Coding in primary research is the process of organizing and analyzing data to identify patterns, themes, and insights. Unlike secondary research, which relies on pre-existing sources, primary research involves collecting firsthand data through methods such as surveys, interviews, and observations (Denny & Clark 86). The coding process allows researchers to transform raw qualitative data into meaningful categories that answer their research questions.

Denny and Clark emphasize qualitative coding as an iterative process where researchers identify emerging themes rather than imposing predetermined categories (91). Creswell outlines four key steps in coding: organizing the data, thoroughly reading through it, assigning descriptive codes, and developing overarching themes (Denny & Clark 92).

Applying this to my own research, I will follow these steps:

Before coding, I will anonymize my data to protect participant confidentiality. The Belmont Report highlights ethical considerations, such as using pseudonyms or assigning numerical identifiers to avoid bias and maintain privacy (Denny & Clark 91). This ensures objectivity and prevents researchers from making assumptions based on personal familiarity with participants.

Next, I will read through the data multiple times to gain an overall sense of recurring ideas. For instance, in the Pew Research dataset analyzed by Denny and Clark, researchers initially categorized responses into broad positive and negative sentiments before refining their themes further (92). I will adopt a similar approach by marking general attitudes within my data, which will help guide the coding process.

Coding involves breaking responses into meaningful labels. Denny and Clark illustrate two approaches: using symbols (e.g., a plus sign for positive comments and a minus sign for negative ones) and assigning keywords or phrases that capture the essence of a response (94). For my study, I will code responses based on emerging themes. For instance, if participants discuss “connection” as a benefit of AI companionship, I may use a code such as “social interaction.” As I refine my analysis, I will look for patterns and group codes into broader themes like "emotional support" or “human-like interaction.” After coding, I will categorize responses into major themes. For example, in the Pew study, researchers found that positive comments about social media were often related to “interaction” and “self-expression,” while negative comments highlighted “bullying” and “social skill decline” (Denny & Clark 97). I will similarly identify overarching trends in my findings, ensuring that my analysis remains grounded in the data rather than personal assumptions.

Ethical concerns in primary research extend beyond data collection to how findings are interpreted and presented. One major issue is cherry-picking, where researchers selectively highlight data that supports a preferred narrative while ignoring contradictory evidence (Denny & Clark 98). To avoid this, I will ensure that my report reflects all significant themes, even if they challenge my expectations. I must also be cautious about misrepresenting data through misleading statistics. Denny and Clark illustrate this with a class evaluation example—reporting “100% satisfaction” from only four students is technically accurate but lacks crucial context (97). Similarly, I will contextualize my findings to ensure that conclusions are proportional to the data collected.

To maintain ethical integrity, I will provide balanced interpretations by including both common and outlier responses, clearly document my coding process to enhance transparency and replicability, acknowledge limitations, such as sample size constraints, to prevent overgeneralization. By adhering to these principles, I will ensure that my research is both rigorous and ethical, producing findings that are credible, fair, and meaningful.