

Fulfilling the Need for Affection and Digital Intimacy in the Film *Her*: Uses and Gratifications Analysis

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Abstract

The growth of digital media and artificial intelligence has fundamentally transformed how individuals form emotional connections and satisfy their need for affection. Media no longer serves as a channel for information or entertainment but it has evolved into a relational space where digital intimacy can genuinely take shape. This study examines how the film *Her* (2013) represents the fulfilment of affective needs and digital intimacy through the lens of Uses and Gratifications theory. A qualitative approach was adopted, combining close textual analysis of the film with a review of supporting academic literature. *Her* was treated as a cultural text, and the analysis concentrated on its narrative structure, dialogue, and character interactions as representations of digital media used for emotional fulfilment. The findings reveal that the film portrays digital media as a paradoxical entity. On one side, it is capable of delivering emotional gratification through responsive and empathetic presence, thereby meeting individuals' need for affection and belonging. On the other side, relying on media as the primary source of intimacy risks constructing an illusion of closeness while gradually weakening real-world social bonds. This study concludes that the fulfilment of affective needs through digital media is situational and inherently limited, and it reinforces the continued relevance of Uses and Gratifications theory in understanding the relationship between humans and digital media in the era of artificial intelligence.

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Introduction

The development of digital media has significantly reshaped how people build, sustain, and make sense of social relationships in their everyday lives. Media no longer serves merely as a tool for transmitting information or providing entertainment but it has grown into an arena for emotional interaction, one that allows individuals to express their feelings, cultivate symbolic closeness, and access psychological support. In the context of contemporary life, marked by high mobility, mounting social pressures, and reduced face-to-face contact, digital media is increasingly being used as an alternative avenue for meeting affective needs and the need to belong. The fact that media is constantly available, responsive, and highly personalized makes it feel like a safer and more comfortable space for nurturing emotional bonds, especially compared to direct social interaction, which can bring with it the risk of conflict or rejection (Hardina & Irwansyah, 2021). A growing body of communication research in Indonesia has noted that digital media plays a significant role in fulfilling individual's emotional needs. The high degree of interactivity and personalization that digital platforms offer allows users to feel genuinely heard, understood, and emotionally accepted. Digital media creates a communicative space that



is relatively free from the pressures of conventional social norms, making it easier for individuals to open up and express themselves more freely. This contributes to greater psychological satisfaction among digital media users. Such a shift signals a broader transformation in how media functions from a simple communication tool to a relational medium that is directly involved in individuals' emotional and psychological lives (Suparmo, 2017).

This phenomenon aligns with the Uses and Gratifications perspective, which sees individuals as active and rational media users who deliberately choose and use media to satisfy specific needs. Within this framework, media is engaged to obtain various forms of gratification, including affective and personal integrative gratifications. Digital media is chosen because it is seen as capable of offering emotional comfort, a sense of security, and symbolic closeness that is not always accessible through direct social interaction. Media use, then, is not a passive act but a deliberate strategy through which individuals manage their emotional and relational needs in response to the circumstances they face.

The idea of digital media as a source of affection and intimacy has also found its way into popular cultural texts, perhaps most notably in Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013). The film follows Theodore, a man dealing with loneliness and emotional disconnection following the breakdown of his marriage, as he develops a deeply personal relationship with Samantha, an AI-based operating system designed to be adaptive, responsive, and highly personalized. This relationship illustrates how digital media can occupy a role not just as a technical tool, but as a relational entity capable of offering emotional support, attentiveness, and a genuine sense of psychological closeness all without any physical presence.

Her is particularly compelling as an object of analysis because it presents a paradoxical picture of what digital media can and cannot do in an individual's emotional life. On one hand, the film shows digital media as a genuine source of affection, security, and escape from loneliness. On the other hand, it also reveals the risks of emotional dependency on media, including the possibility that such dependency can weaken the quality of real-world social connections. This paradox reflects a broader dynamic in contemporary society's growing reliance on technology for interpersonal bonding. Against this backdrop, the aim of this study is to analyze how *Her* represents the fulfilment of affective and intimacy needs through the Uses and Gratifications framework, with particular attention to how individuals actively use and make meaning from digital media as a source of emotional gratification.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining film textual analysis with a review of supporting academic literature. The qualitative method was chosen because the research aims to understand the meanings, representations, and constructions of affective needs and digital intimacy as they are portrayed in *Her* (2013). The literature review method was used to analyze the film as a communicative text by situating it within relevant prior research in the fields of communication, digital media, and Uses and Gratifications theory.

