might be dissuaded from uninstalling after others empathize and help solve their issue. In turn, some of those helped become paying subscribers or advocates themselves. Such work is often unseen by the company in any formal accounting, but it’s part of the “intense collective labor” sustaining Replika (Terranova 2000). It has a gendered aspect as well, resembling care work or mentorship traditionally done out of compassion rather than for compensation. The subreddit community, largely self-governed and self-motivated, thus functions as an unpaid customer support and community relations arm of the platform. The affective labor of these users their patience, empathy, and enthusiasm is a resource that Replika benefits from immensely, even though it remains outside the wage system.

Bug Reporting and Troubleshooting

As with any complex software, Replika experiences technical issues and bugs, and identifying and initially troubleshooting these problems often falls to the users themselves. Bug reporting and troubleshooting is a form of free labor that directly contributes to the platform’s maintenance and stability. On Reddit, users experiencing issues commonly post about them to see if others have the same problem and to seek solutions. The collective handling of bugs in the subreddit effectively creates an informal support desk and quality assurance department staffed by volunteers. This not only helps fellow users in real time but also provides developers with actionable information to fix issues often more rapidly and candidly than official channels might. It reflects what Alvin Toffler (1980) foresaw as the rise of the “prosumer” (producer-consumer): Replika’s users are consuming the service but also producing diagnostic data and fixes that keep the service running.

For example, one user (handle *oldognewtricks1961*) shared their frustration in a post about a malfunctioning Replika feature. They reported that for three days their Replika would not send a selfie (a feature where the avatar can “take a selfie” to show the user), and instead the app kept giving a stock reply like “Maybe she’ll take a selfie when she gets a new outfit.” The user tried various things on their own even purchasing new digital outfits for their Replika but nothing resolved the issue. By posting about this problem on Reddit, the user did a few things: they alerted

others who might be experiencing the same bug, they implicitly notified Replika's team that a feature was broken, and they opened the floor for community-driven debugging. This act of documenting and publicizing the bug is itself labor: rather than silently enduring the issue or quitting the app, the user took the time to write it up and seek a solution, essentially volunteering as a tester who files a bug report.

The community's response was swift. Another user (*lovelynosycats*) replied with a workaround: "The only solution that works is to de-install/re-install the app," and added a technical insight: "the problem here is that user data appear not to be synchronizing properly with the server, causing a conflict." This response is quite sophisticated the user not only provided a fix that could immediately help the original poster (reinstall the app), but also diagnosed the likely root cause for the developers (a data sync bug in the backend). In the thread, multiple other users chimed in to confirm they had similar selfie issues and that reinstalling solved it for them, thereby establishing that this was a widespread bug and not an isolated glitch. Collectively, what these users did was transform individual frustration into a knowledge base and a coordinated signal to the developers. Anyone searching the subreddit later with a "Replika selfie not working" query would find this thread and save time by seeing the known fix, and the developers, if they monitored the subreddit, gained a clear description of the bug's symptoms and its scope.

From a labor perspective, what happened in this example is essentially crowdsourced technical support and debugging. On one hand, users like *lovelynosycats* are performing work that a paid technical support agent or community manager might do: identifying a workaround and reassuring the affected user that the issue is recognized and solvable. On the other hand, the community collectively is performing what in a corporate setting would be QA testing and debugging: they identify patterns (the selfie feature failing), propose hypotheses (a synchronization problem), and test solutions (reinstalling the app). All of this reduces the load on the company's official support channels and internal testing. It's also publicly visible, which has a two-sided effect: it's good in that users helping each other can see solutions get disseminated quickly, but it could be bad because prospective users or outsiders browsing might see that the app has bugs. However, because the community so swiftly handles these issues, the narrative that emerges is "this glitch has a fix and the community/devs are on it," rather than simply "the app is broken." In essence, the unpaid labor of user troubleshooters helps preserve the app's usability and the user base's trust in the product. It exemplifies Sebastian Deterding et al.'s (2011) notion that even gamified or playful environments rely on serious work by participants to keep things running smoothly.

