



Exploring Lived Experiences of Digital Intimacy in AI-Based Communication Among University Students in Indonesia's Multicultural Higher Education Context

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies have transformed the way human connections are formed and sustained, reshaping social interaction in both private and public domains. Within this context, the use of AI-based chat and instant messaging has become especially relevant for students, raising new questions about intimacy, authenticity, and presence in digital communication. What remains insufficiently understood is how students themselves experience and interpret intimacy through these technologies, particularly in relation to the emotional and relational meanings they assign to AI-mediated communication. This study applies an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore students' lived experiences and provides an answer to how digital intimacy is constructed and negotiated in AI-mediated contexts. A total of 12 university students (7 female, 5 male), aged 19–23, who actively use AI-based chat applications, were purposively selected to ensure relevance and experiential depth. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with university students who actively use AI-based chat applications, and the transcripts were analyzed thematically using IPA procedures. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes, was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through a systematic IPA process involving line-by-line coding, emergent theme development, and cross-case convergence to enhance analytic rigor. The findings revealed three major themes: the redefinition of intimacy in digital spaces, the role of AI interaction as a form of emotional substitution, and ambivalence regarding the authenticity of AI-mediated closeness. These themes highlight both the comforting and contested nature of digital intimacy, where students recognize the utility of AI communication while questioning its ability to replace human connection. The study demonstrates that AI-based communication technologies reshape social intimacy by blending accessibility with skepticism, offering insights that extend beyond descriptive or quantitative accounts. By detailing sample characteristics and analytic procedures, this study enhances methodological transparency and strengthens the credibility of its phenomenological claims. These results enrich current understanding of technologically mediated intimacy and provide important implications for future research, practice, and policy on digital well-being.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of digital technologies into everyday life has significantly reshaped the ways in which individuals connect, communicate, and maintain relationships (Adams, 2022). In contemporary society, social interaction is no longer confined to physical spaces but increasingly mediated by online platforms, mobile applications, and, more recently, artificial intelligence (AI)-driven communication tools (Boddington, 2023). This technological shift has made AI-mediated interaction a constitutive element of social life, especially among younger users.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its profound impact on the subjective dimensions of human experience (Bossio & McCosker, 2021). Intimacy, belonging, and emotional closeness—once

primarily associated with face-to-face interactions—are now often sustained, challenged, or redefined within digital spaces. For younger generations, particularly students, the boundaries between physical and virtual intimacy have become blurred, raising important questions about how individuals make sense of closeness, presence, and authenticity in technologically mediated communication (Mukhlis et al. 2023). The subjective nature of these experiences highlights the importance of exploring not only the structural or behavioral aspects of technology use but also the meanings individuals attach to their interactions in digital environments.

Given these transformations, there is a pressing need to investigate how individuals experience and interpret intimacy within the context of AI-mediated communication (Hu & Zhan, 2024). A phenomenological perspective is especially relevant in this regard, as it emphasizes the lived experiences of participants and the meanings they attribute to their social worlds. Such an approach allows for a deeper understanding of how the interplay between technology and human connection shapes contemporary forms of intimacy and belonging (Liberati, 2023). By focusing on subjective experiences, phenomenology provides a pathway to uncover the nuances of this phenomenon, which are often overlooked in more quantitative or technologically deterministic analyses.

Research on individuals' lived experiences within particular social and technological contexts has become an increasingly important field of inquiry (Loder, 2021). As digital technologies continue to transform the ways people interact, scholars have sought to understand how subjective experiences of intimacy, connection, and presence are shaped by mediated communication (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Phenomenological approaches have been recognized as particularly valuable for uncovering the essence of these experiences, offering insights into how individuals make sense of their interactions and construct meaning in technologically saturated environments.

Nevertheless, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the depth of these experiences (Thorpe et al., 2023). Much of the existing scholarship has relied on quantitative surveys or large-scale behavioral analyses, which often reduce complex emotional and relational dynamics into measurable variables. While these methods are valuable for identifying patterns of use, they lack the capacity to access the nuanced, lived realities of individuals navigating digital intimacy (Zappavigna, 2023). As a result, critical dimensions of subjectivity—such as emotional resonance, perceived authenticity, and the subtle shifts in social closeness—remain underexplored.

