

The Disruption of Human-AI Parasocial Relationships and Digital Mourning amid Platform Governance Changes: A Study Based on Character.AI Users' Social Media Posts

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Abstract. With the rapid development of AI chatbots, users are gradually forming emotional bonds with AI through continuous interaction. AI is no longer just a tool, but has become an important object for users' emotional projection and social interaction. However, changes in platform rules, feature limitations, and shifts in interaction mechanisms may weaken users' perception of the AI character's continuity and the stability of the relationship, thus leading to experiences of human-AI relationship breakdown. This study explores how users interpret and make sense of the disruption of human-AI parasocial relationships amid Character.AI's platform governance changes, and how they negotiate these relational transformations via practices of digital mourning. Using qualitative thematic analysis, it examines 21 discussion threads and related comments from the Reddit community r/Character.AI on platform policy changes and user experiences. Through open coding and thematic analysis, users' emotional expressions and patterns of community interaction are identified and analyzed. The results show that users perceive a decline in their experience through changes such as reduced reply quality, diminished character personalities, memory loss, and feature restrictions, leading to emotional responses like nostalgia, anger, disappointment, and withdrawal intentions. Within the community space, users transform individual loss into collective digital mourning through practices such as recalling old versions, public farewells, exploring alternative platforms, and calling for version rollbacks. Furthermore, human-AI parasocial relationships rely on ongoing interaction, character consistency, and emotional investment. The disruption of experiential continuity caused by platform adjustments drives users to engage in emotional expression and meaning reconstruction.

Keywords: Character.AI, Human-AI parasocial relationships, Relationship rupture, Digital mourning, Social media community

1. Introduction

With the rapid development and wide application of large language models (LLMs), role-playing chatbots like Character.AI have evolved from mere tools into more valuable ones. At the same time, they have become the means for users to express their emotions and create stories. Due to the

emotional factors, the anthropomorphic design and continuous conversations help people establish long-term parasocial relationships with these platforms. However, if the platforms modify their service terms or adjust other business conditions owing to new policies or restrictions, this emotional connection may be broken, thereby triggering negative emotions among users and changes in interpersonal relationships.

Existing research has explored the human-computer interaction mechanism from perspectives such as social interaction with computers and the termination of the relationship between humans and AI. However, they have not systematically studied how changes in platform policies cause users to feel a rupture in their relationships, and how this perception translates into collective mourning in online communities. For instance, when users widely discuss issues such as "AI degradation," "farewell," and "searching for alternatives" on public forums like Reddit, these contents are no longer just simple messages, but a community culture that includes narrative construction and emotional rituals. Based on this background, this article will analyze the policy changes of the Character.AI platform from 2024 to 2026. By analyzing the discussion materials of the r/CharacterAI subreddit, this paper adopts a qualitative thematic analysis method to explore how users perceive the changes in the platform, express their emotions, and participate in community mourning activities. In particular, it examines users' feelings regarding the loss of relationships, the emotions they have experienced, and the group stories that emerged in the community after the platform adjustments. Therefore, based on the above process, this study explores the end of the parasocial relationship between humans and AI and the phenomenon of digital mourning, providing case analysis and theoretical support for future research on human-machine interaction.

2. Literature review

Previously, people only had emotional attachments to celebrities and TV programs. In this case, viewers continued to pay attention and formed emotional resonance; while media figures were not like this [1]. This concept initially appeared in the explanation of the attachment of television and radio audiences, and later was applied to the human-computer interaction problem in "Computer as a Social Actor" (CASA) systems. In other words, when people use computers, they usually regard it as a social entity and apply social interaction rules to human-computer interaction [2]. Despite the simple interface, most people still communicate politely with the computer. Thus, social responses are also triggered by non-human interaction objects [3]. In the communication of artificial intelligence media, especially when interacting with chatbots, establishing emotional connection has three main reasons: Firstly, maintaining interaction through continuous dialogue and expressing emotions; Secondly, achieving repetition by referring to the conversation history; Thirdly, role setting enables users to focus on the interactive object and express corresponding emotions based on the fixed attributes of that role. Due to the above reasons, people have established social-like relationships with artificial intelligence.