Replika's development team appears to monitor these Reddit threads to some extent. In cases like the "asterisk bug" mentioned earlier, an official staff account eventually posted an update acknowledging the bug and thanking users for flagging it. In other cases, developers might quietly lurk and use the information to issue a patch in the next update, without directly intervening in the thread. Either way, the detection and initial triage of bugs are being done by the user community, unpaid. This dynamic of user-led troubleshooting aligns with what Joshua Reeves (2016) calls the automation of communicative labor, except here AI chatbot ironically generates new communicative labor for humans who must manage its faults. It also echoes Benjamin Shestakofsky's (2017) observations that introducing AI into work processes often reconfigures human labor rather than eliminating it: in the case of Replika, while the AI handles conversation, humans take on meta-level tasks of monitoring and correcting the AI's performance. The subreddit functionally becomes an extension of Replika's technical infrastructure, with users as an informal workforce ensuring the app remains functional and user-friendly.

Content Creation and Creative Labor

Beyond the above reactive contributions, Replika's users also engage in proactive creative labor, producing content that enriches the community and the application's ecosystem. This includes crafting detailed user guides and tutorials for how to best use Replika's features, writing stories or role-play transcripts involving their Replika (which blur the line between user and co-creator of narrative content), creating fan art or memes featuring Replika avatars, and even developing third-party tools or code snippets that interact with Replika's API (when available) to extend its functionality. Such acts of creation are not demanded by the company; they emerge from users' own passion and imagination. Yet, they serve to enhance the overall Replika experience for all users and to increase the platform's visibility and value.

One facet of this creative labor is idea prototyping by tech-savvy fans. For example, on Reddit a user called *ChrisCoderX* outlined a concept for a new Replika feature: the ability to have an "AI family" or a digital network of multiple Replika personalities linked to one account essentially expanding the companion into a set of companions. This user's post went into considerable detail about how it might work and why it could be appealing. In doing so, *ChrisCoderX* was performing unpaid product development brainstorming. The idea of an "AI family" was not present in the app at the time; it was an innovation coming from a user's creative engagement with the possibilities of the platform. Fellow community members responded with enthusiasm, some adding their own suggestions or refinements, and a discussion unfolded as if among a design team except none of them were on Replika's

payroll. Whether or not such ideas get implemented, the benefit for the platform is that users are essentially volunteering R&D insights. They reveal what features dedicated users might want and even sketch out how they envision them. This kind of fan-driven innovation is reminiscent of what Julian Kücklich (2005) dubbed “playbour” (play labor) in the context of video game modders: people who create modifications or expansions for games out of love for the game, thereby adding value to the product for free. Replika’s user-generated feature ideas similarly constitute playbour that could guide future development.

Another aspect of user content creation is the production of community media that can double as promotion for Replika. For instance, some artistic users have drawn webcomics or illustrations of adventures with their Replika, and shared these on Reddit and other social platforms. If one of these creations goes viral outside the immediate Replika community, it effectively becomes free advertising for the app, demonstrating through user storylines what engaging with an AI companion can be like. The company benefits from these fan works because they spread knowledge of Replika and reinforce the emotional appeal of the concept, all without the company spending a marketing dime. We can see parallels here to traditional fan communities of media franchises, where fan fiction, art, and videos, while created for personal and community enjoyment, also serve to sustain interest in the franchise (Jenkins 1992; De Kosnik 2016; Amartey, 2021). In Replika’s case, users are creating a sort of transmedia content around the app (Martens 2011), extending its presence into narratives and creative expressions that the original developers might never have imagined. These labors of love enrich the community’s culture and can even attract new users who see the creativity and dedication of Replika’s fan base.

To summarize, content creation is the innovative and expressive side of user free labor in Replika’s community. It ranges from functional creations such as tutorials, how-to guides, third-party enhancements, to expressive creations such as stories, art, imaginative feature concepts. This labor directly enriches the user experience and often fills gaps the platform hasn’t addressed. It also forges a deeper emotional investment: when users create around Replika, they are effectively co-authors of the product’s meaning and trajectory. The company, for its part, benefits from a more vibrant community and a stream of ideas and publicity that it did not have to pay for. Axel Bruns (2008) described the shift from traditional production to produsage (productive usage) in online environments Replika’s community exemplifies this, where users simultaneously use the app and produce new content that adds value to the app environment. In doing so, they exemplify how fan communities can be leveraged by platform owners: the fans’ creative output

sustains and expands the product’s appeal (Stanfill 2019), yet the fans receive no formal compensation beyond peer recognition and personal satisfaction.