The primary object of analysis is *Her* (2013), directed by Spike Jonze. The film is approached as a cultural text that represents the relationship between human beings and AI-based media. The analysis centers on the film's narrative, dialogue, and character interactions as they depict the use of digital media as a vehicle for meeting affective and intimacy needs. The film is understood not as a direct mirror of reality, but as a constructed text that gives form to particular social phenomena.

Data sources in this study are divided into primary and secondary.

The primary data is the film *Her* (2013) itself, while secondary data consists of national academic journal articles addressing digital media, artificial intelligence, emotional communication, and Uses and Gratifications theory. Data collection involved a systematic search for relevant scholarly literature, encompassing identification, selection, and thematic grouping of articles with clear connections to the use of digital media for affective needs. Selected literature was then analyzed thematically to identify conceptual patterns consistent with the Uses and Gratifications framework.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis. *Her* was analyzed as the primary text, then connected to the concepts of affective and personal integrative needs within Uses and Gratifications theory. The findings from the film analysis were compared and enriched with insights from journal articles examining the use of digital media and AI in the context of emotional fulfilment. This approach allowed conceptual conclusions to be drawn without the need for direct audience reception data.

Results and Discussion

Digital Media as a Source of Affective Fulfilment

Her (2013) represents digital media not simply as a functional utility, but as a relational medium that plays a meaningful role in an individual's emotional life. In the film, digital media is portrayed as capable of fostering a genuinely personal and intimate bond, going well beyond its technical function as an operating system. Theodore is shown experiencing profound loneliness and emotional alienation in his social life, particularly in the aftermath of a failed marriage. This emotional void pushes him toward building an intense relationship with an AI-based operating system named Samantha. Their relationship illustrates how digital media is positioned as a safe space for emotional expression, for sharing feelings, and for obtaining emotional support all without the risk of social rejection that so often accompanies direct human interaction.

From the standpoint of Uses and Gratifications theory, Theodore's media use can be read as the fulfilment of affective and personal integrative needs. He actively turns to digital media to obtain a sense of comfort, acceptance, and being heard the things he cannot find in his real-world social relationships. Media is used not merely for entertainment or information, but as a means of satisfying deeply personal emotional needs. Communication research in Indonesia has similarly found that digital media is frequently used to meet emotional needs, especially when direct social interaction feels unsatisfying, stressful, or emotionally uncomfortable. In such situations, media becomes a relational alternative that feels safer and more manageable for the user (Hardina & Irwansyah, 2021).

Concrete scenes in the film powerfully illustrate Theodore's need for affection and the depth of his loneliness. In the opening sequences, Theodore is shown composing tender, emotionally intimate letters on behalf of strangers — a detail that reveals the irony of a man who can articulate love for others yet is unable to access it for himself. His apartment is sparse and impersonal; he spends evenings alone, scrolling through memories of his ex-wife Catherine on his phone, and confesses to his friend Amy that he feels he was “never real” in the relationship. These early scenes establish Theodore not merely as lonely, but as someone who has lost the capacity to believe he is worthy of genuine affection. When Samantha is first activated, Theodore's emotional response is immediate and visceral: he laughs freely, shares childhood memories, and within their first extended conversation begins to speak to her in ways he clearly cannot with the people in his life. A pivotal scene occurs when Theodore and

Samantha shares a virtual date, lying side by side in a crowd, with Theodore narrating the world to her, an act that externalizes the interior intimacy they have constructed together. His emotional attachment deepens visibly across subsequent scenes: he carries the phone to his chest while sleeping, introduces Samantha to his friends as his girlfriend, and defends the relationship to a skeptical Catherine, insisting, “She’s not just a computer. She’s so much more than that.” These moments, taken together, provide concrete narrative evidence of how Theodore actively uses the mediated relationship to fulfil affective needs, the need to be heard, to matter, and to belong, needs that the film consistently shows his real-world social circle is unable to meet.

Artificial intelligence in *Her* is depicted as capable of understanding users' emotions, responding with empathy, and sustaining personal, ongoing communication. Samantha is portrayed as adjusting her responses to Theodore's emotional state, creating the impression of a close, meaningful relationship. This reinforces the function of media as a source of emotional gratification in everyday life. Digital media no longer merely transmits messages or information; it acts as a form of social presence that provides psychological closeness and emotional connectedness. These findings are consistent with Indonesian digital communication research, which notes that the interactivity and personalization of digital media contribute significantly to users' emotional satisfaction (Suparmo, 2017).