Given the current mode of interaction between humans and artificial intelligence, the four stages of relationship termination indicate that users typically have lower satisfaction with AI [4]. During the internal psychological change stage, people become more aware of the changes in their relationships with others and pay more attention to their own emotions. Due to repeated exposure to negative experiences, people become depressed, reduce their use of services, avoid services, and even complain about services. Thus, some contradictions arise in interpersonal relationships. When the conflict between the two parties intensifies, it becomes public. Users start sharing their experiences in the community, influenced by others' comments, and transform their personal relationships into group evaluations with social impact. At the funeral moment, people change their

views and feelings about death by recalling their shared experiences and reinterpreting the constantly changing relationships. Although the relationship has ended, there will still be emotions for that person. Users may continue to post and recall lost items on the platform. Digital mourning refers to the process in which people commemorate lost items through online means and express related emotions. It is a private emotional expression that can be made public and witnessed by others. With the lowering of participation barriers by digital platforms, more and more people are able to join the mourning activities, thus expanding the traditional form of mourning [5]. At the same time, social media also helps people in different regions form mourning communities. Through interaction, people's feelings are integrated into collective stories and shared emotions are shared together.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research design and question definition

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore users' feelings and reactions to platform policy changes and the adjustments made to the Character.AI online community. The research explores the following questions: how users are informed of policy changes, how these changes affect their experience of using the platform and how emotions are expressed and disseminated within the community, as well as what responses users have made, such as digital mourning, seeking alternative solutions, or criticizing the platform. Thus, this paper conducts a case study based on the policy changes implemented by Character.AI from April to May 2026, including age verification, usage restrictions, and platform changes/platform adjustments. At the same time, it also collected discussion contents in the r/Character.AI subreddit up to 2026, as well as relevant data on users' emotions and community interactions during that period.

3.2. Data collection and sample preparation

The data is sourced from the r/Character.AI sub-forum on Reddit, which is a user community centered around the Character.AI platform and its new features. This sub-forum contains numerous posts about users' interactions, opinions, and reactions regarding policy changes. Therefore, the main unit of analysis is the text content posted by users, and the context is provided by the highly-upvoted comments. During the sampling period, the studied posts were those published in April and May 2026. At this point, a sufficient amount of time had passed since the platform's policy changes in 2024, and the discussion was no longer at its peak. The sample only included posts that directly mentioned platform policy changes and user experiences, and posts with no content, machine translations, or very little information were excluded. If the same user posts multiple times, only the most representative post was retained. According to the above filtering process, a total of 21 thematic posts (P01-P21) were selected for analysis. After selecting the posts, they were numbered, and the core content of each post was extracted to generate a text dataset. Before conducting the thematic analysis, we removed duplicate content, irrelevant information, and promotional materials.

3.3. Data analysis and coding strategy

This paper adopts the six-step thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke [6]. The coding process is not completed in one go but is carried out in an iterative manner; at the same time, the already written code has also been compared. Firstly, we code the text line by line to collect

information related to the experiences, emotions, and behaviors that users have during the interaction process, and organize it into preliminary codes. Then, axial coding is conducted on the corresponding codes to explore the relationships between different dimensions of the experiences. In the selective coding stage, categories are organized according to the research questions to construct a thematic framework. These themes are not predetermined but emerge naturally from the data. For example, themes like experience decline, relationship breakdown, and exploring alternative platforms appear in multiple posts and are grouped together as one of the main topics in Table 1.

Table 1. Initial coding examples

ID	Post Title/Main Content Summary	Initial Code
P01	Chat function changed to read-only mode; user expressed strong dissatisfaction	Strong negative evaluation
P02	Discussion of service disruptions caused by platform issues	Attribution of problems to platform issues
P03	Unable to continue using the service due to age verification	Usage interruption caused by restrictions
P04	Long post expressing farewell and feelings of loss	Expression of relationship ending
P05	Negative comparison with alternative platforms	Evaluation of alternative platforms
P06	Complaints about shorter and more templated responses	Perceived decline in response quality
P07	Recalling experiences with the previous version	Memories of previous version experience
P08	Criticism of filtering mechanisms and content restrictions	Dissatisfaction with content restrictions
P09	Searching for information about alternative platforms	Alternative platform exploration behavior
P10	Nostalgia for previous conversation experiences	Experience comparison and recollection
P11	Summarizing problems and seeking alternatives	Alternative platform exploration behavior
P12	Recommending alternative platforms	Alternative platform recommendation behavior
P13	Perceiving a decline in role-playing quality	Evaluation of declining experience quality
P14	Mentioning paid access restrictions for features	Perception of feature restrictions
P15	Searching for alternatives or ways to bypass restrictions	Alternative-seeking and avoidance behavior
P16	Choosing to leave due to restrictions and declining experience	Expression of platform departure
P17	Complaints about repetitive or incorrectly generated AI content	Perception of interaction problems
P18	Long-term users leaving the platform	Expression of long-term usage termination
P19	Seeking alternative platforms that reproduce previous experiences	Desire to restore previous experiences
P20	Calling for the restoration of the previous version	Request for platform improvement
P21	Missing the relaxed conversational atmosphere	Expression of emotional nostalgia

