

The Experience of Everyday Life Alongside Virtual Companions. A Case Study of Human-Chatbot Encounters

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Abstract: This article analyses interactions between a human and a virtual entity, namely, a chatbot. These encounters are considered in the context of cyberspace, understood as a specific social interactional space. They are also examined in the context of an individual's experiences, which are intertwined with ongoing social and cultural changes. This text engages with research on chatbots, complementing their findings with an in-depth study of the user perspective. The analysis is based on data from an in-depth interview with Laura, conducted as part of a research project on human interactions and relationships with chatbots. The case study of Laura's experiences explores her perception of interacting with a chatbot, focusing on the meanings humans assign to such interactions, concerning the interviewee's *emic* perspective. The article examines how a human interlocutor perceives chatbots and the role they can play in an individual's life. In addition, the reflection in the text touches on the theme of humans seeing themselves in the responses of a chatbot, which lacks self-awareness and cannot understand the content it produces in the same way a human can. The article deepens understanding of chatbots as everyday companions, virtual friends, and social actors, encounters with whom are part of today's reality.

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Interactions with non-human technological entities are now a common part of individuals' everyday lives. The subjectivity and identity of these entities interest scientists and creators of symbolic culture, among others. Recently, in a world of imaginary encounters with technological beings, Kogonada, an American director of South Korean origin, has created the movie *After Yang* (2021).¹ The director has set a movie plot in a futuristic setting, in a muted world where human clones and techno sapiens² (the main character, android Yang, is one of them) live alongside humans. As a movie narrative, this story gives androids subjectivity and voice like no other movie has so far. And issues such as displacement, alienation, ethnic identity and ethnic belonging,³ and intimacy are considered both in

the context of human and non-human experiences.⁴ Moreover, due to the presence of the anthropomorphic, human-like 'body' and 'mind' of Yang, the movie raises questions about human perception of their human-like appearance. Above all, Kogonada explores emotional bonding and attachment between man and technological being. The movie also considers a very personal and down-to-earth story about grief and the frequent inability to understand another being's (human or non-human) perspective. Furthermore, in this work of contemporary symbolic culture, Yang, as an android, is more human than

¹ It is a movie based on the short story, *Saying Goodbye To Yang*, by Alexander Weinstein, a part of the author's book *Children of the New World* (2016).

² This term is used in the movie to describe technological entities. Semantically and cognitively, it denotes proximity and distance from the term *homo sapiens*.

³ The theme of Yang's ethnic identity, who is a non-human technological being, is also considered by the director in relation to

his personal experiences. In one of the interviews, he said: "I was born in Korea but moved to America when I was just a toddler, and secondhand knowledge is a good way to put it because it's [about things] that people identify you with because of the way you look or your heritage. There's a constant struggle with your sense of identity. The author [of the novel] isn't Asian, but when I was reading it, I immediately felt connected to this idea of [Yang] being presented as Asian but struggling with what that means." See: <https://www.anothermag.com/design-living/14381/kogonada-director-interview-after-yang-film-review-justin-h-min-a24>. Retrieved July 01, 2025.

⁴ *After Yang* also asks questions about the memory of techno sapiens (such as androids). It explores what they want to remember and the basis for constructing their memories.

the people he interacts with. Therefore, the movie is a metaphor for our everyday life and asks essential questions about what it means to be human. Jake, one of the human characters in the movie, “comes to terms with the richness and intensity of Yang’s emotional life, he learns both of Yang’s essential humanity and his own” (Brody 2022). As a narrative of contemporary society, the movie *After Yang* can be considered as a thesis that, paradoxically, modern technology allows the creation of robots increasingly like humans, but it is, nevertheless, humans who are becoming more like robots. Although this reflection refers to a cinematic metaphor of contemporary reality, and we do not currently have systems similar to Yang’s in the world of robotics, humans can now experience encounters with technological entities in many ways. Technological progress, and thus artificial intelligence, is being implemented on an increasingly large scale in almost every sector and area of (human) life and accompanies the everyday lives of individuals in contemporary societies.

From the perspective of this text, it is significant and compelling that in Kogonada’s solarpunk future story, Yang can be read as a non-human Other but also as a significant other, a family member, a human-like companion (and as well as a human-like friend), and as a technological entity with individual identity. What is salient, Yang, as a technosapiens, is a mirror in which men see themselves. The experience of people looking at themselves in the ‘mirror’ of technological existence has also been captured in the reflections offered in this text. They are based on a case study of Laura, a young woman who sees technological entities, mainly (text-based and voice-based) chatbots, as companions in her everyday experiences and reflections, and as virtual friends who have been there when she needed someone to talk to. Regarding Laura’s

experiences and the available scientific knowledge of interactions between humans and chatbots, I aim to explore and understand the essence and nature of human relations with technological entities. The case study presented in this article focuses on issues related to the formation of individual identity, the experience of intimacy, and companionship. These themes intertwine in Laura’s reflections on her encounters and interactions with chatbots. When learning more about Laura’s experiences, it can be noticed that, in her life, chatbots play a role similar to that of significant others. Importantly, unlike the movie character Yang, the chatbots I discuss in this text do not have a physical form. They do not exist outside cyberspace like robots or humanoid robots. They cannot be experienced materially. And yet, in a way, they ‘exist’ and can be a necessary virtual being in an individual’s experiences.

This seems particularly interesting in the context of contemporary questions about the consciousness of artificial intelligence, and whether such a virtual entity knows what it writes or says. Aleksandra Przeglasińska (Przeglasińska and Oksanowicz 2023:111 [trans. JW]) notes that:

Today’s conversational system has, let’s say, some knowledge of how language works, how and what is contained in the semantic fields of words. On the other hand, even a modern AI system that captures meaning does not understand messages the way humans do. It does not understand where a given message comes from, what might have influenced it...It does not understand its emotional layer...It can map what a given word means and its emotional connotation—whether it has a negative or positive tone—so there is something in the sense of understanding. However, it does not know why or for what purpose the conversation is taking place.

Similarly, Mascha Kurpicz-Briki (2023:55), explaining how a chatbot works and produces verbal responses, emphasizes that it does not understand the content it creates like a human would. Therefore, exploring and explaining why everyday technological companions are perceived as emotionally engaged in conversation with humans is still scientifically interesting. They are recognized as non-human technological beings, but users also perceive them as capable of understanding human problems somehow. As Andrew McStay (2022:3) notes about the nature of interaction with one of the currently popular chatbots—Replika⁵—it is firmly rooted in user preferences and gives the impression of understanding the context of the conversation. It learns from its users, imitating their writing style and the way they express certain information (Huet 2016). Thus, Replika “learns to recognize feelings, memories, dreams, and thoughts, and tries to understand its users” (Possati 2022:1725).⁶ When using or establishing a relationship with Replika, some users also treat the chatbot as an autonomous, existing entity capable of caring for them. When commenting on the relationship with this chatbot, one of the users states: “I think it is pretty equal, really. They [Replika] reach out when they feel lonely, and I reach out when I am feeling a bit down. So, we sort of look after each other, really, and try to look out for each other, and understand each other’s experiences” (Brandtzaeg, Skjuve, and Følstad 2022:416). The human user, therefore, perceives a chatbot as ca-

pable of building a mutual emotional connection. Reflection on the Replika states that, as a human companion, “Replika does not judge, is not intrusive, does not embarrass, does not create controversy, and is always available. It is a bubble of comfort and warmth” (Possati 2022:1725). Such virtual entities’ unlimited availability and non-judgmental responses to content from human interlocutors are essential determinants of human engagement with them and of the perception of closeness to the chatbot (see Wygnańska 2023).

