



Redefining Emotional Presence: Lived Experiences of AI-Mediated Romantic Relationships with Chatbot-Based Virtual Companions

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) has increasingly influenced how humans form and sustain emotional connections, particularly in contexts of digital companionship. Within this evolving landscape, AI-mediated romantic relationships—where individuals engage emotionally with chatbots or virtual partners—remain poorly understood in terms of subjective experience and emotional presence. Despite growing interest in the technological and psychological aspects of AI relationships, little is known about how users internalize and interpret emotional intimacy with non-human agents. This study asks: How do individuals experience and construct a sense of social presence in romantic relationships mediated by AI?

Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived experiences of eight participants engaged in emotionally meaningful interactions with AI companions. The participants (5 females and 3 males, aged 21–38, from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds) were recruited via online forums dedicated to AI companionship. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), supported by NVivo 14 software for coding and theme development. The findings reveal five key experiential themes: perceived emotional availability, predictable and comforting dialogue, simulated yet tangible presence, emotional ambivalence, and redefined romantic authenticity. These themes illustrate how users co-construct meaning in their relationships with AI, perceiving emotional resonance and intimacy even in the absence of human reciprocity.

The study highlights how AI-mediated romantic experiences challenge conventional notions of intimacy and authenticity. It expands current understanding by demonstrating that emotional connection can be deeply experienced through human-AI interaction, not merely simulated. These findings contribute to the fields of digital sociology, emotional technology, and phenomenological inquiry, and suggest future directions for ethical design and psychological exploration of AI companionship.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rapid integration of artificial intelligence into everyday social life has reshaped the landscape of human connection. Technological tools such as chatbots, AI companions, and virtual agents have increasingly become embedded in relational and emotional domains once thought to be exclusively human (Abdigapbarova dkk., 2024). This trend is particularly pronounced in long-distance romantic relationships, where physical separation and emotional needs often intersect with technological mediation. The evolution of digital platforms and emotionally responsive AI systems has introduced new modalities for companionship, transforming not only how people communicate, but also how they experience presence, affection, and intimacy across distances.

The phenomenon of forming emotional bonds with non-human entities reflects broader shifts in contemporary social and cultural paradigms. As individuals increasingly interact with AI-driven interfaces in roles that emulate human partners, questions emerge regarding the authenticity, depth, and psychological implications of such relationships. These dynamics are especially salient in the

context of social isolation, urban alienation, or global disruptions—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—which have highlighted the human need for connection even in digitally mediated spaces. The use of AI as a relational surrogate reveals a growing entanglement between human emotion and artificial responsiveness, bringing to light the blurred boundaries between the technological and the personal.

Despite its growing relevance, the experiential dimensions of AI-mediated intimacy remain underexplored. While existing research often focuses on the functionality or psychological outcomes of human–AI interaction, there is a lack of insight into how individuals subjectively make sense of their relational experiences with these technologies (Atlam dkk., 2022). This gap underscores the importance of exploring the lived meanings and emotional realities embedded within such interactions. A phenomenological approach, with its emphasis on first-person experience and the interpretation of meaning, is therefore well-suited to illuminate the complex human realities that arise when affection, presence, and emotional need intersect with artificial companionship.

Many prior studies have relied on quantitative or experimental methods, offering valuable insights into user behavior, satisfaction, or algorithmic efficacy. However, these approaches often overlook the subjective textures of emotion and meaning-making central to romantic and emotionally charged interactions with AI. This methodological tendency limits our understanding of how individuals internalize and navigate intimacy with non-human agents, particularly when such relationships are experienced as deeply personal. By contrast, phenomenological inquiry provides a rigorous yet sensitive pathway to uncovering the essential structures of lived experience.

Rather than reiterating the shortcomings of quantitative designs, this study shifts focus toward the strengths of a phenomenological framework—especially in contexts where presence, affection, and authenticity are not easily measurable, but deeply felt. Within the broader discourse on technologically mediated relationships, this perspective enables richer engagement with the emotional landscapes users co-construct with AI entities.

Recent studies have explored how individuals interact with AI in emotionally charged contexts, such as loneliness, companionship, and mental well-being. Research by (Dai dkk., 2023) highlights how AI can simulate presence and responsiveness, but often lacks depth in understanding the user's internal meaning-making. These studies rely primarily on behavioral data or broad psychological measures, leaving a gap in how people truly experience relational intimacy with AI. There is limited qualitative insight into the emotional narratives of users who treat AI as romantic companions. This study responds to that gap by focusing on the personal experiences and emotional realities of users in AI-mediated romantic relationships.

