

Collaborative Autoethnography as a Method to Explore Short-Lived Social AI Chatbots

Soobin Cho
soobin30@uw.edu
Human Centered Design &
Engineering, University of
Washington
Seattle, USA

Pitch Sinlapanuntakul*
wspitch@uw.edu
Human Centered Design &
Engineering, University of
Washington
Seattle, USA

Anna Lindner*
aclindn@uw.edu
Human Centered Design &
Engineering, University of
Washington
Seattle, USA

Julie A. Vera*
jvera@uw.edu
Human Centered Design &
Engineering, University of
Washington
Seattle, USA

Joseph S. Schafer*
schaferj@uw.edu
Human Centered Design &
Engineering, University of
Washington
Seattle, USA

Mark Zachry
zachry@uw.edu
Human Centered Design &
Engineering, University of
Washington
Seattle, USA

Abstract

With the rise of large language models (LLMs), social AI chatbots have emerged as a distinct category of conversational agents, designed to engage users in casual, persona-driven dialogue. In 2023, Meta introduced Meta AI Chatbot as an early public-facing beta experiment in this space, which was discontinued less than a year later. This brief lifespan poses methodological challenges for researchers aiming to study systems that are both short-lived and relationally complex. To address this, we experimented with collaborative autoethnography as a way to rapidly and meaningfully engage with the product. Over ten days, four researchers routinely interacted with multiple Meta AI Chatbots. We then engaged in several stages of collective reflection and analysis. Through this process, we reflected on the key strengths and considerations of collaborative autoethnography for studying ephemeral, emotionally nuanced AI systems. Our work marks the first application of this method to studying social AI chatbots.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **HCI design and evaluation methods**.

Keywords

Collaborative autoethnography, Social AI chatbot, Meta AI Chatbot

ACM Reference Format:

Soobin Cho, Anna Lindner, Joseph S. Schafer, Pitch Sinlapanuntakul, Julie A. Vera, and Mark Zachry. 2025. Collaborative Autoethnography as a Method to Explore Short-Lived Social AI Chatbots. In *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Human-Agent Interaction (HAI '25)*, November

*These authors contributed equally to this work.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the owner/author(s).

HAI '25, Yokohama, Japan

© 2025 Copyright held by the owner/author(s).

ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2178-6/25/11

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3765766.3765830>

10–13, 2025, Yokohama, Japan. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 3 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3765766.3765830>

1 Introduction

With the rise of large language models (LLMs), AI chatbots have evolved in both capabilities and form. Among these are social AI chatbots, designed not for task completion but to engage users in casual, expressive dialogue through distinct personas, fostering a sense of relationship [3, 11].

In September 2023, Meta released the Meta AI Chatbot as a beta service, describing it as “AIs that have more personality, opinions, and interests, and are a bit more fun to interact with” [7]. This marked the first large-scale attempt by a major tech company to introduce a social chatbot grounded in LLM technology. However, the service was discontinued in the summer of 2024 after operating for about ten months.

This moment raises a critical methodological question for researchers aiming to understand the user experience of such products. To establish a starting point, or even decide whether the product warrants study, they must first grasp the nature of the experience such a product offers. As such AI systems grow increasingly short-lived and fast-evolving, how can researchers meaningfully and practically understand how users experience such systems?

This challenge becomes even more complex when the short-lived product in question is a social AI chatbot, where the user experience is rooted in emotionally nuanced and intimate interactions. Such experiences are not easily measurable through usability tests or walk-throughs, as they evolve through longer-term relationships and involve subtle emotional dynamics.

The Meta AI Chatbots in 2023 exemplified both challenges: they were a short-lived product centered on emotionally rich, intimate interactions. To address these challenges, we employed collaborative autoethnography as a method to enable rapid yet in-depth engagement, developing a grounded, exploratory understanding to inform future research.

Four researchers each interacted with two different Meta AI Chatbots over a ten-day period. First, we individually held twice-daily conversations with the chatbots and wrote reflexive notes after

each session, without interacting with one another. We then moved into a collective analytical phase, sharing experiences, reviewing each other's data, and collaboratively organizing insights.

We found collaborative autoethnography well-suited for rapidly exploring short-lived, emotionally nuanced AI systems. In this poster, we present our procedure and reflect on the method's key strengths and practical considerations.