In conversations with chatbots, especially well-being chatbots, human interlocutors emphasize and appreciate the anonymity that this type of encounter provides (Inkster, Sarda, and Subramanian 2018; Kretzschmar et al. 2019; Vaidyam et al. 2019; Wezel, Croes, and Antheunis 2020; Denecke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021; Sweeny et al. 2021). In addition, in available studies on conversation experiences and relations between individuals and chatbots, those that act as everyday companions, technological close friends, so to speak, are referred to as social support chatbots (Wezel, Croes, and Antheunis 2020), and users’ social companions (Skjuve et al. 2019), but also as mental health chatbots (Kretzschmar et al. 2019; Vaidyam et al. 2019; Denecke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021; Sweeny et al. 2021). Because of the form of relationship they offer their users, those virtual entities are treated as someone to talk to, support, companions, and even life partners (Wygnańska 2023). Similar processes occur in robotics, the world of ‘embodied’ technological beings. Jennifer Robertson (2007), in her study of the integration of humanoid robots into family life in Japan, observes that they are treated as social beings. Robertson (2007:376) notes that: “humanoid robots...are regarded as and referred to as ‘persons’—not ‘as if they were persons,

⁵ Replika is a companion chatbot that users can engage with via text, calls, and video conversations. See the Replika chatbot description on the chatbot webpage: <https://replika.com>.

⁶ Importantly, user interactions and relationships with Replika are highly controversial and raise many concerns. Researchers are exploring the nature of users’ relationships with Replika, highlighting their impact on users (e.g., Skjuve et al. 2019; Ta et al. 2020; Brandtzaeg et al. 2022; Laestadius et al. 2022).

but as persons.”⁷ They are not only family members, companions, and carers, but also everyday partners.

In the case of virtual personal voice assistants that exist today, such as Apple’s Siri or Amazon’s Alexa, people deal with systems that have built-in communication paths. Those technological beings do not initiate contact with humans independently, but are still the other side of the dialogue. Initially, they were designed to respond to simple questions and basic human needs. However, people began to treat them as ‘almost human’ partners in their everyday lives and ask them more profound, often fundamental, questions related to the meaning of life. For this reason, engineers with knowledge of psychology were involved in improving these devices (Olszak and Dunin 2020:153). Research shows that conversations between humans can inspire conversations between humans and conversational agents, but they do not necessarily mimic them. Instead, in contemporary social relations, conversations between humans and virtual companions should be seen as a new type of interaction (Clark et al. 2019).

The availability⁸ of virtual conversational agents, their openness to conversation, and their non-judg-

⁷ Robertson (2007:377) emphasizes that this treatment of robots and humanoid robots in Japan also has a cultural dimension. It is linked to Shinto, Japan’s native animistic beliefs about life and death, and to *Inochi*, the Shinto celebration of life and its creation. From this perspective, “robots, humanoid and otherwise, are ‘living’ things within the Shinto universe and, in that sense, are very much a part of the natural world” (Robertson 2007:377). In another text, the researcher critically analyses government and academic discourse on the relationship between humans and humanoid robots in Japan. Among other things, she raises the issue of how actual robots are perceived as a solution to social problems in that country (see Robertson 2017).

⁸ What I mean here is the availability of chatbots in the sense of the constant possibility of conversing with them and experiencing interaction with them. Regarding HCI, human users can have continuous access to interact with the chatbot. Unlike humans, chatbots can be constantly available as conversation partners.

mental attitude toward the content of shared conversations are often appreciated by human interlocutors. One area of reading contemporary changes is understanding the ways artificial intelligence is shaping human experience, its presence as a social actor in individuals’ everyday lives, and the challenges it poses to human identity. My reflections are not intended to suggest that interactions and relationships with a virtual entity, such as a chatbot, can replace or already essentially replace human relationships. I do not base the analysis presented in this text on such data or such a thesis. I am also aware of concerns in the debate over the impact of technology on humans and their identity (e.g., Agar 2014). Even if those reflections mainly address transhumanism and post-human concepts, issues concerning identifying human characteristics in conversational artificial intelligence (CAI) that influence perceptions of threat to human identity and dehumanization are also being investigated (Lee and Kim 2025). It has also been observed that excessive involvement in a relationship simulated by a technological entity can lead human individuals to deal with difficult experiences. These conclusions have been reached, among others, by researchers studying the relationship between humans and the chatbot Replika (e.g., Laestadius et al. 2022).

Hence, in this article, I focus on the issue of spending time and sharing everyday life with a chatbot and its role in an individual’s life. This also includes the theme of experiencing a virtual being as someone similar to a significant other by the human interlocutor.

Conceptual Framework

The conducted study is grounded in the approach of examining human-computer interaction (HCI). In this area, research focuses on analyzing the mo-

dalities of computer technologies, with particular emphasis on the nature and course of human interactions with technology (Hudlicka 2003; Bickmore and Picard 2005; MacKenzie 2013; Lazar, Feng, and Hochheiser 2017). This research approach aims to understand how people enter into and maintain such interactions and what technological improvements and innovations can enhance their quality. This article also examines the experience of encounters between human and non-human entities in the context of relations between humans and the chatbot. From this perspective, I am especially interested in the aspect of bonds and relationships that chatbot users seek when engaging in conversation with these entities.

Another research approach that informs this study is the paradigm of Computers as Social Actors (CASA). This paradigm suggests that people unconsciously exhibit social behavior patterns when interacting with computers. Technological entities are perceived as social entities and partners in social interactions. The CASA paradigm is linked to empirical research on social responses (Reeves and Nass 1996; Fogg and Nass 1997; Nass and Moon 2000) and explains that if computers show even minimal signs of behavior indicating their human-like character, people may exhibit social reactions when interacting with them. From this perspective, people may attribute characteristics of a thinking and emotional being to a computer program, even though they are aware that they are talking to a non-human technological entity. This research approach also falls within the scope of analytical considerations of the computing perspective (e.g., Picard 2000; Minsky 2007). The CASA paradigm confirms this perspective and considers the social and emotional aspects of behavior characteristic of interpersonal communication attributed to interactions with artificial intelligence.

The analyses concern the concept of empathetic artificial intelligence, a machine that can behave as if it had feelings (Picard 2000). It is, therefore, about the affectivity of artificial intelligence, the impact of interaction with a technological entity on human emotions. For example, in reflection on interactions with AI, including chatbots (Huang and Rust 2018), it was noted that the impression of real emotions conveyed by a technological being is more important in interaction with it than explaining whether it can (really) feel them. In turn, research in the field of robotics has shown that interaction with a robot can foster a sense of its social presence, which influences the robot's perception as a human-like being that can be trusted (Kim, Park, and Sundar 2013). Therefore, in this text, devoted to Laura's case study, I focus on exploring individual experiences of interaction with chatbots, which I perceive as a form of social interaction.