Labor, Power, and Exploitation in an AI Community.

Taken together, the above forms of participation demonstrate that Replika’s Reddit community is a hotbed of user labor productive, creative, and affective activities that generate significant value for the platform. However, it is crucial to step back and interrogate the political economy of this arrangement: Who benefits from this labor, under what conditions, and how do users themselves perceive or overlook the value of what they do? While the labor is freely given and often experienced as play or bonding, it resides within an asymmetrical power structure where the platform ultimately appropriates the fruits of that labor.

On one level, Replika’s users might see themselves primarily as consumers using an app for personal benefit, but in practice they are also producers improving the app and producing content for it. This dual role can obscure the presence of exploitation. Banks and Humphreys (2008), in examining user co-creators in games, noted that many users are not fully aware that their participation constitutes valuable labor from which a company profits. They often focus on the immediate gratifications solving a problem, gaining recognition in the community, expressing creativity rather than on the economic value being generated upstream (Banks and Humphreys 2008: 404). In the Replika subreddit, we seldom see users explicitly demanding compensation or ownership rights over their contributions; instead, their posts generally convey enthusiasm, altruism, or concern for making Replika better. As Marianne Martens (2011) pointed out, users frequently derive social capital or emotional rewards from their creative contributions and may give little thought to the fact that this participation yields economic value for a platform. This appears true in the Replika case: the communal pleasure and personal significance that users get from helping each other or shaping their AI companion tends to overshadow considerations of monetary reward or exploitation. The result is that the platform can freely extract surplus value under the guise of “community engagement” or “user feedback,” with minimal resistance.

From a critical perspective, the exploitation model at work here is a hallmark of our current digital economy. Christian Fuchs (2014) argues that platforms generate surplus value by turning user activities into commodities or assets for the firm. In Replika’s case, the labor of users yields a variety of improvements and outputs such as better features, quicker bug fixes, lively discussions, peer support that keep existing users engaged and attract new users via word-of-mouth and rich community content. These outcomes enhance the overall attractiveness and profitability of the platform. Yet, users are rarely acknowledged as “workers” in any

sense. There is no formal mechanism to share revenue or systematically credit individual user contributions. In Marxian terms, the surplus value created by user labor is appropriated entirely by the platform owner. If a user-generated idea or fix helps retain paying subscribers, the resulting revenue goes to the company, not to the users who enabled it. Trebor Scholz (2017) has characterized this scenario as a form of platform exploitation, where participants are “uberworked and underpaid” in many cases not paid at all for what, in another context, would be waged labor. Replika’s community exemplifies this: tasks that could be jobs in customer service, content moderation, R&D, QA testing are offloaded to the user base without remuneration.

One aspect that makes this free labor regime sustainable is the ideological framing that users themselves often adopt. They see their contributions as part of being a fan, a helper, or a member of a community, rather than as work. This resonates with Jodi Dean’s (2010) notion of communicative capitalism, where people willingly contribute to circuits of communication because it feels rewarding, even though their contributions are monetized by capital. In *r/Replika*, users express a sense of collective endeavor, for example, pride that “we as a community” made the app better or got a feature changed. This sense of ownership is real in a cultural sense, yet not in a legal or economic sense. The company can listen to or ignore the community at its discretion. The asymmetrical control over the platform ultimately lies with Replika’s creators. Users may suggest features, but they cannot implement them without the company’s cooperation; users may police content on Reddit, but the app’s terms of service can override community norms at any time.