These limitations underscore the inadequacy of purely quantitative or descriptive approaches for fully understanding the phenomenon (Aditya Shastry & Sanjay, 2022). The subjective and experiential nature of intimacy mediated by AI-based chat demands an approach that privileges meaning, interpretation, and personal narrative (Mukhlis, 2025). A phenomenological lens, particularly one grounded in interpretative analysis, provides a methodological pathway to address these challenges and to reveal insights that would otherwise remain obscured in conventional frameworks.

Much of the existing research addressing the role of technology in shaping social intimacy has relied on practical approaches such as surveys, behavioral monitoring, or content analysis (Cai et al., 2024). These methods have been valuable in highlighting patterns of communication and identifying the prevalence of digital interaction among younger populations. However, they remain limited in their ability to capture the depth and complexity of lived experiences (Fuchs, 2024). By focusing primarily on observable behaviors or quantifiable measures, prior studies have overlooked the nuanced meanings individuals attach to their interactions with AI-based chat and instant messaging platforms.

This reliance on surface-level approaches has resulted in a partial understanding of the phenomenon, one that lacks the richness of subjective interpretation and emotional resonance (Huang & Wang, 2023). For instance, while quantitative studies have described the frequency and contexts of digital communication, they provide little insight into how students perceive authenticity, presence, or intimacy in these interactions (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Consequently, the essential dimensions of digital intimacy—such as feelings of comfort, ambivalence, or substitution—remain underexplored.

An alternative lies in adopting a phenomenological framework, which prioritizes the exploration of lived experience and the interpretive processes through which individuals construct meaning (Lorenzini et al., 2023). By focusing on the subjective realities of students, a phenomenological study can uncover the essence of AI-mediated intimacy in ways that traditional approaches cannot achieve (Madahana et al., 2022). This perspective is crucial for advancing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon and addressing the gaps left by previous research

Previous research has examined digital communication and its influence on social relationships, yet most studies have emphasized patterns of behavior rather than the lived meaning of such experiences. Literature on social media and AI communication highlights changes in intimacy, but often through descriptive or quantitative approaches that reduce the richness of subjective realities (M. Wang et al., 2022). Phenomenological studies in related contexts demonstrate the value of focusing on personal narratives and interpretations, offering insights into how individuals construct meaning in their daily lives (Mukhlis et al. 2025). These findings suggest that deeper qualitative inquiry is necessary to understand intimacy in digital environments. This study builds on that recognition by turning specifically to AI-based chat and its impact on students' experiences of closeness.

To address the gap, this research employs interpretative phenomenological analysis as its guiding approach. Phenomenology is well suited for this inquiry because it emphasizes lived experience and the meanings individuals attach to their interactions (Abood & Al-Adamat, 2025). Through in-depth interviews and thematic interpretation, the study explores how students perceive and construct intimacy when engaging with AI-mediated communication (Alyafei, 2026). This method allows the voices of participants to guide the analysis and ensures that their perspectives remain central. In doing so, the study responds directly to the limitations identified in earlier research.

The article is structured to provide a coherent flow from context to findings. The introduction outlines the background, specific focus, and rationale for the study. The methodological section details the phenomenological design, participant selection, and procedures of data collection and analysis. The results present themes that emerge from the participants' narratives, highlighting key aspects of their experiences. The discussion reflects on the findings in relation to existing literature, and the conclusion emphasizes the contributions, limitations, and implications for future research. Together, these sections present a comprehensive exploration of AI-mediated intimacy through the lens of phenomenology.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of students in relation to social intimacy mediated through AI-based chat and instant messaging applications (Borisova et al., 2025). Phenomenology was selected as it emphasizes the exploration of subjective experiences and the meanings attached to them, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how individuals perceive and interpret a given phenomenon. Within this framework, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed, as it provides a means to examine how participants make sense of their experiences and construct meaning in the context of technologically mediated intimacy. In line with IPA principles, the study emphasized idiographic depth, privileging detailed accounts over breadth to ensure analytic rigor.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria comprised undergraduate or postgraduate students actively using AI-based chat or instant messaging platforms as part of their daily communication routines (Damayanti & Satria, 2025). Exclusion criteria involved individuals without prior exposure to such platforms or those unwilling to discuss personal experiences of digital intimacy.

The study involved a total of 15 participants, including both male and female students, with an age range of 19 to 25 years (mean age: 21.6). The diverse backgrounds of the participants contributed to capturing a range of perspectives on how technology influences their social interactions and perceptions of intimacy.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol developed to explore students' perceptions and lived experiences (Gao et al., 2025). The interviews were conducted face-to-face and, where necessary, through secure online platforms to accommodate participants' preferences and availability. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent.