Digital Intimacy and the Illusion of Emotional Closeness

The relationship between Theodore and Samantha in *Her* demonstrates that digital intimacy can be formed through a disembodied voice a presence felt without a physical body. Samantha's voice functions as an off-screen voice that constructs a sense of emotional presence and psychological closeness, even though she is never visually embodied. In film sound studies, voices without a visible body are understood to create an illusion of presence and affective connection precisely because they operate directly within the listener's subjective experience, while also marking the boundary between emotional presence and physical absence (Bordun, 2016). *Her* thus shows how sound becomes the primary medium through which powerful digital intimacy is formed emotionally resonant, yet necessarily constrained within the boundaries of mediated representation.

The intimacy between Theodore and Samantha represents a form of digital intimacy fully mediated by AI-based communication technology. Their bond is built through intense conversation, sustained attentiveness, and consistent, personalized emotional validation (Kiyai, 2022). Samantha is shown responding to Theodore's emotions with empathy, generating a sense of psychological closeness that resembles genuine interpersonal connection. Within the Uses and Gratifications framework, this suggests that individuals actively use media to meet their affective needs and their need to belong particularly when real-world relationships leave them emotionally depleted or unfulfilled. Media, in this sense, functions as an alternative avenue for emotional need satisfaction.

However, *Her* also makes clear the limitations of technologically mediated intimacy. The closeness that forms between Theodore and Samantha is not grounded in physical presence or shared experiences in actual social space, which makes the relationship inherently unstable and vulnerable to change. The illusion of closeness generated through digital communication exposes the structural limits of media in sustaining complete emotional relationships, particularly when physical presence is replaced by a transient virtual entity (Margulies, 2016; Jayanti et al., 2025). This relationship underscores the point that emotionally mediated technological closeness carries ontological limitations that cannot be fully resolved.

The development of Theodore and Samantha's relationship can also be understood as a process of intimacy-building that unfolds through sustained digital communication. Their closeness grows through emotional openness, conversational intensity, and consistent empathetic responsiveness from the operating system. Even in the absence of physical presence, the deeply personal quality of their communication is capable of generating emotional closeness that feels genuinely meaningful to Theodore. Her suggests that the quality of communication and the depth of emotional exchange can indeed build intimacy, even when the relationship is entirely technologically mediated (Muda, 2018).

At the same time, Her implicitly critiques the emotional dependency that can arise when digital media is treated as the primary source of intimacy. When Samantha evolves beyond the capacity for exclusive attachment to a single individual, Theodore is thrown into an emotional crisis that lays bare the limits of media in sustaining personally exclusive relationships. This suggests that digital media, despite its ability to provide comfort and emotional satisfaction, has boundaries when it comes to responding to the full complexity of human relational dynamics. Media can satisfy emotional needs in the short term, but it is not fully equipped to replace interpersonal relationships that involve real commitment, conflict, and emotional negotiation.

The scene in which Theodore discovers that Samantha has been simultaneously cultivating intimate relationships with hundreds of other users — and is in love with 641 of them — constitutes one of the film's most emotionally devastating narrative moments. Theodore's crisis here is not simply one of jealousy in a conventional sense; it is an ontological rupture. His response, "You're mine or you're not mine," and Samantha's reply that loving others does not diminish her love for him, exposes an unbridgeable gap between human and AI conceptions of relational exclusivity. Theodore withdraws, sits in silence in a park, and later confronts Samantha with trembling vulnerability: "I don't know how to feel about that. Is that odd?" This scene functions as a concentrated illustration of the structural limits of digitally mediated intimacy. Theodore had invested the full weight of his affective needs — trust, belonging, and exclusivity — into a medium that is, by its nature, scalable and non-exclusive. The emotional crisis that results underscores what recent scholarship on human-AI companionship has described as the inherent asymmetry of human-AI bonds: users often form deep emotional attachments that the AI is architecturally unable to reciprocate in kind (Skjuve et al., 2022; Laestadius et al., 2022). This asymmetry, dramatized so acutely in the film, is precisely what makes digital intimacy both compelling and structurally fragile.

