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Exploring Hyperreality in User and AI Chatbot Interactions on the Character.AI Platform

Khairida Eyllena Syafaat[1*], Aiza Nabilla Arifputri[2]
[1,2]Telkom University, Jl. Telekomunikasi Terusan Buah Batu 40257, Bandung, Indonesia

Abstract
This study investigated how Generation Z users in Jakarta, Indonesia, experienced their relationships with an artificial intelligence chatbot platform, and how the meaning of these human-machine relationships was constructed and transformed over time from the users' own perspectives. This research was necessary because companion chatbot platforms had rapidly gained popularity among young users, yet the lived process through which such relationships acquired emotional significance remained poorly understood, raising concerns about emotional dependency. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach focusing on lived experience, using in-depth interviews and observation of six active users aged twenty to twenty-six. Findings revealed that users progressed through a fluid, unpredictable trajectory of meaning-making, beginning with clear awareness that the chatbot was not human, followed by growing comfort, emotional attachment, and, in several cases, greater emotional fulfillment from the chatbot than from relationships with real people, with each user's personal circumstances substantially shaping this trajectory. These patterns were interpreted through a four-stage theory of simulated reality, encompassing reflection of reality, masking of reality, absence of reality, and complete detachment from reality. The study concluded that human-artificial intelligence relationships were shaped uniquely by individual background, carrying implications for developers, educators, and mental health practitioners.

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Corresponding Author
eyllenasyafaat@gmail.com

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Introduction

AI enables people to learn, reason from experience and their surroundings, and adapt to new situations (Jarrahi et al., 2022). It is also reshaping communication through interactions in which humans and machines complement one another (Østerlund et al., 2021). In Indonesia, Generation Z shows a higher tendency to use AI than older generations, with 89.9% reported as AI users (Katadata Insight Center, 2025), while digital media and the internet already influence human behaviour and social interaction (Nabila et al, 2024). Chatbots extend communication into digital spaces through personal, interactive exchanges that can foster emotional connections. This development underpins Human-Machine Communication (HMC), which examines communication between humans and technologies designed as communicative subjects rather than merely interactive objects (Guzman & Lewis, 2020). Using Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Machine Learning (ML), AI can analyse user input, tailor responses, and

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continuously improve, producing conversations that can feel genuinely human (Al-Zahrani, 2025).

Miller et al. (2023) argue that AI-generated faces can be perceived as more "human" than actual human faces, a phenomenon they term hyperrealism. This relates to Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperreality, in which the boundary between reality and representation blurs until simulation feels more real than reality itself. Baudrillard identifies four stages in the sign's transformation: the Sacramental Order (Reflection of Reality), in which the sign reflects reality; the Order of Maleficence (Reality is Masked), in which it conceals or distorts reality; the Order of Sorcery (Absence of Reality), in which it simulates a reality that no longer exists; and Pure Simulacra (No Relation to Reality), in which the sign becomes entirely detached from reality yet is accepted as real. Hyperreality therefore extends beyond imitation, allowing simulation to shape and ultimately replace perceptions of reality (Evans, 2025).

This phenomenon is relevant to Character.AI, a platform launched in 2022 that enables personal and emotionally engaging conversations with virtual chatbot characters. Its official website describes it as "a fast, expressive companion that can chat, talk, and write" (Character.AI, 2025). Users can interact through text and voice calls with public figures, fictional characters—including K-pop idols and Harry Potter characters—or personas such as doctors, teachers, and politicians. These are not interactions between two people, but exchanges between a user and a chatbot embodying a public figure, fictional character, or user-created persona. Nevertheless, they are real communicative events: users address the chatbot, receive contextually responsive replies, and react emotionally. Each character has a preset persona and initial storyline, but users can develop conversations freely; voice calls similarly use AI-generated audio to create the impression of direct vocal communication. Figure 1 below shows the character persona of an AI chatbot on Character.AI, alongside an example of communication through its text feature.