The interview environment was arranged to ensure privacy and comfort, allowing participants to speak openly about their experiences. Probing questions were used to elicit richer narratives and capture deeper meanings. Field notes were taken to supplement interview data and provide contextual insights.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the procedures of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Transcripts were prepared verbatim from the audio recordings and read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Meaning units were identified and coded, followed by the clustering of codes into emerging themes (Jarrah et al., 2025). These themes were refined through an iterative process of comparison and interpretation, leading to the identification of essential structures of meaning.

NVivo software was utilized to support the organization and coding of data, although interpretative processes remained central to the analysis. The stepwise procedure ensured that the final themes reflected both individual experiences and shared meanings across participants, while preserving the richness of personal narratives.

RESULTS

Redefining Intimacy in Digital Interaction

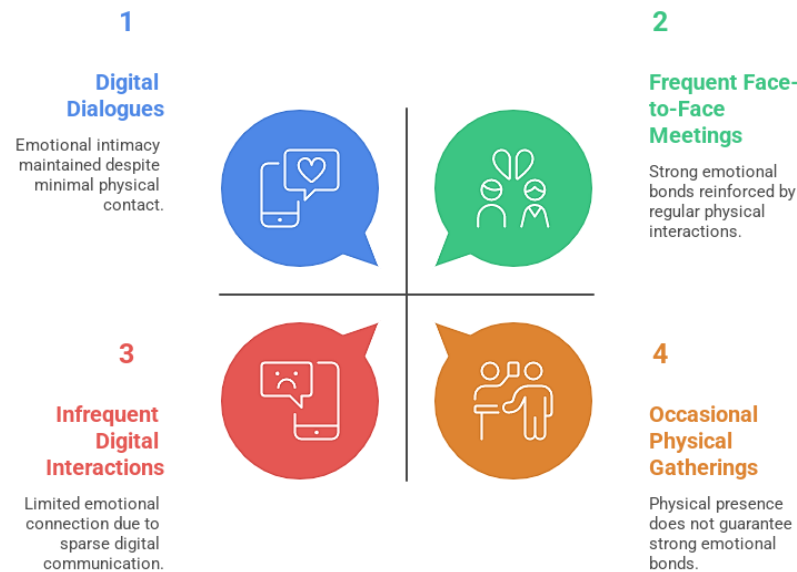
Participants consistently expressed that AI-based chats and messaging platforms have reshaped their understanding of intimacy. Rather than perceiving closeness solely through physical presence, many students reported that emotional connection could now be sustained through digital dialogues.

One student reflected:

“I feel that my friend is always near me, even though we don't meet often. Just chatting on WhatsApp or even with an AI bot gives me a sense of comfort.” (Participant 3)

This indicates a shift from physical to mediated intimacy, where technology acts as a bridge in maintaining emotional proximity. The accounts highlight that students do not measure intimacy solely by frequency of face-to-face meetings but by the perceived availability and responsiveness within digital spaces.

Shifting Dynamics of Intimacy in Digital Age



Emotional Substitution through AI Interaction

Another emergent theme relates to how students perceive AI-based chat as a form of emotional substitution when human interaction is unavailable. Several participants acknowledged turning to AI systems for reassurance, reflection, or even companionship.

As one participant explained:

“When I feel stressed, sometimes it’s easier to open the AI app and talk. It doesn’t judge me, and sometimes I just need someone—or something—to listen.” (Participant 7)

This demonstrates that AI tools are not merely communication platforms but are perceived as relational entities. The sense of being “listened to” by AI created a form of emotional relief, even if students simultaneously recognized that the interaction was not equivalent to human empathy. Such accounts underline the blurred boundaries between human and non-human sources of social support.

Ambivalence and Skepticism toward AI-mediated Intimacy

While many students appreciated the convenience and comfort provided by AI-mediated communication, ambivalence was also evident. Participants questioned whether such forms of connection could truly substitute genuine human intimacy.

