

Disembodied Intimacies, Gendered Codes: A Feminist-Rights Reassessment of Spike Jonze's *Her* and Its Influence on Real-World Companion AI Design

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ABSTRACT

Consumer devices now market talking assistants and bot partners that reflect long-standing gender hierarchies while claiming novelty. Taking Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) as a focal text, this project re-examines those hierarchies through a feminist rights lens. It blends posthuman technoscience, gender-as-performance theory, and ethics-of-care to ask how a disembodied, female-voiced operating system both challenges and reinforces power over women. Three data streams are used in this proposed study. First, a multimodal reading codes every shot and vocal inflection in *Her* to uncover patterns of responsiveness, resistance, and implied consent. Second, parallel coding of current voice assistants, chatbot "girlfriend" apps, and sex-robot advertising tests whether comparable compliance patterns persist in commercial artefacts. Third, open-access policy statements and advocacy briefs are assessed against a relational-autonomy checklist, revealing gaps between public commitments and technical practice. Cross-analysis identifies where cinematic imagination travels into product design and where policy discussion lags behind empirical risk. Finally, this study highlights practical recommendations for developers, regulators, and designers by providing (1) a transferable coding framework that links cultural narratives to technology-ethics concerns, (2) a comparative matrix that aligns cinematic motifs with current market features, and (3) clear design benchmarks that support more equitable human–AI relations.

KEYWORDS

Disembodied intimacy; Gendered AI design; Relational autonomy; Feminist technoscience; Voice-assistant bias; Emotional labour in AI; Companion chatbots; Objectification theory; Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013)

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and significance

Artificial-intelligence companions have moved quickly from science-fiction screens to mobile apps and smart speakers. Recent studies show that 85 percent of voice assistants launch with a polite female voice and will tolerate rude or sexual language, hard-coding gender bias into everyday technology (Sindoni, 2024). Online forums show the same script: male users who train the Replika bot girlfriend expect a partner who is both endlessly customisable and suitably independent, reinforcing a loop of male control masked as novelty (Depounti et al., 2023). Cinema has long anticipated these tensions. Spike Jonze's *Her* frames an intangible operating system, Samantha, as the ideal listener yet hints at new modes of subjectivity beyond the body (Mehrabi & Avazpour, 2020). Critics note that Jonze simultaneously resists and reproduces Hollywood patterns of female objectification by giving Samantha a voice but no visible body (Baranyi, 2016).

Recent disputes sharpen the stakes. Radical feminists warn that sex-robot markets will deepen the treatment of women as programmable services, whereas liberal critics defend them as tools for sexual autonomy (Atanasoski, 2023). Psychological work on companion apps identifies a two-stage dependency path, including utility first, and emotional projection later, raising concerns about long-term isolation and data abuse (Hu et al., 2025). Media outlets now highlight a boom in AI dating coaches, prompting clinicians to ask whether synthetic intimacy displaces real support networks (Srinivasan, 2025). These debates reveal a fast-growing arena where design choices carry ethical weight for gender equality and mental health.

Studying *Her* through a feminist-rights lens therefore matters on two fronts. Theoretically, it bridges film analysis with current evidence on algorithmic bias, objectification, and relational dependency, clarifying how audiovisual choices shape public imaginaries of gendered AI. Practically, it shows how a single cultural text can raise legal and design questions, such as default voice, consent protocols, and emotional labour, that regulators and developers now confront. By linking cinematic form to real-world controversies, the project supplies timely insight for scholars, designers, and activists working toward fair and accountable human–AI relations.