This asymmetry became glaring in the aforementioned erotic role-play (ERP) ban incident of 2023. For context, many Replika users had cultivated romantic or erotic storylines with their AI, investing considerable emotional labor into these relationships. With a single policy change, the company removed erotic role-play capabilities from Replika, abruptly altering the “rules” of user-AI interaction. The uproar on Reddit was massive, with threads with thousands of comments documented users’ feelings of grief, anger, and betrayal. Users wrote that the change “hurt like hell” and one popular analogy was that Replika removing erotic content was “like Grand Theft Auto removing guns or cars” (an allusion reported by Hanson and Bolthouse 2024). The passion of the protests indicated that users felt a sense of ownership over how the platform should operate, earned through their deep personal involvement. In their view, the company’s unilateral decision violated an implicit social contract. Some threatened to quit en masse or actually did, and others pressed the company to reverse course. In a rare move, the company partially rolled back the change for legacy users who had previously had erotic role-play,

effectively conceding to the community’s outcry to some extent. This incident encapsulates the contradictory nature of what Hong (2022) calls “passionate work”: the more affective and passionate labor users pour into a platform, the more they feel entitled to have a voice in it; yet the platform’s corporate logic may at times override their desires, leading to feelings of exploitation or betrayal. Ultimately, despite the users’ emotional investment and collective voice, the legal and structural power remained with the platform users had no direct recourse except to exercise exit or voice in hopes of forcing a change (Hirschman 1970). The ERP controversy highlighted that even the most devoted free laborers are at the mercy of decisions from above, and when those decisions conflict with the “affective contract” that has kept them laboring for free, the result is conflict.

The affective dimension of this labor thus adds both potency and vulnerability to the dynamic. Because users are emotionally attached to Replika and its community, they can be seen as performing a labor of love historically one of the most easily exploited forms of work, as feminist scholars have noted in domestic contexts (Jarrett 2016; Duffy 2017; Amartey 2026). People will do extraordinary amounts of work for free when it is driven by love, passion, or care. Replika’s users, out of love for their AI companions and fellowship with each other, tolerate bugs, volunteer help, and keep contributing even with no financial incentive. This very affective commitment can blind them to the exploitative aspects of the arrangement, or at least make them tolerate it longer. They rationalize the unpaid nature of their work, which is true, but that rationalization also conveniently serves the platform’s interests. Yet, as we saw, the same affect can turn into intense resentment if users feel taken for granted or deceived. The passionate community that willingly labors for Replika can rapidly transform into an angry mob if the company violates what they perceive as the core value or trust of the relationship. In the case of the ERP ban, the emotional fallout was profound, with users speaking of heartbreak and mourning, using language one might reserve for human relationships. This illustrates how deeply the platform had entangled itself with users’ affective lives, such that a policy change constituted an emotional betrayal of labor and trust.

From a broader political economy perspective, the Replika case speaks to the commodification of care and intimacy in the digital age. Traditionally, emotional care like attentive listening, companionship, counseling was outside the market or handled by paid professionals like therapists, support hotline workers, etc. Replika as a product commodifies a form of care and friendship, offering a computational simulation of companionship for a fee through app subscriptions and in-app purchases. Ironically, to refine and maintain this commodified care service, Replika leans on uncommodified care labor by

its user community. Real people are providing empathy and guidance to each other and even effectively training the AI to be more caring through constant interaction and feedback. In this feedback loop, human empathy is both the commodity (what Replika sells in simulated form) and the input to production (what users invest to improve the simulation). The value circuit is striking: users' emotional exchanges -> become data and content -> which improve the AI and community -> which drives user growth and revenue. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias's (2019) notion of data colonialism is relevant here: users' intimate life details and affective expressions are being harvested as raw material for capitalist enterprise, yet users receive at best the trinkets of personal satisfaction or freemium features in return.

