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Beyond the Couch: Algorithmic Presence, Ecological Storytelling, and Digital Mental Health through WYSA

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Abstract

The rapid rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in healthcare has transformed how mental health support is designed, accessed, and experienced. Platforms such as WYSA illustrate how smartphones and AI chatbots create new forms of therapeutic presence, reshaping mental health care into an always-available, algorithmically mediated service. This article examines WYSA as a case study to explore how digital therapeutic platforms embody multisensory, multispecies, and ecological narratives that resonate with broader debates on synesthetic environmentalism. Drawing on Medium Theory (McLuhan), Actor-Network Theory (Latour), and Platform Theory (Gillespie), the paper situates WYSA within the shifting terrain of digital care, commodification, and ecological communication. It argues that algorithmic presence, while offering scalable and accessible mental health support, also raises critical questions about care ethics, dehumanization, and the commodification of intimate experiences. By placing digital therapeutic ecosystems in dialogue with multisensory and multispecies storytelling, the paper highlights how platforms like WYSA not only address mental health needs but also prototype new epistemologies for understanding human-environment relations in the digital age.

Introduction

Mental health challenges are increasingly recognized as a pressing global crisis. Rising rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness strain traditional models of therapy, which often remain inaccessible due to high costs, geographic limitations, or social stigma. In this context, smartphonesubiquitous, personal, and networkedhave emerged as crucial mediators of care. AI-driven digital mental health platforms, such as WYSA, transform these devices into spaces for reflection, healing, and therapeutic connection.

This transformation is not simply technological; it is epistemological. Traditional therapy presumes co-presence, where the clinician and client share a physical environment. Digital therapeutic platforms displace this model, creating what may be called algorithmic presencea form of care that is immediate, distributed, and programmed. The device becomes both a site and a medium of care, embodying McLuhan's insight that the medium itself reshapes human experience (McLuhan, 1964).

Yet this transformation also resonates beyond healthcare. The Call for Papers on "Synesthetic Environmentalism" asks how storytelling in the digital age can move beyond text and visuals toward multisensory and multispecies narratives. Platforms such as WYSA, though primarily designed for mental health, offer a template for such reimaginings. They orchestrate multisensory engagement (through text, touch, and interaction), invite ecological metaphors in self-care, and foreground the entanglement of humans, code, and networks in ways that parallel multispecies storytelling.

This paper situates WYSA at the intersection of digital mental health and ecological storytelling. By exploring its architecture, theoretical underpinnings, and ethical challenges, it argues that digital therapeutic presence exemplifies how technological mediation can foster new ways of caring both for individuals and for broader planetary entanglements.

The growing body of scholarship on AI in mental health foregrounds both its promises and pitfalls.

Inkster et al. (2018) evaluated early chatbot-based interventions, finding measurable reductions in depressive symptoms among users. Their work demonstrates the viability of chatbots as first-line interventions, particularly for populations with limited access to traditional therapy. Importantly, these findings suggest that therapeutic alliance, long considered contingent on human empathy, can be partially replicated in interactions with non-human agents.

Beatty et al. (2022) expanded on this notion, examining the formation of "working alliances" with digital systems. They argue that while non-human agents cannot embody empathy in the human

sense, users often project relational qualities onto them. This process generates a pragmatic form of alliance that supports engagement and therapeutic outcomes.

In contrast, Sinha et al. (2023) highlight the risks of commodification. By reframing care as a service delivered via digital platforms, therapeutic interactions risk becoming products within a market-driven ecosystem. This shift threatens to instrumentalize intimacy, transforming moments of vulnerability into data points for monetization.

Together, these studies reveal a tension: AI-assisted care can expand accessibility and efficacy, yet it also risks hollowing out the ethical and relational dimensions of therapy. This tension sets the stage for examining WYSA as both a technological innovation and a site of ethical concern.

Theoretical Framework

Medium Theory

McLuhan's Medium Theory posits that the medium itself, not just its content, shapes human perception and social relations (McLuhan, 1964). Applied to digital therapy, smartphones are not neutral carriers of care; they reconfigure therapeutic presence into something portable, immediate, and asynchronous. WYSA's therapeutic presence emerges not only from its dialogue but also from the tactile, visual, and temporal affordances of the smartphone medium.

Actor-Network Theory

Latour's Actor-Network Theory (2005) emphasizes that social phenomena arise from networks of human and non-human actors. WYSA embodies this perspective: its therapeutic outcomes are not the result of "AI" alone but emerge from the entanglement of code, design decisions, user input, regulatory frameworks, and data analytics. Understanding WYSA requires tracing this assemblage, acknowledging that agency is distributed across humans and technologies.