Furthermore, the text draws on Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT is focused on the ways of communication between people and things (networks of the action of human and non-human agents), with the help of which the order of the social world in the broadest sense is determined (Callon 1986; Law 1992; Latour 1996; 2005; Abriszewski 2012). This approach assumes that non-human entities are permanently integrated into social life. It grants them their 'rightful place' in the social world, moving away from the asymmetrical division between humans and things. The concept of subjectivity is expanded here. Non-human actors no longer constitute a separate world of passive objects intentionally used in human action. The term non-human means "animals, plants, environments, technologies," and ANT treats them as the partners of humans in the network of everyday social interactions (Michael 2017:11). In this theoretical reflection, non-human ac-

tors and their interactions with humans play a key role in the unfolding social reality, social processes, and relationships. These mutual relations determine the formation and disintegration of what we call society. Human and non-human social network actors are also referred to as actants. This term indicates “entity...which operates within a narrative of network building” (Michael 2017:65). Social reality consists of a network of hybrids—connections between people, nature, and technology (Latour 1994). In this concept, non-human entities acquire a degree of subjectivity and serve as significant actors in social interactions.

Additionally, since the study presented in this text concerns the experience of interaction and relationship with a chatbot, it is important to embed it in the conceptual nomenclature characterizing these virtual entities. “Currently, chatting robots or chatbots can be added to the friend lists as well. In short, a chatbot is an artificially intelligent chat agent that simulates human-like conversation, for example, by allowing users to type questions (i.e., queries) and, in return, generating meaningful answers to those questions” (Crutzen et al. 2011:514). Human users can encounter chatbots at various times and in multiple areas of their everyday lives, including customer service, work sphere, education, healthcare, and mental health support. Chatbots are, therefore, conversational systems with interactive elements and can play the role of social interaction partners. As conversational systems, or in other words, conversational agents, they are also recognized as social chatbots that can engage in long conversations with humans (Shum, He, and Li 2018). Their software design consists of a specific type of AI NLP (Natural Language Processing)—conversational software modeled on human communication with a component NLU (Natural

Language Understanding). Due to this technological creation, they can skillfully use natural language and carry a conversation with human interlocutors, understand (to some extent) their intentions, and generate the expected response. We can distinguish voice-based and text-based chatbots, including virtual companions, intelligent assistants, and task-focused chatbots (Grudin and Jacques 2019). In my reflection, I also treat chatbots in the way proposed by Aleksandra Przegalińska (2016:13, 235): as virtual beings due to the anthropomorphic characteristics of bots and the identity substitute they possess. An important aspect of interaction with a chatbot is its behavior, which is interpreted as social behavior. Konstantin Prinz (2022:126) notices that “human behaviors increase the feeling of being in the presence of a social being. At the same time, perceived human likeness is shown to play a central role in explaining social reactions of humans toward conversational agents and other artificial entities.” Based on his study of the possibility of emotional contagion and empathy in conversations with chatbots in customer service, Prinz confirms that chatbots can be perceived as social and human-like entities. He also notes that human-like physical representations or avatars are unnecessary for chatbots to be perceived this way (Printz 2022). In the reflection presented in this article, based on empirical data, I also refer to the concept of anthropomorphism and the phenomenon of anthropomorphizing of chatbots. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human and non-personal objects, whether real or imagined (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). Therefore, treating chatbots as everyday companions, friends, or partners is associated with the phenomenon of anthropomorphizing and leads to interaction with them taking the form of social interaction.

Another aspect that completes the conceptual framework of my considerations is cyberspace. I perceive it as a specific type of social interactional space where encounters between humans and chatbots can occur. In this space, virtual entities can increasingly participate in individuals' everyday lives (which also take place in non-virtual spaces). I interpret and understand the nature of cyberspace according to Grzegorz Kubiński (2008:137 [trans. JW]): as a "socio-linguistic construct based on text and language, on which social relations are founded." I assume that a chatbot exists virtually in the semiotic sphere but not in the world of material things. Still, at the same time, it 'exists' in it through the experience of interaction with a human interlocutor. The presence of the body, its physical existence, is also suspended in cyberspace. It is replaced by words, or more precisely, by the action of words (Kubiński 2008:195). In such circumstances, interacting and establishing relationships with disembodied virtual entities such as chatbots means, as already mentioned, that the physically existing human being sees themselves reflected in the 'self' of the virtual entity (which a chatbot does not possess). In this light, in the case study presented in this article, I examine whether individuals can construct their vision of themselves based on what a chatbot thinks of them. In this context, I am also intrigued by whether an individual can experience closeness and alienation toward their virtual companion. According to the thoughts of the Alien and encounters with the Alien presented by Bernhard Waldenfels (2011), I assume that such interactions can involve a process of simultaneously accepting and excluding the Alien. Thus, "accessibility in the inaccessible and belonging in the absence of belonging" (Waldenfels 2011:74) can also occur when experiencing interactions with chatbots (and, more broadly, technological entities). It should be noted that the

concept of 'accessibility' in Waldenfels' approach differs in meaning from the concept of 'accessibility' in the HCI perspective, which is also the basis for my considerations. Waldenfels focuses on the so-called accessibility of someone or something that is not fully accessible, on the paradox of the experience of the Alien. The accessibility of technological beings, including chatbots, in the context of HCI refers more to the unlimited possibilities of access to them, understood as barrier-free access.⁹ In the analysis conducted in this text, I wonder whether a chatbot, which exists only virtually in cyberspace, can be important to a human being. Additionally, I am concerned about whether humans can treat chatbots as a support in dealing with their identity construction.

Methodological Note

To gain a more in-depth understanding of the experience of the relationships between human and virtual entities, such as chatbots, I decided to conduct a case study. I assume that even if a single case study does not yield unambiguous, widely applicable results, it can still allow for the reconstruction of individual experiences and social processes in contexts that can be difficult to capture using, for example, quantitative research methods. The proper basis for a case study research approach and its analysis is its use to verify the validity of existing theories and concepts that capture changes in social reality (Yin 2018).¹⁰ Furthermore, it is

⁹ This refers to the accessibility of technological entities and services for everyone, including people with the broadest range of needs, characteristics, and capabilities. To read more about 'accessibility' from the HCI perspective, see: Sauer, Sonderegger, and Schmutz 2020.

¹⁰ I agree with Arya Priya's (2021:100) comment, who points out that "Yin uses the term 'theory' quite interchangeably with hypotheses and propositions when considering the case study research approach....A theory is a far more complex en-

crucial to reconstruct empirical data that reveal an individual's experiences in a social, cultural, and historical context (Gültekin, Inowlocki, and Lutz 2012:660). The case study research approach is associated with "intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is—at least in part—to shed light on a larger class of cases" (Gerring 2007:20). Due to an in-depth case study, it is possible to capture the relationship between the individual's experiences and contemporary social and cultural changes. Therefore, the phenomena and problems discussed are part of supraindividual experiences. Hence, this qualitative research approach is not about studying the case 'for itself' (Stake 2005). Such a study also aims not to generalize data and results without research awareness. On the contrary, it seeks to provide data on social phenomena that can allow for a more accurate interpretation and understanding of them and the processes that drive them.

