

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND AI

Edited by Shing-Ling S. Chen

STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION

VOLUME 61

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND AI

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SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND AI

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PART A

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND AI

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AI AND PARA-INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

Following the previous research on the relationships between technological formats and social forms, the authors use the studies presented in this volume to demonstrate the relationship between the technological formats of artificial intelligence (AI) and the emergence of a distinct form of interaction, para-interaction. The authors view para-interaction as a paradoxical concept in that the basic elements of sociality, from inception to consummation (as generally discussed by Mead 1938), become the basis for a type of alienated interaction in which sociality (and basic elements representing sociality) cannot be sustained. The authors further discuss how the studies in this volume illustrate the various features of para-interaction that emerge in conjunction with AI power systems.

Keywords: AI; Social forms; technological formats; chatbot; ChatGPT

INTRODUCTION

In a previous assessment of the interactional elements necessary for the consummation of sociality and its relation to advances in the technological means to observe distinct elements of such sociality, [Chen et al. \(2014\)](#) noted that [Carl Couch \(1996\)](#) fused together [Georg Simmel's \(1950, 1972\)](#) discussion of social forms with [Marshall McLuhan's \(1962, 1964\)](#) depiction and articulation of various technological formats. Accordingly, in his examination of the relationship between social forms and technological formats, Couch noted that one particular technology, defined in the context of an ancient oral tradition, fostered collectivism, due to the time bias associated with orality ([Innis, 1951](#)). In general, this bias, characterized by the dominance of orality, emphasized the need of people to gather together to receive information. In contrast, literacy

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(more associated with what Innis called a space bias) promoted individualism. This promotion gave rise to the individualistic acts of reading and writing.

Couch (1996, pp. 111–115) further noted that the printing press advanced nationalism with the opportunities to standardize writing and promote national literature and ideology. As this advancement continued beyond paper-based media and into electronic media, Couch (pp.120–126) maintained that globalism in entertainment is achieved through broadcasting sights and sounds. Apropos to Couch’s thesis, Earl and Kimport (2013), for example, illustrated that the Internet promoted activism by allowing dispersed users to connect and mobilize for causes. Patterned after this line of argument, authors in this volume build the case for artificial intelligence (AI) and the construction of a new social form, para-interaction.

PARA-INTERACTION

AI references computer systems which are able to perform activities that require human intelligence – learning, reasoning, problem-solving, perception, and language understanding. AI accomplishes these tasks through immersion in massive amounts of language data, identifying patterns (on the basis of programming the means to recognize specific categories of information) and making predictions based on these patterns. By processing large datasets of text and coding to predict the next word in a sequence, AI becomes able to anticipate predictable patterns and forms of relationships that emerge within the data. Due to this capacity, AI, among other capacities, generates human-like text, answers questions, and even introduces foci that can be shared. The capabilities of generating human-like text and answering questions enable an AI-powered language model, chatbot (i.e., a robot designed to have conversations with users), to engage in conversations, provide information, introduce new subjects, and provide mutual responsiveness (among other capabilities). The capacities to understand and respond to human language make chatbot a seemingly natural (i.e., using natural language) and helpful (i.e., providing needed information) interactant.

The interaction with a chatbot, trained by massive language datasets, is certainly different from interacting with a human being, capable of reflexive thinking. For one, chatbot is trained by precompiled datasets. It is unable to provide real-time information or emergent updates, unlike what search engines are capable of. Hence, pending on the time frame of the datasets used, chatbot could provide outdated or inaccurate information. In addition, chatbot is task based; it may lack the needed common sense reasoning due to its inability to fully understand the nuances of the contexts that become introduced amid conversations. Therefore, it may have difficulty understanding the full context of a conversation, which leads to misinterpretations and misunderstanding (Hua et al., 2024). In effect, being pretrained and unable to fully understand contexts set the limitations of interacting with chatbots.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the capabilities to understand and respond to natural human language make chatbot a popular interactant. ChatGPT (which stands for “Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer”), developed by OpenAI, an AI research and development company, for instance, has 400 million weekly active users worldwide (Carino, 2025). Making full use of ChatGPT’s capacities in natural language understanding and generation, users find chatbots valuable for answering basic questions, providing information, brainstorming ideas, and engaging in mundane conversations as a virtual companion. While talking to a “robot,” no matter how well versed it is in natural human language, may seem unusual or even creepy, some users have found comfort, joy, and a genuine connection when interacting with their chatbots (Dolan, 2024; Roose, 2023). While the massive language datasets which form the capacity of a chatbot may seem artificial or impersonal, the resulting user interaction is real in its consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, pp. 510–511), making subsequent users experience, at least, feel as if these users construct authentic interaction in their life-worlds (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). Due to this emotively real user interaction and the feel of genuine user experience, interaction with chatbots warrants sociological investigation.

As implied above, AI powered chatbots have generated a form of interaction which simulates human interaction, not only in regard to explicit content but with regard to the emotional experience associated with such interaction. Chatbots have generated the feel of social interaction, para-interaction, that encapsulates the basic elements of human association, especially in regard to opening interactional encounters (Miller et al., 1975). Humans interacting with chatbots establish copresence, acknowledge one another reciprocally, engage in mutual responsiveness, share foci and even project futures so as to create social objectives. However, the technical resemblance of basic interactional elements occurs without the real nuances of face-to-face interaction. With regard to para-interaction, users can converse with a knowledgeable and supportive chatbot to obtain information and social support, but such objectives occur mechanically, without the human idiosyncrasies linked to a “universe of touch,” or a mutual feeling of connecting, including all the graceful and awkward moments involved in this connection (see Liechty, 1986).