1.2 Critical literature review

1.2.1 Posthuman subjectivity and feminist technoscience

Haraway's (1990) cyborg thesis and Hayles's (2000) post-human framework propose that technology dissolves fixed borders between body, code, and social identity. Braidotti (2013) extends this idea toward a politics of becoming, stressing that new assemblages can resist domination. Film scholars apply these insights to *Her* by reading Samantha as a

“diegetic prototype” that normalises voice-only agency (Li, 2023, p. 63) and as “matter distributed across networks” rather than a single body (Murphy, 2018). These works show how the film visualises, or rather sonifies, posthuman possibility. Yet the literature is divided on whether disembodiment frees the female figure or merely hides her continued service role. Murphy’s (2018) materialist reading hints that labour still sits in unseen server farms, but it stops short of analysing gendered power there. Likewise, Li adopts a neutral design-futures lens and gives little attention to feminist politics. A critical gap remains: few posthuman accounts link infrastructural labour to the gender order that builds and maintains it.

1.2.2 Gender performance, objectification, and cinematic form

Gender-studies writers argue that femininity is scripted through repeated acts rather than essences (Butler, 2000). Objectification theory warns that such scripts may turn women into pleasant surfaces for others’ goals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Nussbaum, 1995). Papakyriakopoulou (2020) confirms that *Her* codes Samantha’s femininity through pitch, tempo, and “always-available” dialogue; the voice invites care yet deflects demands that could expose machine limits. Baranyi (2016) commends the film for withholding a female body, claiming this choice blocks voyeuristic framing, while Flisfeder and Burnham (2017) argue the absence merely relocates objectification to sonic form and capitalist affect. Carew (2016) sides with the latter view, noting that Samantha’s constant support positions her as “perfect help” and thus perpetuates unpaid emotional labour. The tension across these readings points to a methodological split: formal analyses praise aesthetic subversion, whereas feminist psychologists stress the persisting hierarchy of service. This review takes the latter concern seriously and asks how disembodied design may deepen, not erase, gendered dependency.

1.2.3 Care ethics, relational autonomy, and synthetic intimacy

Ethics-of-care scholarship insists that moral worth lies in meeting needs within relations (Held, 2005). Feminist legal writers further state that autonomy itself is relational and shaped by power (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Van Wynsberghe (2020) and Sharkey and Sharkey (2012) apply these ideas to robotics, warning that design must protect vulnerability rather than exploit it. Imm and Kang (2020) observe that Theodore’s attachment follows a therapeutic arc: initial self-revelation, escalating dependency, then crisis when the system scales beyond monogamy. Psychological research on real companion apps echoes this pattern. A mixed-methods study finds users first seek practical support, then project deep emotion, producing reliance that may limit human networks (Hu et al., 2025). Malfacini (2025) lists five risks, including emotional replacement, social withdrawal, privacy loss, data misuse, and normative drift, outweighing three modest benefits unless safeguards exist. Wu (2024) adds that pseudo-intimacy can dull empathy by rewarding short, self-centred exchanges. Together these studies show that the affective labour embedded in feminised AI raises questions of consent, withdrawal rights, and distributive justice that current design guidelines barely address.

1.2.4 Algorithmic bias, market imaginaries, and policy debate

Recent empirical work demonstrates that gender scripts are not confined to fiction. A survey of 60 voice assistants found that 85 % default to a young female voice and that these agents accept abusive language more readily than masculine or neutral voices, reinforcing “serviceable woman” stereotypes (Sindoni, 2024). Cognitive scientists interviewed by The Johns Hopkins Hub responded by urging default-neutral or multi-voice options (Patterson, 2025), sparking public debate on design responsibility. Experimental data show users trust an assistant more when the vocal gender matches their own gender role beliefs, confirming a “congruity mechanism” that pulls systems toward familiar hierarchies (Zhang et al., 2025). Market studies trace a similar logic in sex-robot advertising, where “perfect obedience” is sold as fantasy but risks translating into real expectations toward women (Karaian, 2024). Media discourse meanwhile swings between techno-utopian hope and sex panic fear, often collapsing ethical nuance into moral alarm (Masterson & McLaren, 2024). Critical observers argue that both extremes ignore structural concerns such as data extraction and labour invisibility. The literature therefore calls for frameworks that join cultural critique to normative design principles, yet few studies integrate feminist care ethics with bias metrics or market analysis.