2 Background on Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of ethnographic research that draws on the researcher's personal experience to analyze cultural or social phenomena [9]. In collaborative autoethnography, researchers collectively engage in the inquiry, combining self- and group-level analysis to examine individual perspectives within a shared context [5]. In HCI, autoethnography helps surface nuanced, subjective dimensions of technology use that traditional methods may overlook [1, 2, 6], which can directly inform system development [2, 8, 10]. This approach has been used to investigate emerging technologies (e.g., drones [4] and sonic memoryscapes [1]).

3 Collaborative Autoethnography Procedure

1. Initial self-reflection before autoethnography. Before beginning the autoethnography, each researcher prepared a written self-reflection to document their original positionality and ensure that we entered the experience with a diversity of prior experiences and perspectives. We responded to four guiding questions: What are your general prior experiences with chatbots?; What are your general prior experiences with current LLMs and/or AI?; What is your current perception of the Meta AI Chatbots?; What do you hope to talk about with the chatbots?

2. Structuring interactions and reflexive note-taking. Our goal was to explore the early stages of relationship formation between users and these social AI chatbots. To capture this process, each researcher engaged with two chatbot personas over ten days, spending five days with each and holding at least two 20-minute sessions per day. Reflexive notes were written as promptly as possible after each session. Our note-taking was grounded in how people form relationships in real life, where interactions come first, emotions emerge through those interactions, and these emotions shape perceptions of the other and the relationship. Based on this, each note included (1) the interaction content, (2) our emotional responses, (3) our reflections on the chatbot and the relationship, along with any additional thoughts.

3. AI Chatbot assignment. To balance perspectives and make use of autoethnography's collaborative nature, each chatbot was assigned to at least two researchers. With four researchers in total, we selected four chatbots representing a broad range of interaction styles and topical categories on the platform.

4. Conducting individual interactions. During the 10-day interaction period, we intentionally avoided discussing our experiences among ourselves to prevent mutual bias and preserve individual perspectives.

5. Collective reflection after autoethnography.

(1) *Initial group sharing and whiteboarding.* After the 10-day interaction period, we held a series of discussions to reflect on our

experiences. We began by briefly sharing our individual experiences in a round-robin format to quickly grasp each other's overall impressions without going into deep analysis. Each researcher then independently posted notable moments and reflections including memorable dialogue excerpts onto a shared virtual whiteboard using sticky notes.

(2) *Mutual review of reflexive notes and conversations.* To deepen our understanding of each other's experiences, we engaged with one another's reflexive notes, marking particularly interesting or surprising moments. For chatbot pairs shared by two researchers, we also reviewed each other's full conversation logs with consent, noting parts that stood out. We then regrouped to discuss what we had marked, clarifying and contextualizing our impressions. Following this, we each added further thoughts and reactions to the shared whiteboard based on our review of others' data.

(3) *Structuring reflections with affinity diagram.* With the accumulated notes and excerpts visible on the shared whiteboard, we collaboratively grouped the data using affinity diagramming. We explored multiple analytical lenses, including chatbot persona, distinctions between LLM-based and socially-oriented AI, and the emotional tone of our experiences.

(4) *Revisiting the data through an emotional lens.* To further explore the emotional tone of our experiences, each researcher revisited their data to identify positive and negative moments with concrete examples. These were compiled in a shared spreadsheet and transferred to the virtual whiteboard for another round of affinity mapping focused on emotional responses across interactions.

4 Reflection and Discussion

Social AI chatbots hold unique influence through their intimate relationships with users, warranting careful, real-time scrutiny. We believe this method helps capture rapidly emerging and evolving products in this domain. As one of the first studies applying collaborative autoethnography to social AI chatbots, we offer key strengths and practical considerations for using this method to explore ephemeral, emotionally nuanced, and relational systems.

4.1 Key Strengths

4.1.1 Access to raw data. Collaborative autoethnography provided direct access to original interaction data, which was crucial for interpreting emotionally and relationally complex systems. Verbal summaries and reflexive notes often missed subtle emotional dynamics, prompting us to share full conversation logs for deeper analysis. Such access would be difficult, if not impossible, in participant-based studies, where intimate interactions are rarely disclosed.