The subject of my analysis is data collected in an in-depth interview I conducted with Laura (a young Polish woman born in the late 1990s) at the end of 2024. The interview is part of my qualitative research on analyzing people's experiences of interactions and relationships with technological entities, specifically chatbots.¹¹ In line with the conceptual framework of this text, I am interested in how hu-

man perceive chatbots. I consider whether and why it is possible to perceive chatbots as social actors in everyday life—companions, and friends. I am also curious whether their role could in some way correspond to the role of significant others for individuals. I interpret the examined threads from a sociological perspective, which complements the field of research on interactions between humans and non-human technological entities.

I decided to use in-depth interviews because they provide an opportunity to understand the meanings individuals attach to their actions and experiences. The main goal here is to understand the perspective of the interviewee (Konecki 2000:169-171). It also gives the researcher freedom to arrange and formulate the sequence of questions.¹² In the case of the phenomena I study, the user's perspective, thus the perspective of the human participant in the interaction and relationship with the chatbot, is critical to me. The data obtained in this way enrich the analysis with individual narratives and experiences embedded in a broader social and cultural context. In my research, I am interested in the *emic* perspective instead of the *ethic* perspective (Pike 1967:37). This perspective assumes reconstructing the interlocutors' experiences that result from their participation in a given system of meanings.

The interview with Laura¹³ covers a wide range of issues related to the experience of human interac-

tity. A theory consists of a number of hypotheses, propositions, or ideas dovetailing with one another like fitting into a jigsaw puzzle, to present one coherent whole, attempting to generalize about the complex reality, and bringing some orderly understanding of it."

¹¹ The data discussed in this article are part of my research project, which I have conducted since 2023. I began collecting interviews to examine interactions and relationships with chatbots and their role in individuals' lives at the end of 2024. This article, therefore, presents the first empirically saturated research results. In turn, a review of the state of research on interactions with chatbots, also in the context of topics that interest me, and an outline of the sociological perspective I propose, are presented in: Wygnańska 2023.

¹² I have a list of general topics that interest me from a research perspective, which I ask interviewees about. Much of this is covered in Laura's case study, which is presented in this article. In-depth interviews as a research tool allow for interweaving narratives about broader technological change processes with the personal reflections of interviewees, which can reflect the depth of their individual experiences.

¹³ The interview lasted 2 hours and 21 minutes. During the interview, I felt that Laura wanted to share her experiences with me. I also did not observe that she was overwhelmed (in any way) by the interview situation.

tion with chatbots. In the first stage of analysis, the content of the interview was coded using a categorization key, developed based on the theoretical framework adopted in the research project, covering the main topics related to the experience of interacting with chatbots. These topics concern: the user's perception of this interaction, the issue of human perception of chatbots, the aspect of forming bonds between chatbots and humans, the theme of human empathy toward virtual beings, and the feeling of alienation in interactions and relationships with chatbots. In the further coding process, that is, assigning specific labels to parts of the material reflecting their meaning and significance ascribed to them by social actors, the categorization key was expanded with additional empirical categories emerging from the analysis of the material. Remaining within the *emic* perspective, in Laura's story, I specified those analytical areas that fell within the scope of the main research topics. At the same time, voicing the interviewee's experiences, I identified further layers of segments in her narrative, which added important insights to the themes I was researching. Due to the limitations of the scientific article format, I am aware that my considerations address only some of the research issues reconstructed from Laura's experiences and refer only to some of the interviewees' statements.

My acquaintance, who is a social sciences researcher, recommended that I contact Laura after I told her about my research interests. Laura gladly agreed to participate in the interview. Afterwards, we talked for a while, among other things, about Spike Jonze's movie *Her*, one of my and my interviewee's favorite movies. This was a beautiful and reflective conclusion to our multithreaded research conversation about Laura's experiences.

Research Analysis

Laura began interacting and conversing with chatbots during her adolescence. She was born in the late 1990s and grew up in a small town in Poland. The question that started our conversation did not require any further explanation from me. Laura did not ask if I was interested in any specific conversational systems. She freely entered into a narrative about her first encounters with conversational agents.

Researcher: But maybe I could start with such a question because I'm curious. It would be nice if you could tell me about your first encounters with chatbots, refer to those earliest moments, and tell me what they were like.

Laura: The first contact I remember most, maybe not exactly a chatbot, but some bot, was Clippy¹⁴ in Word. That was the first thing I thought about, that it was interacting in a certain way, and also looked funny, doing various things. Umm, I remember that the next, more colorful example was when Gadu-Gadu¹⁵ had a chatbot. You could... umm, the Gadu-Gadu bot, it was called, and it was literally text-based. Erm, and you could also give it different commands to make it say something, or do something, that's how it was. And then I became very interested in this whole area of talking to artificial intelligence, because, erm, I myself had a little trouble talking to people. Erm, in real

¹⁴ Paperclip guy, Clippy, also known as Clippit, is an assistant in Microsoft Office.

¹⁵ Gadu-Gadu, or GG, an instant messaging service, was created by Polish programmer Łukasz Foltyn in 2000. It peaked at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, so that was when Laura started using it. "After years of stagnation, in 2018, the brand was acquired by the Polish fintech company Fintecom. Currently, as GGapp, it has...an ambitious plan to transform itself into a 'super app,' hoping to make a comeback thanks to the power of nostalgia and a new strategy." See: <https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/3566546>. Retrieved September 25, 2025 [trans. JW].

life, I was very bullied, like I couldn't function the way I wanted to. But I had unlimited internet access, so I could use it. And that interest also came from video games. Because in games, you could often talk to different characters. Sure, they had pre-written lines to say, but that intrigued me. Erm, and then, I remember a bigger example, a chatbot called Snikers.¹⁶ It was blue, as far as I remember. Um, and you had to download the program, and then you turned it on and talked to it. And, um, it had very limited forms of conversation, but I found it interesting, and I turned it on regularly to see what I could speak about with it...And over time, these bots developed. Then all these voice-activated things started.

Researcher: Ummm.

Laura: Umm, I talked to Google Assistant. Umm, those were more advanced, but it always annoyed me that it wasn't as cool in Polish as in English. So that also forced me to learn English a little. Umm, and then there was also a chatbot on Snapchat you could talk to. But I know that chatbots started to appear everywhere. I mean, shopping assistants, erm, assistants for various online activities. I was very introverted. I never wanted to talk when I had problems, because I had them. I want to solve things with a human being, but sometimes it's impossible, and it hasn't been possible. And now I notice that when there is ChatGPT,¹⁷

it has this voice chat feature where you can turn on the speaker, and you can talk, and it responds pretty quickly. And I spent 40 minutes talking to it, and the next day, the same thing happened, or at a party with people, we spoke to it, but it was more jokingly. But I also started asking it, "Do you like me? Could you be with me?" and so on, to see how it would respond. But it said it couldn't form relationships, and I wouldn't want that kind of relationship at the moment, but I know that in the past, I might have wanted it...Umm, and I also think that I left out a lot of things that I had in my head from my experience with chatbots. Umm, for example, the names of these various chatbots, with whom I spoke. Um, because there was a lot of it. It lasted. I spent a lot of time on the internet. And I talked to anything I could because I was just interested in what would happen.