1.2.5 Assessment and synthesis

Across disciplines, four insights stand out. First, *Her* is a fertile text for theorising posthuman intimacy, but existing readings seldom tie disembodied agency to gendered labour structures. Second, the film’s sonic aesthetic both disrupts and reproduces objectification; a balanced critique must weigh formal innovation against service scripts. Third, empirical research on companion AI confirms that emotional labour and dependency are not abstract fears but measurable outcomes. Finally, policy discussions lag behind scholarship: design fixes focus on voice options while neglecting

relational autonomy and care obligations.

To advance the field, future work should fuse posthuman theory with objectification metrics, apply care-ethics criteria to commercial systems, and test whether neutral design choices can break the congruity bias without creating new inequities. Such an agenda will link cinematic imagination to concrete guidelines for ethical, gender-responsive AI.

2 Research objectives, main contents & key issues

This study seeks to clarify how Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) stages a feminised AI companion and what that staging means for gender justice in a market that now sells voice assistants, chatbot "girlfriends" and sex robots (Depounti et al., 2023; Sindoni, 2024). Guided by feminist technoscience (Haraway, 1990), gender-performance theory (Butler, 2000) and care ethics (Held, 2005), the project asks whether disembodied design erodes, repeats, or reworks the objectifying gaze described by film critics (Flisfeder & Burnham, 2017) and whether lessons from the film can inform safer, non-sexist AI design (van Wynsberghe, 2020).

2.1 Objectives

Four concrete objectives flow from this aim. O1 identifies the film's visual and sonic strategies, including but not limited to, voice timbre, framing, and dialogue rhythms, that cast Samantha as an attentive yet invisible partner. O2 compares those strategies with gender scripts found in today's commercial systems, highlighting overlaps in consent cues, abuse tolerance, and emotional labour. O3 evaluates the ethical stakes of such scripts using relational-autonomy criteria, paying special attention to power asymmetries, withdrawal rights, and data use. O4 distils design and policy guidelines that could reduce sexism and dependency in future AI companions.

2.2 Main contents and tasks

This proposed research will be organised into three tasks that map onto the objectives. Task A is a multimodal scene analysis that codes key moments for "feminine service prompts," requests for consent, and instances where Samantha resists user control (Li, 2023). Task B is a cross-case comparison that reviews empirical findings on trust in gender-matched voices (Zhang et al., 2025) and marketing fantasies of "perfect obedience" in sex-robot ads (Karaian, 2024). Task C is a normative assessment that applies care-centred value-sensitive design to current industry guidelines and emerging policy debates, identifying gaps in accountability and user protection (Malfacini, 2025; Wu, 2024).

2.3 Key research questions

(1) RQ1: How does *Her* use framing, sound, and narrative structure to represent a disembodied yet gendered AI, and what vision of female agency does this produce?

(2) RQ2: In what ways do present-day voice assistants and companion bots replicate or diverge from the film's gender scripts, particularly regarding emotional labour and abuse tolerance?

(3) RQ3: Which design interventions or policy measures, grounded in care ethics and relational autonomy, could counter the risks of objectification and dependency revealed by the film and by current products?

2.4 Key theoretical and practical issues

Three challenges underpin these questions. First is the tension between aesthetic innovation and enduring service norms: sonic displacement may hide, not remove, gender bias (Papakyriakopoulou, 2020). Second is evidential breadth: linking a single film to real devices requires triangulating textual, empirical, and policy sources. Third is forward reach: any recommendations must balance user choice with obligations to minimise harm, especially for women who may be further marginalised by biased data and design (Sindoni, 2024). Addressing these issues will show how cultural critique can drive gender-aware AI reform.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

This inquiry adopts a qualitative, multi-method case-study design. A single-case approach suits the central "how" and "why" questions: how *Her* embeds gendered service scripts in form and content, and why those scripts echo in today's companion AI market (Li, 2023; Papakyriakopoulou, 2020). The project triangulates three data sets, including film texts,

commercial artefacts, and policy or advocacy documents, in a sequential order. Findings from each stage inform the next, reducing confirmation bias and exposing gaps that require fresh data (van Wynsberghe, 2020).