Platform Theory

Gillespie's Platform Theory (2010) critiques the infrastructural and economic logics that shape digital platforms. WYSA operates not just as a therapeutic agent but as a platform governed by algorithms, engagement metrics, and business models. Its therapeutic presence is inseparable from the economic imperatives of scalability and monetization, raising questions about how platform logics intersect with the intimate practice of care.

Case Study: WYSA and Algorithmic Presence

WYSA is an AI-powered chatbot designed to provide mental health support through text-based conversation. Built on principles of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and positive psychology, it engages users in exercises, reflections, and guided dialogues. Its design emphasizes anonymity, accessibility, and immediacyqualities that appeal to users reluctant or unable to seek traditional therapy.

Algorithmic Presence

Unlike traditional therapeutic presence, which requires physical co-presence, WYSA embodies algorithmic presence. The platform is available at all times, offering immediate responses mediated by code. This presence is not bound by geography or scheduling but by the logic of digital networks. In this way, WYSA transforms care into an ambient resource, always accessible yet mediated through algorithms and platforms.

Multisensory Dimensions

Although primarily text-based, WYSA engages multiple senses through the tactile act of typing, the visual presentation of dialogue, and the temporal rhythms of interaction. The experience is not merely linguistic but embodied, as the smartphone becomes a site of touch, sight, and rhythm. These multisensory dimensions resonate with the call to expand storytelling beyond text and visuals, suggesting that therapeutic platforms themselves are forms of synesthetic storytelling.

Discussion: From Digital Care to Ecological Storytelling

WYSA's design and presence illuminate broader implications for ecological communication. Just as therapeutic presence is reimagined as algorithmic, environmental storytelling may also be reimagined through digital platforms that engage multiple senses and actors.

First, WYSA demonstrates how non-human agents can participate in narrative. Users form alliances not only with human clinicians but with coded agents, echoing the multispecies dialogues emphasized in synesthetic environmentalism. If a chatbot can become a co-narrator of mental health, then non-human entitiesplants, animals, even data systemscan similarly be integrated into ecological narratives.

Second, the platform's multisensory engagement models how storytelling can move beyond text and visuals. Touch, timing, and interaction are central to the therapeutic experience, underscoring the importance of embodied, multisensory storytelling for ecological communication.

Third, WYSA's scalability highlights how digital systems can democratize access to narratives of care. In environmental communication, similar platforms could scale ecological awareness, embedding multispecies perspectives into everyday interactions.

Ethical Considerations

Commodification of Care

Sinha et al. (2023) warn that digital care risks commodification, transforming therapy into a market product. WYSA exemplifies this risk: user interactions are not only therapeutic but also data points that sustain a business model. This raises concerns about how intimate experiences are monetized and how care is redefined within platform economies.

Dehumanization and Empathy Gaps

While Beatty et al. (2022) show that users can form alliances with digital agents, there remains a risk of dehumanization. Algorithmic responses cannot fully capture the depth of human empathy, potentially leaving users with a diminished experience of care.

Algorithmic Governance

As Latour (2005) reminds us, agency is distributed across networks. Yet algorithmic governance often obscures how decisions are made. Users may not fully understand how their data informs responses or how the platform's logic shapes therapeutic pathways. This opacity challenges informed consent and accountability.

Ecological Implications

If platforms like WYSA prototype ecological storytelling, ethical concerns extend further: how do we responsibly include non-human voices without instrumentalizing them? How do we balance technological mediation with respect for ecological complexity? These questions highlight the need for careful reflection as therapeutic presence expands into ecological domains.

Conclusion

WYSA exemplifies how digital mental health platforms reconfigure therapeutic presence into algorithmic, multisensory, and platform-mediated forms. By situating WYSA within Medium Theory, Actor-Network Theory, and Platform Theory, this paper has shown how digital care is both enabled and constrained by technological and economic logics.

Beyond healthcare, WYSA offers insights for ecological storytelling. Its multisensory engagement, distributed agency, and algorithmic presence resonate with the call for synesthetic environmentalism, suggesting that therapeutic platforms can model new forms of interspecies and ecological communication.

Yet these possibilities come with ethical challenges: commodification, dehumanization, algorithmic opacity, and ecological responsibility. As digital platforms increasingly mediate care and communication, scholars and practitioners must critically engage with these tensions to ensure that technology empowers rather than undermines human and ecological well-being.

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