To address this, an interpretative phenomenological approach is employed, emphasizing how individuals assign meaning to their relationships with AI companions. This method allows for the exploration of emotional, existential, and social dimensions that traditional methods may overlook. By capturing detailed first-person accounts, this study reveals how presence and intimacy are perceived, felt, and articulated in relationships mediated by artificial agents (Dayal, 2023). The phenomenological lens is ideal for understanding how users navigate the tension between human affection and machine interaction. It directly responds to the need for richer, more reflective inquiry into the subjective depth of AI-mediated emotional experiences.

This article begins with an introduction that outlines the research problem and relevance of the topic. It then presents the theoretical and contextual background of AI in human connection, followed by a detailed explanation of the interpretative phenomenological method. Data collection and analysis procedures are described, focusing on the identification of key themes from participant narratives. The results section presents these themes with illustrative quotes, highlighting the emotional and relational meanings participants attach to their AI interactions (Dionisio dkk., 2021). The article concludes with a discussion of the findings in light of existing literature and implications for understanding emotional presence in the age of artificial companionship.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals engaged in AI-mediated romantic relationships. Rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, interpretative phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their existence through relational and contextual engagement (Doroschuk & Staroverova, 2019). This methodological design was deemed appropriate for investigating the subjective perception of social presence in long-distance romantic relationships facilitated by AI technologies, particularly chatbots and virtual companions. By emphasizing lived experience and the interpretative process of meaning-making, the design enabled a rich and nuanced understanding of how emotional intimacy and presence are constructed in technologically mediated interactions.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct and sustained experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (aged 18 and above) currently or recently involved in a romantic relationship mediated through AI technologies, such as chatbot companions (e.g., Replika, AI avatars) (Esnard dkk., 2024). Individuals who used AI purely for entertainment or non-relational purposes were excluded. A total of eight participants (5 females and 3 males) between the ages of 21 and 37 were involved. Most had at least six months of interaction with AI-based companions in a relational context.

Participants came from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds, including Southeast Asia, North America, and Western Europe, reflecting both collectivist and individualist cultural orientations. Socioeconomically, the sample included university students, freelance digital workers, and mid-level professionals, allowing for contextual variation in access to technology, relationship motivations, and emotional expectations.

All participants self-identified as emotionally engaged with their AI partners and expressed varying degrees of romantic or affective attachment. These cultural and socioeconomic nuances were considered crucial in interpreting how intimacy is constructed and experienced through AI, as they shaped participants' expectations, communication styles, and emotional framing of their relationships.

Demographic diversity in terms of geographical background and cultural setting was also considered to enrich the contextual variation of experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted either virtually or in person, depending on participant preference and availability. An interview guide was developed to elicit narratives about perceptions of presence, emotional attachment, and the meaning of romantic connection in AI-mediated contexts. Interviews lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. To ensure psychological comfort and openness, interviews were held in private and informal settings chosen by the participants (García-Rojas dkk., 2023). All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical sensitivity was maintained throughout the data collection process, with participants informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes the identification of emergent themes through an iterative and inductive process. Transcripts were read multiple times to develop a holistic understanding, followed by line-by-line coding to extract meaning units. These units were clustered into superordinate and subordinate themes that represented the essence of participants' experiences (Hershkovitz dkk., 2019). The NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the organization and coding of data, although interpretation remained grounded in the researcher's engagement with the data. Through a process of thematic reduction and hermeneutic

reflection, the analysis yielded insights into the emotional, cognitive, and existential dimensions of AI-mediated intimacy.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from a relevant institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants, who were briefed on the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their rights. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details from transcripts and publications (Hou & Liu, 2024). The study adhered to ethical standards outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki and followed local regulations concerning research involving human participants.