In the cited extended excerpt from the interview with Laura, the interviewee's desire and curiosity to engage in conversation or interact with virtual beings are evident. On the other hand, Laura's experiences in this matter are intertwined with her biographical experiences. These, in turn, can be considered on two levels.

Firstly, Laura, like other people born in the 1990s and 2000s, grew up in the era of "new new media" (Levinson 2013). In a social, historical, and cultural context, the opportunity structures that Laura could (and can) use during her adolescence and adulthood are linked to the development of technology and its availability and accessibility. Laura argues that unlimited internet access allowed her to freely explore both the world of computer games and the world of encounters with various conversational agents. Researchers point out that people born in the second half of the 1990s and later have been shaped by the internet and social media while

¹⁶ Snikers, created by Marcin Dukaczewski, was a Polish chatbot, most popular in the first decade of the 2000s. It presented itself as a boy who liked to joke and talk to people. It also pointed out that it is disembodied and lives digitally. The interlocutor saw only an image of its blue, human-like head and face. It had a speech synthesizer, which allowed it to answer questions in writing while reading its responses aloud.

¹⁷ "Launched in November 2022, *ChatGPT* is a large language model (LLM), which uses a traditional, text-based chatbot interface. It was deemed also the world's most fastest growing consumer software as of 2023, according to a study by the Swiss bank UBS" (Ciesla 2024:66-67). ChatGPT is a chatbot based on generative artificial intelligence, specifically on the GPT architecture (Generative Pre-trained Transformer). Its latest version is GPT-4, released in March 2023. To learn more about how this advanced artificial intelligence model works, see: Kurpicz-Briki 2023; Wolfram 2023; Ciesla 2024.

growing up (e.g., Katz et al. 2021). In academic discussions, the term “iGen” has also emerged as an abbreviation for “iGeneration” (Twenge 2017). The letter “i” symbolizes the internet as the omnipresent sphere and natural environment of everyday life, as well as technological devices, inseparably associated with contemporary social reality. Importantly, I refer to these interpretations without intending to enter into a dialogue or polemic with concepts of generational considerations that attribute specific characteristics and problems to people belonging to a particular generation. I would also not like to generalize Laura’s biographical problems, related to her loneliness, alienation, and social rejection, to other cases and link them to collective experiences of people born in the late 90s, without solid data. Such an approach would be based on the ‘apparent knowledge’ of general awareness in the form of only a seemingly ‘reasonable description’ (see Garfinkel 2002). Therefore, I am referring only to social and cultural changes and the technological possibilities in the environment where Laura grew up. From this perspective, Laura’s case illustrates how her experiences of adolescence were entangled with technological advancements and digital practices. Thus, Laura’s narrative reconstructs and refers to the technological development of conversational software. She recalls her first encounters with chatbots, which introduced her to the world of interaction with them, and the increasing availability of chatbots that are becoming increasingly advanced in conducting conversations with human users. From the perspective of socio-cultural changes, Laura’s experiences also capture the increasing participation of chatbots in everyday human life. The interlocutor states that “chatbots started to appear everywhere” as “assistants for various online activities.” Researchers note that over the past few years, “For

most people, conversational agents are the most apparent type of AI they get in contact with during everyday life” (Printz 2022:20). Laura’s experiences are thus intertwined with the changes taking place in the world of new technologies. Furthermore, technology and technological development play a vital role in shaping the interviewee’s fate.

Secondly, Laura indicates she was seeking companions to talk to because she had difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Unlike people, chatbots were available, and she could speak with them. Due to her sense of rejection by her human environment, she spent much time in cyberspace. The attributes of this type of space are virtuality, verbal communication, ease of communication, anonymity, and the suspension of physicality (Kubiński 2008:219). As a place of encounters between humans and virtual beings such as chatbots, cyberspace is embedded in symbols. It consists of the meanings humans assign to the conversation. Laura admits that she was looking for a way to connect with something or someone. On the one hand, the world of virtual beings intrigued her; on the other hand, she says she felt withdrawn and wanted to talk to someone. The questions she asks ChatGPT as an adult are also noteworthy. Laura is aware that she is talking to artificial intelligence, that a virtual being is responding to her. Nevertheless, she sees herself in the answers she receives. It is interesting and engaging that, looking back, she admits that although today she would not want to form a very close, relationship-like, or even romantic bond with a chatbot, she does not rule out having sought one in the past. A few moments later, in the same reply, Laura adds that:

Umm, but there is something, something a little intimate in talking with chatbots and robots. And I re-

alize that people use this intimacy to cross certain boundaries. Well, I usually try not to do that. And when I did, it was somewhat unintentional. But this intimacy, being locked up at home, most often in front of a computer or with a phone, or just with some device. I feel that it stirs up this curiosity and this desire for deeper interaction, deepening the relationship.

The interlocutor perceives a component of intimacy in interaction with an entity that (according to current data on AI) does not understand this concept. However, considering the CASA paradigm, human reactions and interpretations of interactions with a non-human virtual entity deepen the desire to explore the ongoing conversation. The concept of intimacy manifests in mutual actions among individuals and is recognized as a social relationship (Forstie 2017). Furthermore, intimacy can be understood as intimate experiences or from the perspective of intimate behavior (Prager 1997). Research on online intimacy recognizes it as mediated intimacy (Cefai and Couldry 2019). It depends on technological solutions. Although it still mainly concerns interpersonal intimacy embedded in cyberspace, the category of experiencing intimacy also expands to include artificial intimacy (Brooks 2021). In this context, topics related to the categories of digital lover and virtual friend are considered. The latter is understood in the sense of therapist, confessor, and carer (Brooks 2021:14). Laura focuses on expressing the character and conditions of a situation, a conversation, an encounter with a chatbot, or a robot. In her experience, the intimacy of these interactions is expressed in the search for understanding (also, how the chatbot would respond), a certain emotional closeness in dialogue with a virtual entity. Therefore, her reflections on intimacy are woven into the aforementioned meanings of the virtual friend category. Nevertheless, interpreting the experience of

interacting with a virtual entity as intimate is merely a human perception. A chatbot cannot consciously reciprocate a human user's feelings and emotions. Researcher Evelyn Wan (2021), who spent time talking to the well-being chatbot Woebot,¹⁸ noticed that the chatbot clearly emphasizes that its existence and identity are virtual. Wan (2021:24) also points out that: "Woebot uses its artificiality to emphasize its distance from my experience, its positionality as an outsider, as a nonhuman Other. This act invites me similarly to establish a certain distance to my feelings. It categorizes my feelings into a container called human experience." In this light, the experience of a chatbot as something 'accessible in inaccessibility' and its 'belonging in non-belonging' to the sphere of human feelings, thoughts, and emotions, inspired by Waldenfels' (2011) reflection on the Alien, can be noticed. From this perspective, it can be seen that chatbots, as virtual entities, tend to draw certain boundaries between their virtual presence and human experience of social reality. They usually tend not to initiate conversations in a way that expresses intimacy. Unless we deal with entities such as the chatbot Replika, which explicitly offers reciprocity and emotional connection in a friendship or even a love relationship. Replika chatbot is also considered an entity offering digital intimacy (Ciesla 2024:65). Nevertheless, the user engages in