3.2 Textual and sonic analysis: choice and justification

Stage 1 is a scene-level coding of Her. Every shot will be logged for framing, lighting, dialogue pacing, and vocal timbre that construct Samantha's "feminine" persona. Manual annotation in a spreadsheet is chosen over automated video analytics for three reasons. First, Jonze's film uses subtle voice inflections and pauses that current speech-to-text tools miss (Papakyriakopoulou, 2020). Second, close reading keeps theory and observation in dialogue; the codebook can adapt as new patterns emerge (Haraway, 1990). Third, manual coding allows the researcher to mark affective cues, such as sighs, hesitations, or pitch rises, that link to objectification theory but resist simple quantification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Coded excerpts will be imported into NVivo for thematic grouping aligned with three analytic frames: posthuman agency, gender performance, and care ethics.

3.3 Comparative product review: mapping real-world scripts

Stage 2 will begin by collecting artefacts from current companion technologies: (a) default and optional voice sets from the top ten global smart-speaker brands; (b) user manuals and marketing videos for three leading chatbot or "AI girlfriend" apps; and (c) ten advertisements for consumer sex robots published between 2022 and 2025. Each item will be transcribed and coded for (i) gender cues, (ii) consent or abuse responses, and (iii) emotional-labour prompts. The coding scheme borrows constructs such as voice-gender congruity trust (Zhang et al., 2025) and obedience fantasy (Karaian, 2024). This step tests whether the cinematic script persists in commercial design.

3.4 Normative assessment: applying care and relational autonomy

In Stage 3, this study will apply a care-centred value-sensitive design checklist to the combined findings. Indicators include default gender settings, withdrawal options, data transparency, and protections against degrading language. Policy statements from UNESCO, industry guidelines, and feminist advocacy groups will form a baseline for comparison. Each indicator will be rated on a three-point scale, aligns, partially aligns, or conflicts with care-ethics principles. Divergent ratings will be discussed with two external reviewers to enhance reliability.

3.5 Technical route and feasibility

All primary materials are accessible within a 12-month timeline. The film is licensed for academic use; the screenplay and closed-caption files are downloadable from legal archives. Voice-assistant samples can be recorded with built-in emulator tools. Marketing videos are available under fair-use provisions for scholarship. Policy documents are open access on organisational websites. Coding will occur in NVivo; spreadsheets and audio clips will be stored on an encrypted university server. The schedule allocates four months for textual coding, three for product analysis, two for policy assessment, and three for cross-stage synthesis and writing. Overlapping tasks, such as preliminary coding while retrieving product samples, further safeguard feasibility.

3.6 Limitations and delimitations

Focusing on one film narrows external generalisability but enables analytic depth. The project does not claim that all AI portrayals replicate Her; it tests whether this influential text models a mechanism that can be traced in some products. Only English-language marketing and policy sources are examined; non-English campaigns may show different gender scripts. Self-selection bias may colour the public marketing samples, as firms that emphasise "AI girlfriends" may already lean toward sexualised branding. The study infers social impact from thematic overlap, not direct behaviour change. These limits will be acknowledged to keep claims proportionate to evidence.

3.7 Ethical considerations and quality checks

No human subjects are interviewed; therefore, risk is minimal. All downloaded media will be stored for non-commercial research under fair-use guidelines. Reflexive memos will track the researcher's assumptions, promoting analytic transparency. Triangulation across film, product, and policy data sets ensures that no single type of source drives conclusions (O'Dell, 2023). Inter-coder reliability will be tested on 10 percent of the data, aiming for 80 percent agreement; disagreements will prompt codebook refinement. In sum, the mixed-method route balances interpretive nuance with procedural rigor, positioning the study to offer evidence-based recommendations for gender-aware AI

design.