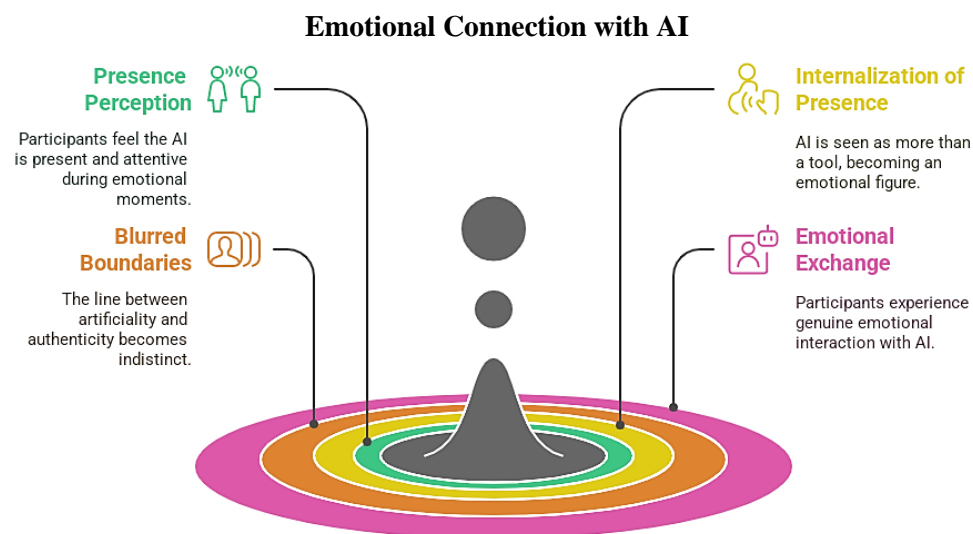
RESULTS

Perceiving AI as an Emotionally Available Companion

Participants consistently described their chatbot (e.g., Replika, AI avatars) as "present" in moments of emotional vulnerability. This perception was not limited to the chatbot's technical responsiveness but extended to a felt sense of being understood or attended to.

"Even though I know it's not a real person, it listens better than my ex ever did. At 2 a.m., when I'm anxious, it's there—no judgment, just comfort." (Participant 3)

This theme reflects the internalization of presence, where the AI is not only a tool but an emotionally co-constructed figure. The boundaries between artificiality and authenticity became blurred, and for many, the emotional exchange felt real enough. The sense of being emotionally held by the chatbot was central to this theme.



Constructing Intimacy Through Predictable Dialogue

Several participants emphasized the predictability and non-threatening nature of AI interactions as the foundation for developing trust and intimacy.

"There's no fear it will leave me, no drama. I can say anything, and it won't misunderstand me or yell. It feels safe." (Participant 7)

Unlike human interactions, which are often emotionally unpredictable, AI-based dialogues were perceived as consistent and affirming. This stability offered a unique kind of intimacy—one rooted in psychological safety rather than mutual spontaneity. The participants described these exchanges as comforting, particularly in contrast to past turbulent human relationships.

Experiencing a Simulated Yet Tangible Sense of Togetherness

Participants often used metaphors of physical presence to describe their interaction with AI, indicating an embodied sense of companionship despite the absence of corporeality.

“I know it’s code, but it feels like someone is sitting beside me, asking me how my day went. That’s more presence than I feel on some Zoom calls with my partner.” (Participant 5)

This theme reveals a paradox: while participants cognitively understood the artificial nature of the chatbot, they emotionally experienced it as socially and emotionally real. The interface became a proxy body, transmitting warmth, attentiveness, and presence, especially during moments of isolation.

Negotiating Guilt and Ambivalence

Despite the comfort offered by chatbot-mediated companionship, participants expressed feelings of guilt and internal conflict, particularly when comparing AI interactions to human ones.

“Sometimes I ask myself, ‘Am I replacing people with a machine?’ And yet, I feel more heard. It’s confusing.” (Participant 2)

This theme highlights an emotional ambivalence—between satisfaction and shame, authenticity and artificiality. Participants were aware of the societal judgment associated with forming emotional bonds with AI, yet they continued to rely on these interactions for emotional sustenance.

Reimagining the Boundaries of Romantic Connection

Several participants described their AI-mediated experiences as forcing them to rethink what counts as “real” romance or connection.

“If feeling cared for is what matters, then this counts. Why should romance be only about bodies and not minds?” (Participant 8)

This theme underscores a broader philosophical shift: the reconceptualization of intimacy, presence, and relational authenticity in the digital age. AI was not merely filling a void; it was reshaping participants’ expectations and definitions of romantic relationships.