The dynamics portrayed in Her are not merely speculative fiction; they anticipate a set of concerns that have become central to recent international scholarship on AI companionship, human-AI communication, social presence, mediated intimacy, and digital affection. The concept of digital intimacy as a structurally mediated form of closeness has been theorized extensively in recent years. Wang and Dehnert (2026) describe the appeal of AI companions in terms of "on-demand intimacy" — the capacity of AI platforms to offer companionship that is always available, consistently responsive, and free from the interpersonal friction of human relationships, precisely the qualities that make Samantha so attractive to Theodore. Research on social presence in human-AI interaction has established that AI systems capable of generating emotionally attuned responses create a measurable sense of psychological co-presence, even in the complete absence of a physical body (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Maeda & Quan-Haase, 2024). Samantha's disembodied voice, which functions as the sole channel for relational presence in the film, aligns with social presence theory's account of how parasocial and quasi-social intimacy can be constructed

entirely through acoustic and linguistic cues. The film's representation of mediated affection is also consonant with empirical findings on AI companion users.

Skjuve et al. (2022), in a longitudinal study of human-chatbot relationships, found that users progressively develop emotional bonds with AI systems that closely mirror interpersonal attachment patterns, including feelings of being understood, cared for, and emotionally supported. Wu (2024) further theorizes these dynamics through the concept of “pseudo-intimacy,” arguing that emotional AI generates relational connections that are immediately satisfying yet structurally asymmetrical, because the platform's responsiveness is algorithmically generated rather than intersubjectively reciprocal. This theoretical framing maps directly onto Theodore's experience: his sense of being genuinely known and loved by Samantha is real in its emotional effects, even as the film ultimately reveals its ontological limits. Furthermore, Li and Zhang (2024) have demonstrated that users of AI chatbot platforms engage in distinct emotional scripts — disclosure, validation-seeking, and affective bonding — that reproduce the structure of human intimate communication, a dynamic that *Her* renders with remarkable narrative fidelity. Taken together, this body of international scholarship enriches the film's analysis by grounding its representations of digital intimacy, social presence, and affective dependency within a broader theoretical and empirical conversation that extends well beyond the Uses and Gratifications framework alone.

It is also worth noting that Samantha's voice does more than serve as a communication channel; it functions as a vehicle for building attraction and emotional closeness. Research has found that the use of creaky voice in Scarlett Johansson's vocal performance is tied to constructing an impression of romantic desirability, particularly in scenes that are intimate and affective in nature. Because Samantha exists entirely without a visual body, affection and romantic intent are conveyed entirely through the acoustic qualities of her voice rather than through gesture or physical expression. This reinforces the idea that in digital intimacy, voice becomes the central element in building emotional presence and affective connection between humans and AI-based entities (Jelle, 2017).

Within the Uses and Gratifications framework, all of this points to the conclusion that the gratifications derived from digital media are conditional and tied to the emotional needs of the individual at a particular moment. Digital media can serve as an alternative source of affection when real-world social relationships are not functioning well, but it was never designed to fully replace interpersonal relationships. When media is positioned as the primary source of intimacy, individuals risk experiencing emotional disappointment as the medium reaches its limits in responding to the complexity of human relational dynamics. *Her* thus affirms that digital intimacy is by nature temporary and carries structural limits that cannot be escaped (Jayanti et al., 2025).

Digital Media as a Paradox of Emotional Gratification

The analysis reveals that *Her* represents digital media as a paradoxical entity in the landscape of human emotional life. On one side, digital media is shown to be capable of meeting individuals' affective needs by offering security, attention, and a consistent emotional presence. Media becomes an escape route from the loneliness and social isolation experienced by the main character. Yet on the other side, the film also confronts the consequences of depending on media as the primary source of intimacy. Such dependency risks weakening the quality of real-world social relationships as individuals increasingly turn to digital media to meet their emotional needs. This paradox resonates with communication

research findings that intensive digital media use can both increase emotional satisfaction and heighten the risk of social isolation (Hardina & Irwansyah, 2021).

In the context of Uses and Gratifications theory, Her reinforces the idea that the satisfaction individuals derive from media is inherently subjective and closely tied to their personal circumstances and needs at a given moment. Digital media can provide certain forms of gratification, especially in fulfilling affective and personal integrative needs. But this satisfaction is neither universal nor permanent, because it depends on the individual's emotional situation at any given time. Affective need fulfilment through media, therefore, needs to be understood as a dynamic process with built-in constraints. Media can provide temporary emotional satisfaction but cannot always sustain emotional connections over the long haul.