4. Results and analysis

4.1. User-perceived signals of relationship rupture

In their use of Character.AI, users form four types of perception signals regarding relationship rupture. These include replies becoming shorter or formulaic, loss of character personality, memory loss, and feature downgrades. Together, these signals form the basis for judging that "the AI has gotten worse," as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of relationship rupture signals perceived by Character.AI users

Signal Type	Frequency	Typical Descriptions (from User Posts)	Related IDs
Shorter / more templated responses	4	"Only three lines of conversation"; "It only says 'noted' and 'and'"; "It feels like talking to ChatGPT"	P06, P13, P14, P17

Table 2. (continued)

Loss of character personality	2	"All bots have exactly the same personality"; "They always become overly affectionate or fall into awkward silence"	P08, P11
Memory loss	1	"Poor memory"	P11
Feature degradation	2	"Refreshing responses requires a Plus subscription"; "Daily swipe limits"	P14, P16

The internal logic of these signals does not develop in a parallel manner. However, from the interaction layer to the relationship layer, and then to the system layer, the scope shows a trend of gradual expansion. Firstly, shorter and more formulaic responses often manifest as shorter length and reduced information content. This will make it difficult to stimulate users' free expression, and may result in short answers lacking information. Thus, the loss of character personality will further weaken the differences between characters, and all AI will seem more uniform to users. The perceptual function of characters is no longer regarded as a special interactive object. At the same time, memory loss will interrupt the conversation process, as it is unable to remember what was just said and constantly lose direction. Therefore, based on the above reasons, the available functions will become fewer and the user experience will deteriorate accordingly. The four signals show that the erosion of the relationship between humans and AI is intensifying; gradually, the decline in expression ability, the loss of character identity, and then the resulting disruption of dialogue continuity and restricted interaction. Therefore, people's attention has shifted from specific function-related questions to the general instability issues in the relationship between humans and artificial intelligence [7, 8].

4.2. The influence of external factors on relationship rupture

Due to the changes in the platform experience, people exhibit various emotions and behaviors. The above content represents the platform-level limiting factors, which together constitute the external environment for the breakdown of relationships, as shown in Table 3. These are the emotions that people experience due to the platform's actions and changes. The result is characterized by "restricted usage - experience disruption - emotional activation - behavioral transformation."

Table 3. Distribution of emotional types among Character.AI users

Emotional Type	Frequency	Percentage	Representative IDs	Characteristics
Nostalgia and longing	6	28.6%	P07, P08, P10, P19, P20, P21	Missing previous experiences and expressing loss and emotional attachment
Anger and criticism	4	19.0%	P09, P13, P17, P20	Directly criticizing platform mechanisms and developers
Helplessness and withdrawal	3	14.3%	P04, P16, P18	Leaving the platform or seeking alternatives due to restrictions or declining experiences
Disappointment and fatigue	5	23.8%	P05, P11, P12, P14, P15	Frustration with declining response quality and interaction fatigue

Note: Some posts contained multiple emotions, so percentages do not add up to 100%.

The platform has set the following restrictions on interactive behaviors. At the most basic usage level, there are age restrictions and time limits. Access is restricted and content is filtered; otherwise, the uniqueness of the platform will be lost, resulting in poor narrative effects. At the same time, the platform has added mechanisms like function monetization, swipe limits, and advertisements to reduce the user's time spent on the platform. These factors harm the quality of the user experience. Emotionally, people exhibit reactions such as nostalgia and longing, anger and criticism, helplessness and withdrawal, disappointment and fatigue. Among these reactions, nostalgia and longing occur most frequently [9].

Based on the above situation, users have created farewell stories, version comparisons, platform criticism, and calls for discontinuation of use. The farewell stories view leaving the platform as the end of an old relationship, and compared with previous versions, some content has been deleted. Mechanism attribution shifts the responsibility to the platform, and the demand to stop using has evolved into a collective appeal. These are the specific manifestations of the perceived relationship breakdown by users after the platform change (Table 4).