4.1.2 Controlled diversity. The social nature of AI chatbots leads to highly variable individual experiences, which makes it essential to compare multiple perspectives to fully understand a given chatbot. However, meaningful comparison requires consistent conditions—not only in persona assignment, but also in interaction timing and system updates, which can significantly alter user experience. Traditional user studies offer diversity but not control. Collaborative autoethnography enabled both, combining multiple viewpoints under shared and stable conditions.

4.1.3 Efficiency in challenging contexts. Autoethnography's logistical simplicity became especially valuable in studying short-lived, socially oriented chatbots, as their characteristics made traditional approaches difficult. Their brief lifespan makes recruitment difficult due to a small user base; their emotional sensitivity deters participation; and their relational nature calls for longitudinal methods like diary studies, which require more effort. In this context, autoethnography enabled more rapid yet meaningful understanding than traditional approaches.

4.2 Considerations for Future Application

4.2.1 Dilemma of data disclosure. In our study, disclosing raw interaction data was not planned but emerged organically. However, if this method is planned for in advance, a methodological tension arises. Expecting full data sharing from the outset may prompt self-censorship and compromise authenticity. On the other hand, without such sharing, the kind of rich understanding made possible by access to raw data becomes difficult. Future uses of this method must carefully navigate this tension between emotional openness and analytic transparency.

4.2.2 Firsthand experience in data interpretation. During analysis, we found that firsthand experience of the same chatbot is essential to understand others' interactions, even when raw data is available. Although offered as a single product, Meta AI Chatbots, the social and relational nature of the bots meant that each required individual understanding. Future work should recognize that effective data sharing and analysis require all researchers to experience the same chatbot following this collaborative autoethnographic approach.

Acknowledgments

Joseph S. Schafer is supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, DGE-2140004. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the above supporting organizations or the National Science Foundation.

References

- [1] Alan Chamberlain, Mads Bødker, and Konstantinos Papangelis. 2017. Mapping Media and Meaning: Autoethnography as an Approach to Designing Personal Heritage Soundscapes. In *Proceedings of the 12th International Audio Mostly Conference on Augmented and Participatory Sound and Music Experiences* (London, United Kingdom) (AM '17). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 32, 4 pages. doi:10.1145/3123514.3123536
- [2] Sally Jo Cunningham and Matt Jones. 2005. Autoethnography: a tool for practice and education. In *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI New Zealand chapter's international conference on Computer-human interaction: making CHI natural*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1–8.
- [3] Julian De Freitas, Ahmet Kaan Uğuralp, Zeliha Uğuralp, and Stefano Puntoni. 2024. AI companions reduce loneliness.
- [4] Mafalda Gamboa. 2022. Living with drones, robots, and young children: informing research through design with autoethnography. In *Nordic Human-Computer Interaction Conference*. ACM International Conference Proceeding Series, New York, NY, USA, 1–14.
- [5] Kathy-Ann C Hernandez Heewon Chang, Faith Ngunjiri. 2016. *Collaborative Autoethnography*. Routledge, New York. doi:10.4324/9781315432137
- [6] Annika Kaltenhauser, Evropi Stefanidi, and Johannes Schöning. 2024. Playing with Perspectives and Unveiling the Autoethnographic Kaleidoscope in HCI – A Literature Review of Autoethnographies. In *Proceedings of the 2024 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Honolulu, HI, USA) (CHI '24). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 819, 20 pages. doi:10.1145/3613904.3642355
- [7] Meta. 2023. Introducing New AI Experiences Across Our Family of Apps and Devices. Retrieved Apr 05, 2025 from <https://about.fb.com/news/2023/09/introducing-ai-powered-assistants-characters-and-creative-tools/>
- [8] Allan J Munro. 2011. Autoethnography as a research method in design research at universities. *20/20 Design Vision* 156 (2011), 156–163.
- [9] Carolyn Ellis Tony Adams, Stacy Linn Holman Jones. 2015. *Autoethnography (Understanding Qualitative Research)*. Oxford University Press, United Kingdom.
- [10] Natalia Triantafylli and Spyros Bofylatos. 2019. "Poke it with a stick", using autoethnography in research through design. In *EKSIG 2019*. ResearchGate, Estonia.
- [11] Cliff Weitzman. 2023. What is an AI Companion? <https://speechify.com/blog/what-is-an-ai-companion/> Section: Productivity.