Generation App: examining epistemic and ethical issues in digital mental health technologies

Reports indicate more than 50% of young adults in the Netherlands experience mental health issues (RIVM, 2025). Meanwhile, the mental health care system is overburdened, with long waiting lists (NZa, 2025). Digital mental health technologies (DMHTs), like chatbots, promise to make mental health care more accessible, yet bring risks. They can, for instance, provide ineffectual or even dangerous advice (Aratani, 2023). This paper critically analyses some key principles underlying the turn to DMHTs in mental healthcare. In so doing, we identify two epistemic issues that lead to two ethical questions. The first epistemic issue consists in a general gap between theoretical suppositions and practices of data collection and DMHT development, compared to the lived experience of patients. The second concerns the extent to which the tacit knowledge of (interpretative) psychiatrists can be integrated into DMHTs. These issues give rise to the following ethical questions:

(1) Under what conditions could DMHTs fulfil the promise of personalised care and increased accessibility for young people, or do they offer a mere illusion of care?

(2) Does the increased accessibility of DMHTs lead to a risky outsourcing of decisions that should be made by human experts, e.g., distinction between ‘severe’ and ‘non-severe’ conditions?