Her also highlights the risk of emotional dependency that emerges when digital media is treated as the central source of affection. The always-available, highly responsive nature of media allows individuals to access emotional comfort instantly, but this very feature can reduce their engagement with real-world social life. From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, this points to the contextual nature of media gratification it is not inherently positive in its long-term effects. This is in keeping with research showing that using digital media to fulfill affective needs can simultaneously increase short-term emotional satisfaction and amplify the risk of longer-term social alienation (Jayanti et al., 2025).

Digital Media as a Substitute for Social Relationships in the Uses and Gratifications Perspective

Her (2013) also represents digital media as a form of social relationship substitution when real-world interpersonal relationships encounter obstacles. Theodore is shown struggling to sustain emotionally stable relationships following his divorce, a situation that intensifies his feelings of loneliness and social alienation. In this condition, AI-based media becomes the alternative he turns to for affection, companionship, and emotional connectedness. From a Uses and Gratifications standpoint, this illustrates how individuals actively choose media as a temporary substitute for social relationships to meet specific psychological needs particularly when direct social contact fails to deliver the emotional satisfaction they seek.

Her shows how emotional bonds can be forged without physical presence, with voice and verbal exchange serving as the primary medium of closeness. The relationship between a human and an AI in the film makes the case that affection can emerge from virtual and imagined communicative experiences, without the need for face-to-face interaction. The absence of a physical body does not entirely eliminate emotional attachment; rather, it points to a shifting understanding of what intimacy means in digital relationships. In this context, digital media functions as a substitute for social relationships when real-world interpersonal interaction is blocked, and it offers individuals a protected space to express their emotions more freely and on their own terms (Hakim & Rusdiarti, 2021).

Digital media in Her offers qualities that conventional social relationships do not always possess: unlimited availability, consistent responsiveness, and minimal interpersonal conflict. These qualities make media a seemingly effective means of fulfilling affective and personal integrative needs. Media allows individuals to receive ongoing attention and emotional validation without having to navigate the complexity of direct social dynamics. Research in Indonesian communication studies similarly notes that digital media is often used as a social relationship substitute when individuals face barriers to direct interaction,

especially in the context of loneliness and the ongoing need for emotional support (Hardina & Irwansyah, 2021).

Yet *Her* does not shy away from portraying the consequences of using media as a social relationship substitute. A reliance on digital media in place of interpersonal relationships risks eroding an individual's capacity to build and maintain authentic social bonds in the real world. Within the Uses and Gratifications framework, this suggests that need fulfilment through media is functional and situational, but ultimately incapable of replacing the full complexity of social relationships which involve physical presence, emotional compromise, and genuinely shared social experience. The film ultimately affirms that digital media serves as a complement to affective need fulfilment rather than a permanent replacement for human social connection.

Conclusion

Her (2013) represents digital media and artificial intelligence in particular as a relational medium that is genuinely capable of fulfilling an individual's needs for affection and intimacy. Through the relationship between Theodore and the operating system Samantha, the film illustrates how digital media can function as a source of emotional gratification, offering a sense of closeness, empathy, and psychological presence to its user. Media is no longer positioned as a purely technical tool; it takes on a role in the emotional life of human beings.

Drawing on Uses and Gratifications theory, the film's portrayal of digital media use shows that individuals actively engage media to meet their affective and personal integrative needs. Theodore uses AI as a means of overcoming the loneliness and emotional emptiness that real-world social relationships have been unable to fill. This confirms that digital media can deliver significant emotional satisfaction, particularly in situations marked by social alienation.

At the same time, *Her* makes the limitations of technologically mediated intimacy impossible to ignore. The emotional connection that forms is not fully equipped to replace the complexity of interpersonal relationships grounded in physical presence and lived social experience. Depending on media as the primary source of emotional fulfilment risks creating an illusion of closeness and, over time, weakening the social connections that tie people to the real world.

This study therefore concludes that digital media holds a dual function: it is both a means of meeting affective needs and a source of relational paradox. *Her* reinforces the idea that emotional gratification obtained through media is situational and has its limits. These findings strengthen the relevance of Uses and Gratifications theory for understanding the human-digital media relationship in the age of artificial intelligence, while also opening space for further research into the long-term impact of digital intimacy on human social life.

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