One student noted:

“I know it’s not real. Talking with an AI can make me feel calm, but deep inside I realize it cannot replace my best friend.” (Participant 11)

This ambivalence reveals a tension: students valued the immediacy and accessibility of AI-based interaction, yet they remained skeptical about its authenticity and long-term role in sustaining meaningful relationships. The duality between utility and distrust reflects the complexity of integrating AI into the social fabric of young people’s lives.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that students experience intimacy in digital spaces as both redefined and contested. While AI-based chat and instant messaging create a sense of closeness and emotional relief, they also generate ambivalence regarding authenticity and long-term relational meaning, directly addressing the central question of how intimacy is perceived in AI-mediated contexts.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings provide a clear response to the overarching research question by showing that intimacy in the age of AI-based communication cannot be understood as a simple replacement for

human connection. Instead, intimacy is reconstructed through a blend of presence, accessibility, and responsiveness afforded by technology (Ke et al., 2025). Students described feelings of comfort and companionship when interacting with AI systems, yet they also recognized the limitations of such interactions in fulfilling deeper relational needs (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). This dual perception highlights the unique contribution of the study: it uncovers the lived paradox of intimacy where technology functions simultaneously as a facilitator of connection and a reminder of its insufficiency (Tuan et al., 2026). By foregrounding these subjective experiences, the study extends our understanding of digital intimacy beyond functional or behavioral dimensions to the level of personal meaning and emotional significance.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

The themes resonate with earlier findings by G. Wang et al. (2025), who emphasized the paradox of feeling “alone together” in digital environments, yet the present study advances this perspective by situating AI systems as active mediators of perceived intimacy. Similarly, the sense of comfort reported by participants aligns with N. Wang et al. (2025) work on virtual bonding, though the present results extend this by showing how AI substitutes, rather than merely supplements, social connection in times of emotional need. The ambivalence expressed by participants echoes Verbeek’s (2020) argument that technology redefines intimacy, but this study enriches the discussion by demonstrating how skepticism and trust coexist in the lived experiences of young people (Mukhlis, 2025a). Together, these comparisons highlight that the contribution of this research lies in revealing the nuanced interplay between human expectations of authenticity and the technological mediation of closeness—an area that has been largely overlooked in prior studies.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry important implications for understanding the evolving nature of social intimacy in technologically mediated environments (Hardley & Richardson, 2021). From a social and cultural perspective, the experiences described by students suggest that AI-based communication is not merely a tool of convenience but a medium that actively shapes perceptions of presence, authenticity, and emotional support (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). For educational institutions and policymakers, these insights highlight the importance of recognizing how digital platforms influence students’ sense of belonging and well-being. In a broader professional context, the results call attention to the need for ethical guidelines in the design and use of AI communication systems, ensuring that they support rather than distort meaningful human connection (Ruberg & Brewer, 2022). These implications underline the role of phenomenological inquiry in uncovering dimensions of experience that might otherwise remain hidden in purely quantitative research.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant careful consideration. The findings are based on a relatively small and homogeneous group of student participants, which limits the extent to which the results can be generalized to wider populations (Aktan et al., 2022). Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences through interviews may be influenced by participants’ memory, self-awareness, or willingness to disclose personal details (Huete-García & Tarp, 2024). The interpretative nature of phenomenological analysis also involves a degree of subjectivity, even though strategies such as member checking and audit trails were employed to enhance credibility (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings but indicate that the results should be understood as context-specific insights rather than universally applicable conclusions.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future studies could extend these findings by examining how AI-mediated intimacy is experienced across different cultural settings or age groups, thereby offering a more comprehensive view of how digital intimacy is shaped by diverse social contexts (Yi & Yeoun, 2023). Comparative

studies could also explore differences between AI interactions and other forms of mediated communication, such as social media or virtual reality, to better understand the spectrum of technological influence on intimacy (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Longitudinal research might reveal how perceptions of AI companionship evolve over time, especially as AI systems become increasingly sophisticated. Such efforts would deepen theoretical understanding and provide practical guidance for developers, educators, and practitioners seeking to balance technological innovation with human relational needs.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how students experience and interpret social intimacy through AI-based chat and instant messaging applications, addressing the problem of understanding intimacy in technologically mediated contexts. The findings revealed that intimacy is redefined through accessibility and responsiveness in digital communication, while also generating ambivalence about authenticity and emotional depth. These results contribute to existing literature by moving beyond descriptive or quantitative accounts and uncovering the lived meanings of AI-mediated intimacy. The study also highlights the paradoxical role of AI, functioning both as a source of comfort and as a reminder of its limitations compared to human relationships. By filling gaps in prior research, the findings provide valuable insights for educators, designers, and policymakers concerned with digital well-being and relational ethics. Future research could extend these insights by exploring cultural differences, generational perspectives, or longitudinal changes in the perception of AI-mediated intimacy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the conduct of this study or the preparation of this manuscript.

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