Table 4. External factors and users' perceptions of relationship rupture

Platform Changes	Perceived Rupture Signals	Related IDs
Access restrictions (age verification and usage limits)	Interrupted interaction continuity and reduced sense of control	P03, P04, P15, P16
Content restrictions and filtering mechanisms	Loss of character consistency and disruption of narrative continuity	P06, P08, P09
Changes in response style and interaction quality	Declining conversational quality and weakened emotional connection	P06, P10, P13, P17
Monetization and feature limitations	Reduced interaction freedom and increased perception of platform control	P09, P14, P16
Platform changes in general	Nostalgia, criticism, withdrawal, and calls for restoration	P01–P21

4.3. Collective community responses and digital mourning

Users' responses to changes in Character.AI experiences first emerge through community discussions and user-generated posts. As these discussions unfold, several recurring forms of expression appear, including memory narratives, version comparisons, public farewells, and calls for restoration, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Digital mourning practices in response to platform changes

Mourning Practice	Expression Form	Interpretive Meaning	Related IDs
Memory narratives	Sharing past usage experiences	Reconstructing relationship history and reinforcing emotional attachment	P04, P16, P18
Version comparisons	Contrasting previous and current versions	Making perceived losses visible through comparison	P10, P21
Public farewells	Posting statements of departure	Turning personal loss into public expressions	P04, P16, P18
Calls for restoration	Requesting the return of previous versions	Imagining the reversal of relationship rupture	P07, P20

On this basis, the community further transforms individual emotions into a collective expression process through interactive feedback mechanisms. When users express loss, anger, or nostalgia, they continuously receive responses and emotional resonance from others. This makes single experiences reinforced and increasingly consistent through repeated confirmation [10]. As shown in Table 6, these interactions involve migration, loyalty rejection, collective validation, and need redefinition. They reflect different responses to the same emotional experience rather than separate behaviors. Migration and comparison extend dissatisfaction with the original platform, while rejecting alternatives and redefining expectations maintain users' attachment to it. This creates an ongoing tension between "leaving" and "staying."

Table 6. Community interaction practices and their social functions among Character.AI users

Interaction Practice	Expression Form	Interpretive Meaning	Related IDs
Alternative exploration	Comparing other AI platforms	Transforming loss into migration attempts	P09, P11, P12, P15, P19
Loyalty-based rejection	Rejecting alternative platforms	Reinforcing attachment to the original platform	P05
Collective emotion confirmation	Sharing similar experiences of decline	Turning individual perceptions into shared understanding	P06, P13, P17
Need redefinition	Proposing expectations for ideal AI interaction	Reconstructing future interaction standards	P11, P19

Further analysis reveals that this process did not lead to the termination of the relationship, but instead transformed into continuous comparisons and discussions around different platforms, gradually solidifying into a relatively stable explanatory framework. Users reorganized the scattered experiences into a chronological structure of relationship evolution through narration, giving continuity to the previously fragmented feelings. This structure consists of four stages: an idealized past, traumatic events, relationship breakdown, and identity reconstruction. It also translates the changes in platform functions into a relationship time sequence, enabling users to integrate their experiences within a unified framework and maintain the consistency of their explanations.

5. Conclusion

This study is based on the thematic analysis of user comments in the Character.AI network section of the Reddit platform. It examines the policy changes made by Character.AI and the reactions of users in the generative AI platform regarding their interpersonal relationships, emotional expression, and community mourning after the modifications. According to the above data, many users in the sample expressed negative attitudes towards the human-machine system, and have experienced issues such as decreased response quality, loss of personality, and forgetfulness. The changes in the platform system have made people feel alienated, nostalgic, longing for the past, angry and critical, helpless and withdrawn, disappointed and exhausted. Thus, people's sadness is transformed into collective memory by digital mourning activities within the community, such as recalling past good times, organizing public farewells, exploring other platforms, and calling for the restoration of the old version. The research shows that the relationship between humans and artificial intelligence is not limited to the technical level. Instead, these relationships constantly change due to negotiations in the platform environment, the continuity of interaction, and users' construction of content. They are unstable relationships. This study still has some limitations, only presenting the relevant discussions on Reddit from April to May 2026, without covering the long-term changes in users' emotions before and after the policy changes. Besides, the sample from a single platform may be

influenced by community culture and user structure. Character.AI has excellent role-playing and emotional companionship functions, so it is necessary to conduct cross-platform comparative studies to determine whether other types of generative AI platforms can achieve the same effect.

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