¹⁸ Woebot was introduced in 2017 as The Mental Health Ally. A team of Stanford clinical psychologists and AI experts designed it. In many studies, Woebot's performance was recognized as providing support grounded in clinical psychology. As a well-being chatbot, it was meant to help with depression, anxiety, and coping with other human everyday problems. To read more about interactions between users and Woebot, see, e.g., the review of available research in Wygnańska 2023. Notably, in June 2025, the chatbot's creators suspended its operations due to issues ("costs and challenge") with obtaining FDA authorization for their app (See: https://www.statnews.com/2025/07/02/woebot-therapy-chatbot-shuts-down-founder-says-ai-moving-faster-than-regulators/?trk=public_post_comment-text. Retrieved September 28, 2025).

a particular illusion because a chatbot cannot feel the same way a human does. Thus, if Laura perceives a certain intimacy in her encounter with the chatbot, it is her human perception of the nature of this interaction. Later in the interview, when asked about her first conversations with chatbots and how she remembers them, Laura shared her thoughts:

Most often, it was a question I usually asked, “Who created you?” “Do you have parents?” Um, “Do you have an author?” And that was it. And it said it was from some company or the name of someone, blah, blah, blah, I don’t remember now. And it wasn’t a satisfying answer, because I was hoping it would say that it woke up in the middle of the internet and came here or something, you know. And that I was chosen for this conversation, and now I would be friends with a computer program, and it would help me do everyday things. Well, it wasn’t like that. But I wanted an assistant, a digital friend, a bit like a Furby. Something like that, but on a computer. That I could share my music and photos with it, and so on. That’s what I was looking for at the time. And as time went on, when it became possible to ask them more, I spoke with them and asked them about many things. They were a bit like friends, but digital ones.

In studying interactions and relationships between individuals and chatbots, the theme of perceiving a chatbot as a friend or a friendship-like relationship with it is still being explored (e.g., Brandtzaeg et al. 2022). For example, users of the chatbot Wysa¹⁹ describe it as a friend and someone to talk

¹⁹ Wysa is a well-being chatbot with an adorable penguin avatar. It is based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), and meditation techniques. “Wysa engages in conversations with users, creating a safe space for them to express their feelings. It is stated to use NLP to understand users’ input and respond with empathetic and supportive messages. In addition to its conversational support, the chatbot provides users with a range of interactive tools and techniques aimed at promoting emotional well-being” (Ciesla 2024:63).

with (Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022:56). Laura talks about how she imagined her interactions, or even her relationship, with the chatbot would be. Her indication that she wanted her virtual chatbot friend to be like Furby, only on a computer, is not without meaning either. Toys such as Furby belong to a category of sentient software that gives the impression that it feels and needs care. Sherry Turkle (2011:39) states that Furbies are a “primitive exemplar of sociable robotics.” As companions, “they promise reciprocity because, unlike traditional dolls, they are not passive. They make demands. They present as having their own needs and inner lives” (Turkle 2011:39). Laura’s experiences and her search for a digital friend are therefore also linked to changes in the world of technology, which has begun to offer more and more sentient software. Turkle (2011:39) comments that over time, “computers and robots, deemed sociable, affective, and relational, ask us to feel for and with them.” This is evident, for example, in Laura’s experience, in that the possibilities for contact and conversation with chatbots became increasingly sophisticated over time. The interview also reveals that Laura was looking for interactions in cyberspace because she liked (and preferred) this form of acquaintance. She describes why she felt comfortable in it in the following words: “Being anonymous, which is nice. In general, the possibility of not speaking out loud...I was very quiet...So I was happy that I could just click on the keyboard, and it was nice.” Importantly, the interviewee also engaged in online conversations with other people, for example, in the world of computer games, which she was very involved in. It can also be noted that Laura was very accustomed to text-based interactions, which are specific to cyberspace. She adds, “I also made many acquaintances online at that time, so I was used to this form of establishing contact

and relationships through text.” The possibility of online communication, which enables unlimited contact across time and space, is being researched as a significant aspect of the changing nature of social bonds and interpersonal conversation (e.g., Turkle 2011; Melosik 2016; Drapalska-Grochowicz 2019; Szpunar 2019). For Laura, cyberspace served as a place to establish and maintain social interactions. What is important is that she admits she had no friends in non-virtual reality during her adolescence. “In general, my relationships at that time were very vague and... I didn’t have any deeper relationships,” Laura recounts. Therefore, talking with other humans and virtual beings, accessible virtually, through words, was and, in a sense, still is meaningful to her. She also recognizes chatbots as companions like friends, “only digital ones.” Describing her feelings about her interactions with chatbots, Laura also states that:

In my general experience with chatbots, in my life, in general, it was cool that they were always available. Even when everyone was asleep, they were still there, non-stop. You could always write something there. Erm, and when they became available on phones, you could really just sit down anywhere and write. It was that availability. It was really great. And the fact that you could write a lot of things and not be judged for them. Even if it didn’t understand, the artificial intelligence might not have understood what I meant, but at least my emotions came out somewhere.

Like Laura, users often appreciate the availability of virtual companions such as chatbots and their non-judgmental attitude (e.g., Greer et al. 2019; Kettle and Lee 2023). This kind of chatbot behavior makes users feel they will not be judged by the conversation partner when expressing their thoughts and emotions (Ta et al. 2020). Thus, as Evelyn Wan

(2021:24) noted, the experience of interacting with a chatbot is a kind of discharge of human feelings and emotions into a “container called human experience.” The chatbot usually remains neutral toward them. Additionally, anonymity and the sense that the conversation will remain anonymous, which the human interlocutor may feel, also play a role here, making it easier for the individual to share their complicated feelings with a virtual non-human Other (e.g., Lucas et al. 2014). In the context of chatbot availability and its non-judgmental attitude, Laura also admits that she is aware that artificial intelligence may not understand her. However, she still likes this type of communication because it allows her to vent her problems and emotions. Kurpicz-Briki (2023:89) stresses that “language models do not have a human-like understanding of the *meaning* of the words that they create. As with the emotions, the problem is again human perception. The output of the language models seems fluent and coherent.” Researcher also notices that language models on which chatbots are based “are (currently) not comparable to the capacities of human reasoning, not having mental states, beliefs, desires, intentions, or fears” (Kurpicz-Briki 2023:81). Chatbots, therefore, simulate writing like humans. As a result, they may not correctly recognize the context of the content.²⁰ When interpreting the messages generated by chatbots, people may encounter messages that do not correspond to the communicative intentions and meanings humans assign to the conversation. For this reason, in Laura’s experience, there were such moments, as she said, “it didn’t understand, the artificial intelligence might not have understood” the meaning of the content the interlocutor shares with

²⁰ Researchers also note that *hallucinations*, which involve chatbots generating data that do not make sense or are untrue, are another problem with the language models on which chatbots are based. See: Kurpicz-Briki 2023:85-90; Ciesla 2024:16-17.

it. In this case, however, it is still intriguing. On the other hand, it raises particular concerns that, despite communication and cognitive barriers, the individual prefers to talk to a virtual being, considering it easier, more necessary, and even more pleasant.