Regardless of lack of important nuance, the information gathered and support gained through examination of human and chatbot interaction have implications for everyday human activities and complex social life. The nature and features of the para-interaction with AI-powered chatbots merit sociological investigations to enrich our understanding of social life in the AI age. To this end, each of the authors in this volume offers a fine-grained view of the para-interaction with AI-powered models. Their studies provide a comprehensive view of the forms and features of para-interaction.

J. Patrick Williams, Samuel Judah, Rolf Lyneborg Lund and Xie Yu, in their chapter, “Prompt Engineering Meets ‘Definition of the Situation’ and Identity Theory: Using ChatGPT to Study Big Social Media Datasets from a Qualitative Symbolic Interactionist Perspective,” investigate the performance and potential of GPTs in the collection and qualitative analysis of social media data. They

examine how generative AI (GAIs) make meaning out of data and communicate with human users. They further analyze how instructions provided to GAIs regarding definitions of the situation and role identities have implications on the analytical actions performed. Their study provides valuable information regarding the similarities and differences between how humans and GAIs interpret and communicate meaning.

In “From Mead to Machine: Conversational Choreographies with ChatGPT and the Emergence of the Socio-Technical Self in Generative AI,” Martin Berg introduces the concept of *socio-technical self* to better understand the nuances in human–machine interactions. This concept also characterizes the relational participants involved in systems such as ChatGPT. Berg utilizes conversational choreography, a methodological approach to examine how ChatGPT become part of and engage in social dynamics. Through this methodology, Berg demonstrates how AI actively contributes to real-time shared meaning-making within socio-technical networks and interactions. Rather than viewing AI as merely mimicking human cognition, Berg establishes AI as an active co-creator of a socio-technical fabric where agency emerges relationally and dynamically.

Michael Fischer, Sally A. Applin and Sridhar Ravula in “External Intelligence: Oracles, Divination and Animism, and the use of LLMs/Generative AI” analyze divination and oracle consultation in chatbots and generative AI (GAI), as manifest by large language models (LLMs). They illustrate the concepts of meaning, identity, and place as constructed in and via human–chatbot interaction. Relying on classical interactionist theory, they explore the generalized other with regard to interacting with chatbots and how the relations that emerge via this interaction make such interaction meaningful. Their focus on apparent meaningful exchanges emphasizes a shared focus on environmental surroundings with respect to the information in the document collection model leveraged by the chatbot. Further, they identify underlying ethical concerns and considerations within the current GAI systems being used for consultation, forecasting and decision-making. In so doing, they provide recommendations to improve the safety of future AI systems and human partnership.

Theodoros Kouros, in “Hey Alexa, Who Will I Be? A Theoretical Exploration on Personal Assistants and the Shaping of the Future Self,” analyzes how AI personal assistants, like Alexa, Siri and Google Assistant may shape self-construction and, eventually, the future of the human self. Kouros argues that AI systems function as a digital mirror and generalized other, by inviting users into interactions that reflect, affirm and occasionally challenge user preferences and behavior. Kouros illustrates that these technologies give personalized feedback and produce complex effective and affective relationships. Through such illustration, Kouros notes that AI can transform existing self-conceptions or open pathways to new identities while raising critical ethical questions regarding algorithmic biases, privacy and autonomy.

In “From Dear Diary to Dear Chatbot: Technological Formats and Mental Health,” Matt Amos, Maxwell Kayser and Shing-Ling S. Chen contrast the forms of social activities involved in traditional journal writing and chatbot use. Their key focus involves the dynamics of interacting with an AI powered chatbot

for mental health purposes. They argue that the discursive bias of journaling favors the development of a high level of self-consciousness while the emotional bias of chatbot use encourages a user to immerse in a self-centered world. They note that while journal writing fosters the development of rationality through the process of relying on the structure of a print medium, interacting with a chatbot only requires the use of reflexivity at the end of the interaction, when the user evaluates the recommendations provided by the chatbot. The rationality that appears in the printed word is typically absent in the world constructed by a user and a chatbot. The authors conclude that in regard to mental health issues, journaling favors the development of an elaborate and sequential analysis of issues while chatbot merely provides a venue for venting.

CONCLUSION

Authors in this volume illustrate the features of para-interaction. Williams, Judah, Lund and Yu demonstrate how GPTs not only make meaning out of data but also communicate with human users. Berg demonstrates how AI can actively contribute to real-time shared meaning-making. Fischer, Applin and Ravula reveal how a person, mediated by a chatbot, can make meaning with respect to the information in the document collection model leveraged by the chatbot. Kouros indicates that AI can transform existing self-conceptions or open pathways to new identities while Amos, Kayser and Chen further reveal the nature of experience involved using a chatbot for mental health purposes.

Even so, while the aforementioned authors demonstrate the benefits of human–chatbot interchanges, all recognize the limitations of their connections. The accomplishments noted above come with limitations concerning how extensive the long-term benefits of these objectives. The immediate gains associated with human–chatbot interactions are contradicted by the lack of any extensive and substantial advantages that make up the enduring fabric of human connections.

Nevertheless, with the rapid advancement of AI and the astonishing potential of AI in transforming social life, social scientists have accumulated knowledge regarding human–AI interaction, as demonstrated by the authors in this volume. An understanding of the distinctive features of human–AI interaction will aid in the development of a more comprehensive theory of social behavior. With the continuous development of AI, further investigation pertaining to human–AI interaction is warranted.

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