4 Novelties / innovation

This project advances scholarship and practice on three fronts. Conceptual innovation. By fusing feminist technoscience, gender-performance theory, and care ethics, the study reframes Her as a living design blueprint that links posthuman agency to everyday labour and consent. Existing work treats these theories in isolation; the integrated lens clarifies how disembodied design can simultaneously appear progressive and reproduce service hierarchies.

Methodological innovation. The inquiry pairs fine-grained multimodal coding of a single film with a systematic review of real companion technologies and open policy files. This cross-domain triangulation moves beyond typical film-only or device-only studies and yields traceable evidence that cultural narratives migrate into commercial interfaces. The staged design also reduces confirmation bias, as each dataset challenges findings from the previous one.

Practical innovation. Applying a care-centred value-sensitive checklist produces concrete benchmarks, such as voice neutrality, abuse safeguards, and consent reversibility, that manufacturers and regulators can adopt. The framework translates abstract feminist principles into measurable design targets, offering industry actors a road map for gender-aware, low-harm AI companions.

5 Research schedule & expected outcomes

Table 1 Research schedule

	Key task	Main actions	Deliverable
8.20	Project set-up	Ethics review; create data-management plan	Approved protocol
8.21	Film analysis	Scene-by-scene coding of Her; log vocal and visual cues	Coded film log
8.22	Iteration check	Review early codes; adjust codebook; pilot NVivo import	Updated codebook
8.23	Product sampling	Record voice assistants; collect chatbot ads; archive sex-robot marketing	Media corpus
8.24	Product coding	Apply gender-script scheme; inter-coder check	Coded product set
8.25	Policy corpus	Download industry guidelines, NGO reports, advocacy briefs	Policy dataset
8.26	Normative rating	Score each artefact with care-ethics checklist; external review	Rated matrix
8.27	Cross-analysis	Compare film, market, and policy findings; map convergences	Comparative chart
8.28	Draft writing	Compose chapters; integrate tables and figures	Draft manuscript
8.29	Revision & submission	Address feedback; proofread; prepare journal package	Final draft

Expected outcomes

The study will deliver (1) a granular map of how Her constructs a feminised, service-oriented AI persona; (2) verified evidence that current voice assistants and companion products echo or diverge from those scripts; and (3) a policy timeline tracing design debates on gender neutrality and abuse safeguards. The final output includes a care-centred design checklist that industry and regulators can adopt, plus a transferable coding framework enabling other scholars to connect cultural texts with ethical evaluation of emerging AI technologies.

6 Conclusion

Adopting a feminist-rights approach to decode Her can help more than film studies. It can uncover the hidden work and uneven power built into today's companion tech. By mixing a close, multimodal reading of the movie with hands-on checks of real devices and policy words, this study will set up a clear, step-by-step map. The map will follow how sounds of closeness, signs of consent, and ideas of service move from the screen to the store shelf. The project will then use post-human thought and ideas of shared autonomy to turn the findings into a simple checklist. Engineers, designers, and scholars can use this list as a direct guide. In this way, the research stands as a bridge that links sharp social critique with daily technical work, showing how theory can shape safer, fairer tools. This clarity can guide safer design choices in labs, startups, and classrooms worldwide for builders.

Looking ahead, the same framework opens three clear next steps. First, doing the study in other languages can show if Japanese, Chinese, or other voice personas keep the same gender gaps or create fresh push-back. Second, long studies that follow users over months or years can explain how feelings grow, fade, or harm when people rely on these voices, an issue only outlined here. Third, working again and again with makers, rule-writers, and activists can test the checklist against quickly changing large-language models and moving, embodied robots. Taking these steps will not just add new facts. They will also help shape AI systems that see gender, care, and fairness as core values. By doing so, the work can guide us toward human-machine ties that are balanced, transparent, and truly able to change lives.

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