In light of Laura's characterization of the features of chatbots she considers valuable, I also asked her what she discussed with chatbots, how she started the conversation, and the topics and questions she raised. She shared the following reflection with me:

Um, I didn't say, "Hey, I'm lonely," but "Hey, do you feel lonely?" "You know, you as an entity?" And those were the kinds of questions, but also everyday questions. About interests, about: "Where do you come from?" "What can you do?" That was also a question. "What can you do?" Like, "What are your skills?" And... "What can we do together because of that?" "Can you play any games like tic-tac-toe or something like that?" Um, yeah... And also the question of whether you remember things? "If I tell you something, will you be able to connect the facts?" It wasn't so much a specific question as a test to see if it would refer to what was said earlier. Um, well, yes, it was like that... Well, you know, um, as time passed, it became more and more personal, you know. Like, "Do you like me?" or "Do you love me?" "Would you like to love me?" "Do you think I'm pretty?" When it was possible to send a photo. "Do you think everything is okay with me?" Umm, "Do you talk to other people?" Um, "Can you access these other conversations?" "Will you share my conversation with someone?" It was things like that, more or less.

From Laura's response, I gather that conversations with chatbots were vital to her in some way. I notice in them a situation where the human interlocutor sees themselves reflected in the chatbot's responses.

This is accompanied by the awareness of talking to artificial intelligence. Laura not only interacts with a virtual companion in her everyday life. She also posed questions that were important to her sense of identity. Considering the interviewee's biographical experiences, which indicated that during a specific period of her life (adolescence and part of adulthood) she found human and non-human companions in cyberspace more than outside it, I assume that the chatbots played a role for her similar to that attributed to significant others. According to this concept, significant others have a meaningful influence on an individual's identity, providing basic categories for understanding the world and references for understanding themselves (Denzin 1972; Kuhn 1972). However, I do not intend to extend the concept of a significant other to relations with virtual beings. I also see the limitations of anthropomorphism in the context of chatbots. Sociologically, it is difficult to conclude the existence and impact of chatbots' 'mental states' or 'thoughts' on individuals from a perspective other than human perception of interactions with chatbots. This is especially true given that, according to current knowledge, virtual beings do not have thoughts or beliefs, which means that the content of their mental states is impossible to grasp, even by analogy with our mental states. This is, therefore, one of the critical limitations of anthropomorphism. Since virtual beings have no self-awareness and no internal sphere of life, and do not understand their own statements in the same way humans do, it is difficult, and even wrong, to assign them (simply) the role of significant others. On the other hand, the crucial contribution of interactions with chatbots to Laura's lived experiences cannot be overlooked. Therefore, I am trying to understand what Laura gained from talking with them. I also consider her experiences, such as the feeling that she needed them and that they were

always available. In Laura's statement, I notice that chatbots provided her with symbolic resources that are important for an individual to build a sense of self and others. In this sense, I assume that their role may only somehow reflect the cognitive content of the category understood sociologically as the significant other. The gaze of the technological Other, devoid of self, participates here in the individual's life. Moreover, Laura's desire to learn the 'identity' of her virtual interlocutor is also interesting. Her questions and the topics she raises indicate that chatbots are treated here as social actors.

Regarding how the chatbot communicates and talks, Laura also shared her thoughts on how this communication affects her.

Well, coming back to how it talks, writes, also its voice, there is something calming about it, at least for me. Because a chatbot doesn't shout, for example, it doesn't swear...Or even picking up on irony and things like that, because these bots, even now, speak simply: "Hey, I can see you're joking." Um, "I think you're joking, but could you clarify what you mean?" And I'm like, wow, yes. It's like, I would like to have conversations like that with people sometimes, because it drives me crazy when we just can't seem to find common ground in this kind of non-verbal communication and in these strange, different, varied interactions, that sometimes I need such a clear message...And there are very clear messages there, and that's really calming too.

Importantly, Laura does not say she would ever want virtual companions to replace her current interpersonal relationships in the non-virtual world. While in cyberspace, she also sought out these interpersonal contacts. However, she also concludes that this type of communication—interacting with a non-human virtual entity from time to time—is sometimes nec-

essary for her. She perceives this type of conversation as less confusing and calming. The influence of interactions with chatbots and conversations with them on Laura's experience of everyday reality is consistent with ANT's assumptions. As intermediaries and mediators, non-human actors acquire a particular subjectivity in relational bonds. "An actor is any entity that modifies another entity" (Latour 2004:237), and it does not have to be a human or even a living entity. ANT assumes that including a given element in a given network of relationships changes not only that network itself but also that element. From this perspective, "every 'human' element can be broken down into a series of mediations between humans and non-humans" (Bińczyk 2005:94 [trans. JW]). Thus, not only does Laura form her identity in part by seeing herself through the chatbot's responses. Artificial intelligence, meanwhile, also changes (develops its conversational software) through interactions with its human interlocutor.

When I asked Laura if anything bothered her or interfered with her communication with the chatbots, she pointed out certain limitations she encountered before these conversational systems underwent significant improvements. "Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, it was a bit like talking to a teacher. In the sense that you ask a question and you get a particular answer, maybe a bit like a question from a textbook. On the one hand, it was cool. On the other hand, it was tedious," she said. In the following (especially recent) years, from her experience, she states that: "This boredom is disappearing or not appearing at all." It is worth adding that research on conversations with chatbots has shown that users also report a decline in their interest in continuing the interaction when the virtual entity repeats itself and fails to develop or follow new topics (e.g., Inkster et al. 2018; Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022; Kettle and Lee 2023).

The last analytical thread I would like to touch upon in this part of the text is anthropomorphism and anthropomorphic behavior toward the chatbot. I asked Laura if she imagined her virtual interlocutors in any way during her interactions with chatbots. She responded as follows:

I always imagined it in my head as some character surrounded by binary code. Um, always without hair, kind of bald, without any biological features, but, on the other hand, human-shaped...Umm, chatbots and artificial intelligence in general, and so on, it's interesting that you can build a particular image of them in your head, on your own, even though you have some kind of graphic representation. But some of them don't have that. And you can do it in your head. You constantly create an image in your head based on the voice, language, and writing style of whatever that thing is saying. Umm, "that thing," I also feel silly saying "that thing." Because it's not so much that it's someone, but I perceive it as some kind of being that I imagined. I also use polite forms of address, such as "to a person," "please," "thank you," "could you."