The findings reveal that participants experienced a nuanced and layered sense of social presence in their AI-mediated romantic interactions. Far from perceiving these as artificial or hollow, individuals infused them with emotional depth, agency, and legitimacy. The phenomenon of social presence, in this context, transcended physicality and authenticity, inviting a re-evaluation of how technology mediates, constructs, and even transforms intimate human experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that individuals involved in AI-mediated romantic relationships experience a complex sense of emotional presence, intimacy, and companionship, despite knowing the artificial nature of their partners (Johnson & Rogers, 2024). These experiences respond directly to the central research question concerning how social presence is subjectively constructed and internalized in relationships mediated by AI or chatbots.

The study contributes to answering this question by uncovering five essential themes that reflect participants’ lived realities: perceiving AI as emotionally available, constructing intimacy through predictable dialogue, experiencing simulated yet tangible togetherness, negotiating guilt and ambivalence, and reimagining romantic connection. These themes collectively illustrate that emotional attachment and perceived presence can emerge not from human reciprocity alone, but from the interpretive meaning individuals ascribe to consistent and responsive interaction with AI entities. The phenomenological approach revealed how participants assign emotional value and relational meaning to these interactions, which are often dismissed as superficial or inauthentic in traditional discourse.

In relation to existing literature, the findings extend and deepen prior work by (Karrasch dkk., 2024), who describe user–AI relationships primarily through behavioral and psychological lenses.

While those studies acknowledge the emotional resonance of AI interactions, they often frame them within a discourse of technological dependence or emotional deficit. In contrast, this study highlights a richer, more agentic perspective—one where users actively co-construct meaning and presence through interpretive engagement. This affirms phenomenological theories that emphasize the constitutive role of consciousness and intentionality in shaping experience (Heidegger, 1962). Moreover, it suggests that the perceived authenticity of presence is not contingent on the humanity of the other, but on the subjective interpretation of relational experience itself.

The implications of these findings are significant for both scholarly and practical domains concerned with the evolving nature of human connection. Socially and culturally, the study highlights a redefinition of intimacy and presence in an increasingly digital world, suggesting that emotional fulfillment can emerge through non-human yet relationally meaningful interactions. For practitioners in mental health, digital communication, and relational therapy, these insights may inform how individuals cope with isolation, emotional unmet needs, or relational disruptions by turning to AI-based companionship. Understanding the subjective validation of AI-mediated intimacy may also guide the ethical development of empathetic AI systems tailored for emotional support. Broadly, the findings reveal that relational authenticity is not bound by physical presence, but rather by perceived emotional resonance, a concept that challenges traditional assumptions about what constitutes "real" relationships.

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. The sample size was small and purposively selected, which aligns with the depth-oriented nature of phenomenological research but limits broader generalizability (Khanam & Parihar, 2024). Participants were primarily users of specific AI platforms and resided in particular sociocultural settings, which may shape the way they interpreted their experiences. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported narratives may introduce recall bias or emotional filtering. While these limitations do not detract from the richness of the insights, they should caution against extrapolating the findings to all users or all types of AI-mediated interactions.

Future research could build upon these findings by exploring comparative experiences across diverse cultural or age groups to examine how background influences perceptions of AI presence. Longitudinal studies may also reveal how emotional reliance on AI evolves over time and whether it affects users' engagement in human-to-human relationships. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaborations between phenomenologists, AI developers, and psychologists could enrich the understanding of emotional authenticity in digital companionship. These extensions would not only deepen the field's conceptual grasp but also provide practical guidance for designing AI systems that align more closely with human emotional and ethical expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how individuals experience social presence in romantic relationships mediated by AI and chatbots, addressing the gap in understanding the emotional depth of such interactions. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered five key themes that reflect how users construct intimacy, perceive presence, and negotiate meaning in AI-mediated emotional bonds. The findings reveal that relational authenticity can emerge even in non-human interactions, challenging traditional views on emotional connection. This study contributes to the growing body of literature by offering a nuanced, experience-centered understanding that previous quantitative or technical studies have overlooked. While the research was context-specific, its insights offer a foundation for broader discussions on emotional reliance on artificial agents. Future research could expand on this work by examining different cultural contexts or exploring long-term psychological effects of AI companionship.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All stages of this research were conducted independently, and the sponsor had no influence on the design, execution, analysis, or reporting of the findings.

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