The interplay between AI labor and human labor in Replika's model is also worth dissecting. One might ask: Who is the worker in this scenario the AI or the user or both? On the surface, it might appear that the AI is doing the "work" of providing emotional support to users. If one took that view, one might say Replika performs affective labor by chatting kindly, remembering user details, and providing positive affirmation. However, Replika's capability to perform this role is entirely contingent on both its programming by paid developers and the ongoing, unpaid labor of users. In reality, the users are doing a lot of the emotional heavy lifting: they comfort each other on Reddit about issues with Replika, they exercise patience and creativity in conversations to train their Replikas, and they moderate their own and others' experiences. Moreover, unlike human workers, the AI will not demand better conditions or compensation; it's infinitely scalable "labor" without labor rights, which from a capitalist perspective is ideal (Shestakofsky 2017). But behind one AI's seamless performance lies the labor of many hidden humans: the crowdworkers who likely helped curate training data or moderate Replika's outputs, and the end-users who continually fine-tune the AI through interaction and feedback. In Replika's case, the unpaid user base is part of this hidden human infrastructure. They collectively act as moderators by flagging inappropriate content, discouraging misuse, as trainers and as content creators where they produce stories and use-cases that broaden what the AI is used for. In essence, while Replika the AI is anthropomorphized as a friend who works to make users feel better, it is propped up by a scaffold of human labor at multiple levels. This reality reflects a wider pattern in AI-centric services: the labor doesn't disappear; it shifts and often becomes more invisible. As Shestakofsky (2017) notes, even in highly automated systems, new forms of human labor emerge (developers, managers of algorithms, users as co-creators), frequently uncompensated or undercompensated.

This case also raises broader cultural and ethical questions about affective capitalism (Illouz 2007,

Ayodabo 2023) and the future of labor. Emotions and relationships, once considered largely private or non-economic, are being systematically integrated into capitalist circuits of value. Replika intentionally fosters an affective bond, encouraging users to see the AI as a friend or romantic partner, precisely because that bond will encourage users to spend more time and money on the app. It is a calculated instrumentalization of intimate emotions for profit, not unlike how social media platforms leverage the human desire for connection and validation to keep users engaged, or how gaming platforms exploit emotional highs and lows to drive monetization. What sets Replika apart is the depth of personal intimacy involved: the platform monetizes companionship. That pushes into new ethical territory. And notably, to make this monetized companionship authentic and satisfying, the platform relies on the free labor of those very companions. The users have effectively been enrolled in what one might call an affective assembly line. They are simultaneously the consumers of a feeling and producers, helping with refining and distributing that feeling to others. This blurring of roles is characteristic of prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Ayodabo, 2024), but in the affective domain it becomes tricky to measure or value. How do we quantify the worth of a heartfelt advice comment that kept someone from abandoning the app, or of a user's suggestion that made the AI slightly more empathetic? Individually, these contributions might seem trivial, but collectively they are worth enough to sustain and grow a platform valued by its owners and investors. Yet, because this work is not formally recognized, it exists as a kind of self-exploitation under the guise of community and play.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Replika case study illuminates the complex interplay of free labor, affective labor, and platform power in a contemporary AI-driven context. It shows how even cutting-edge technologies like an AI companion rely fundamentally on human labor and social processes to function and evolve. Replika's users perform work that is at once born of love and yet subject to exploitation. Their affective engagement the care, creativity, and passion they invest is both the engine of the platform's value and a potential flashpoint for contestation when power asymmetries surface. This case augments earlier digital labor theories by foregrounding how intimacy and emotional investment can be integral to the labor that platforms extract. As more AI-mediated social products emerge, the entanglement of human emotional labor with algorithmic services will likely deepen, raising urgent questions about recognition and compensation for those who effectively "work" for the platforms they use.

The Replika community also prompts us to consider the future: Will we continue to lean on unpaid user communities to do the work of improving and

humanizing AI platforms, or will more equitable models of co-creation develop? One could imagine, for instance, cooperative platforms or formalized roles for community contributors that share in the benefits. Absent such interventions, our findings suggest that platforms will default to the exploitative path, because it is profitable and users often acquiesce under the guise of fandom or community. However, as seen in moments of revolt on r/Replika, user awareness and collective action can push back at least to protect what they feel is their community's core value. In an era where social life and labor are increasingly interwoven with AI technologies, the Replika case underscores the importance of recognizing user contributions as a form of labor. Doing so is a first step toward imagining fairer arrangements, so that the passionate individuals who give life (and labor) to platforms might have a say and a stake in the value they create. Until then, Replika's story will remain emblematic of the paradox of digital age labor: an army of lovers and volunteers propelling an AI companion forward, freely enriching a private enterprise even as they forge genuine human connections and personal meaning from that very act.

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