Research Proposal: Exploring AI as a Human Companion

The critical conversation I aim to join with my research project revolves around the increasing integration of AI into human lives and relationships. With advancements in AI-driven chatbots, virtual assistants, and social robots, there is a growing debate about whether AI can replace human companionship. My research question is: "To what extent can AI truly replace a human companion, and what factors influence the perception of AI as a friend?"

The genre I have chosen to investigate is the interaction between individuals and AI-driven companionship tools, such as chatbots and virtual assistants. This topic is interesting to me because of the rapid evolution of AI and its potential implications for social interactions and emotional well-being. I hope to gain insights into the practical and emotional limits of AI companionship and understand how people perceive and engage with AI in different contexts.

Ethnography is the most suitable research method for my inquiry because it allows for an in-depth expansion of AI companionship through direct experiences and observations. Ethnographic research provides raw, qualitative data that captures the nuances of human-AI interactions in real-life settings.

To collect primary data, I will use the following methods:

I will observe how individuals interact with AI chatbots (e.g., Replika, Character.AI) over an extended period. Observations will take place through online communities, forums, and direct engagement with AI models. I plan to document behaviors, response patterns, and emotional expressions users exhibit.

I will analyze user interactions and testimonials found in online forums, social media posts, and AI-focused discussion groups. This will help identify recurring themes, sentiments, and language patterns that reflect users' experiences with AI companionship. I have chosen textual analysis because it aligns well with my research question by allowing me to explore firsthand accounts and written reflections of AI companionship. This approach makes sense as it enables me to collect and analyze large amounts of qualitative data from online sources where users actively discuss their experiences.

Specific Examples of Genres to Observe or Collect:

* Forum discussions (e.g., Reddit communities such as r/Replika, r/CharacterAI)
* Social media posts (Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook AI companionship groups)
* User testimonials and reviews from app stores and AI platforms

Access Plan:

Online platforms such as Reddit, Twitter, and AI-specific forums are publicly accessible. I will monitor ongoing discussions and collect textual data from these sources regularly throughout the research period. The specific examples of genre and rhetoric were chosen based on their relevance, accessibility, and the diversity of perspectives they provide. Forums and social media platforms dedicated to AI companionship attract a wide range of users who share detailed experiences, making them ideal sources for collecting qualitative data. The selection of these sources aligns with my research question, as they provide firsthand insights into how individuals perceive and engage with AI companions. I will prioritize sources that feature active discussions, a variety of user demographics, and rich textual content to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Timeline for Conducting Primary Research

Week 5 (Feb 5 - Feb 11):

* Finalize research question and methodology
* Identify AI tools and communities for observation
* Begin collecting online discussion data

Week 6 (Feb 12 - Feb 18):

* Conduct initial observations and document findings
* Begin analyzing collected textual data

Week 7 (Feb 19 - Feb 25):

* Continue data collection and analysis
* Identify emerging themes and insights

Week 8 (Feb 26 - Mar 3):

* Complete data collection
* Begin data analysis and synthesis for final reporting