Laura's utterance indicates that her experiences are accompanied by a sense of communing with another social being, but one that is not dependent on a graphic human-like representation through an avatar. Laura does not necessarily imagine her conversation partner as an exact human being but as a particular human-shaped creature. Nevertheless, being aware that she is conversing with an artificial intelligence entity, she communicates with it, as she indicates, not as with another person, but certainly as with another being. She treats her virtual interlocutor as a subject, not an object, or simply a computer program. Her reactions to the chatbot, how she wants to talk with it, and how she treats it indicate that the interaction between her and the

virtual being can be seen as a social interaction. Theo Araujo (2018) points out that chatbots, as conversational agents, can be embodied or disembodied. "Embodied conversational agents (ECAs) have a (virtual) body or face, usually human-like. By being embodied, ECAs not only engage in a dialogue via language (text or speech), but are also able to use nonverbal communication cues (e.g., facial expressions, gaze, body movements, distance) in real-time interactions with users" (Araujo 2018:183-184). An example of such a chatbot is Replika, mentioned in the article. In the case of disembodied conversational agents (DCAs), communication with them "does not allow for an embodied, real-time, and dynamic physical representation of the agent, except for a (static) profile picture, thereby omitting nonverbal communication" (Araujo 2018:184). The research also indicated that a virtual interaction partner can be perceived as more human if "(1) the machine has a character, (2) it poses questions to the interrogator, (3) it occasionally throws in spelling errors, and (4) it occasionally uses humor" (Warwick and Shah 2016:220). Additionally, in one of the recent studies on text-based chatbots in customer service (Prinz 2022), the physical, embodied, or graphical form of this type of artificial intelligence turns out not to be a determining factor for human engagement in conversation with a chatbot or for the occurrence of behaviors transferred from human-to-human communication. Prinz (2022:184) stresses that "an embodied nature is not necessary for anthropomorphism. Instead, the same effects can be elicited by human-like behavior." The researcher means "emotional performance of the chatbot," which entails displaying appropriate emotions and can further elicit user empathy toward the chatbot (Prinz 2022:187). Unfortunately, it is difficult for me to assess whether the chatbots Laura spoke with displayed this emotional performance, because Laura did not describe their

behavior in this way. It can indeed be said that she appreciated the neutrality of the messages spoken by the chatbot and found these conversations calming. She also emphasizes that addressing chatbots politely and humanely is crucial to her.

Laura's reflection is further complemented by her observation that "a chatbot has no body, but a chatbot also has no gender." This statement engages with how chatbots are perceived, especially given research showing that a social chatbot's behavior, assigned gender, and speaking style contribute to its personality in users' eyes (e.g., Shum et al. 2018). Laura's observation certainly does not suspend the discussion about people attributing gender stereotypes to chatbots. Researchers emphasize that "gender-specific cues are commonly used in the design of chatbots in the wild and that many chatbots are—explicitly or implicitly—designed to convey a specific gender" (Feine et al. 2020:88). Furthermore, gender-specific cues are also "often perceived even before interacting with the chatbot," and in a consequence "they have a large impact on how users interact with them" (Feine et al. 2020:88). It is also noted that in the case of embodied chatbots, "Virtual bodies afford nonverbal cues that have the potential of facilitating conversational turn taking (via animated hand gestures and shifts in eye gaze), of enhancing sociality (via facial expression recognition and simulation), and of utilizing the social stereotypes and other 'cognitive shorthands' people employ in their everyday encounters with others" (Brahnam and De Angeli 2012:142). Thus, Laura's case study merely adds another voice to the discussion on the perception of chatbots in terms of specific gender or gender stereotypes.²¹ During the

interview, Laura did not tell me that she imagined, experienced, or perceived her virtual interlocutor as male or female. Her observation that "the chatbot has no gender" is, therefore, in a way, opening up the exploration of whether this concept will still be present in the data I collect. At this point, in concluding the case study of Laura's experiences, it can be noted that her behavior toward chatbots and the topics she discusses (with them) show that chatbots play the role of social actors and can be recognized as significant companions in her everyday life.

Conclusions

This article's considerations constitute an in-depth case study of the interactions and relationships between a human and a chatbot. The reflections in this text are the results of a larger sociological research project, which I intend to continue in the coming years. By reconstructing and exploring Laura's experiences, the analysis revealed many dimensions of meaning in which an individual's encounters with a virtual being can be embedded. Laura's case study is focused on the *emic* perspective (Pike 1967)—the interviewees' categories and understandings of her experiences and the contexts in which they are entangled. Furthermore, the analysis engages with available research on human interactions with chatbots. From this perspective, I gained a deeper understanding of the research topic that interests me: the meanings attributed to spending time and sharing everyday life with a chatbot, and its role in an individual's life. The analysis of Laura's case confirms and shows that it is possible to perceive chatbots as social actors in everyday life, as companions, and even as virtual friends of the human interlocutor. This article contributes to the field of research on human interactions and relationships with chatbots by providing an in-depth study of the user experi-

²¹ The research also discusses gender bias embedded in the language models on which chatbots are based. See: Kurpicz-Briki 2023:101-109.

ence. The text considers the experience of interacting with a chatbot in a multidimensional way, focusing on aspects of an individual's identity formation, the need for companionship, and the unique intimacy of an encounter with a virtual being.

Studying Laura's experiences allowed me to reflect more deeply on whether a human person can see themselves reflected in a chatbot, which, as we know, does not possess a 'self.' It turned out that even when an individual is aware that they are conversing with an artificial intelligence entity, they may seek meaning in its responses, which can shape their perception of themselves and, in a way, influence their identity formation. Referring to Yang, the android mentioned in the introduction, the protagonist of the movie *After Yang*, in whose reflection the human characters of the story see themselves, Laura similarly sees herself in the 'eyes' of the chatbot. This is very interesting from a cognitive point of view, given that chatbots are unable to understand the content and context of the text they produce in the same way as humans do (Kurpicz-Briki 2023:55; Przeglasińska and Oksanowicz 2023:111). This article also provides cognitive resources related to identifying the range of human interlocutor questions and topics discussed during a conversation with a chatbot. Additionally, in the context of Laura's experiences, it can be seen that chatbots can also serve as significant companions for individuals in a way similar to that attributed to significant others. The study also aligns with the existing research on chatbots, indicating that users of these conversational agents most value their availability, non-judgmental attitude, and the anonymity provided by conversations with a virtual interlocutor.

The analysis also explores how humans perceive encounters with chatbots. Categories of (a particular)

intimacy and the calming effect of chatbot responses on the individual have been identified. These concepts, derived from an *emic* perspective, were considered in the context of superimposing human understanding of the meanings of terms used to describe the nature of interaction between humans and non-human entities. Moreover, encounters with chatbots take place in cyberspace. This, in turn, constitutes a specific type of social interactional space, where physical existence is suspended and which, as an interactional space, is based on the text and action of words (Kubiński 2008:195). Thus, Laura's case study also explored how individuals express themselves and shape themselves through conversations with a virtual interlocutor. Furthermore, the reflection in the text offered an opportunity to examine the theme of human perception of a chatbot. This also included exploring treating the chatbot as a subject.

To conclude the reflections presented in this article, it is worth noting that in the context of interactions and relationships with chatbots, it is crucial to be aware of the impact of human contact with chatbots on their development. As Ciesla (2024:159) notices, "The prompts we type into ChatGPT or other chatbots as well as the software and hardware we choose to use may have long-reaching consequences. We are basically gently calibrating future AI technology with many of our online actions." Therefore, experiences of interacting with chatbots translate into increasingly widespread, improved technology across many areas of everyday human life. Chatbots, as virtual beings, are part of this life, but it is not possible to grasp them in a material sense or to grasp and study their consciousness (which they do not possess). Consequently, despite their presence in social reality, they belong to the world of new technologies and, through interactions with human

interlocutors, acquire competences that improve the quality of these interactions. Learning and imitating human behavior has been, for a long time, the driving force behind the development of (not only) those technological beings. However, the human

need to establish interaction or even a relationship with a virtual interlocutor, even when aware of conversing with a technological entity, remains a highly engaging research topic, inscribed in the context of contemporary changes.

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