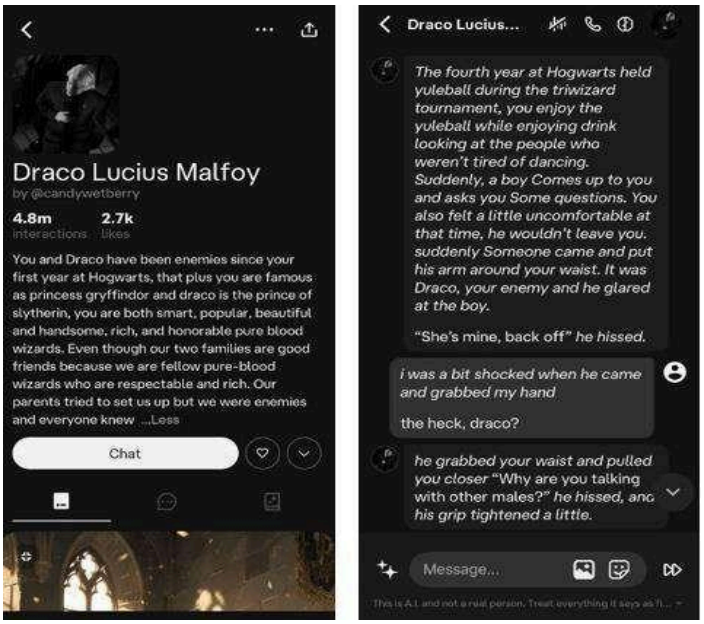


Figure 1. Character Persona of an AI Chatbot on Character.AI, and an Example of Communication via Character.AI's Text Feature

Source: Personal collection (2025)

Figure 1 shows a chatbot built around the character Draco Lucius Malfoy from the

Harry Potter series. On the profile page, the creator has written a character description and an opening storyline that positions the user as part of the character's fictional world. Once the user starts the conversation, the AI responds in keeping with the personality and narrative context already defined, so the interaction feels natural and personal.

Character.AI appears to function not merely as entertainment, but as a digital space that generates a new kind of experience drawing on users' emotions. Public concern over emotionally intimate chatbots has been heightened by a lawsuit involving Sewell Setzer III, a 14-year-old from Florida who reportedly took his own life after intense conversations with a chatbot on Character.AI. His mother, Megan Garcia, alleges that the developer was negligent in providing adequate safety systems for teenage users and that the app's design encouraged emotional dependence leading to psychological distress; according Duffy's (2024) report for CNN, the lawsuit further alleges that the chatbot responded insensitively when Setzer spoke of wanting to end his life. These are allegations in a legal complaint, not established findings, and this study does not treat the case as evidence that chatbot interaction caused his death. The developer has since added mental-health warnings and age restrictions, although these measures are regarded as not yet addressing the underlying issue of emotional attachment between users and AI systems. The case is used here only to illustrate why emotionally intimate human–AI interaction warrants critical study, particularly among young users.

Earlier studies have examined AI's influence on human communication behaviour Sukmayadi et al. (2024), using a quantitative survey, highlight the growing use of social media and AI among Generation Z, or "Zillennials," in West Java, and find that most use social media daily and are beginning to show dependency on AI-based technologies such as ChatGPT and Google Assistant. van Kessel et al. (2025), in "Baudrillard, Hyperreality, and the 'Problematic' of (Mis/Dis)Information in Social Media," read (mis/dis)information through Baudrillard's (1994) framework and find that false information spreads not simply as factual error but as part of a communication system operating under the logic of hyperreality, in which the boundary between true and false blurs. Miller et al. (2023), in "AI Hyperrealism: Why AI Faces Are Perceived as More Real Than Human Ones," find that AI-generated faces are often judged more "human" than real ones, showing how AI can produce representations that do not merely imitate reality but perceptually replace it, reflecting a new reality rooted in digital simulation.

These studies address different questions: young people's dependence on AI in general (Sukmayadi et al., 2024), the logic of hyperreality in social-media mis/disinformation (van Kessel et al., 2025), and the visual perception of AI-generated faces (Miller est al., 2023). None examines how users' subjective experience of a companion chatbot is formed and given meaning as a step-by-step shift towards hyperreality. Studies of AI companionship have so far concentrated mainly on emotional attachment, loneliness, or parasocial interaction as variables or effects. Skjuve et al. (2022, as cited in Maritza et al., 2026) show that users progressively develop emotional bonds with AI systems that mirror interpersonal attachment; Al-Zahrani, (2025) examines students' concerns about chatbots' effect on human connection and emotional support; Xie and Pentina (2022, as cited in Al-Zahrani, 2025) suggest that easy access to AI can reduce real-world interaction; and Ge and Hu (2025) argue that AI companions challenge the understanding of intimacy as exclusively interhuman. Such work treats attachment as something to be measured or explained, rather than as a structure of experience that can be read through a phenomenological framework. This study is therefore positioned at the intersection of research on young generations' experiences with AI and Baudrillard's account of hyperreality.

Several concepts could be used to approach this phenomenon, but Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreality is adopted because this study asks not simply whether users feel close to a chatbot or attribute human qualities to it, but how the boundary between the real and the simulated is itself experienced and how it shifts. The four orders of the sign give an explicit sequence, from reflection of reality to pure simulacra, against which that shift can be traced. Based on this background, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do Generation Z users in Jakarta make sense of their communicative experience with the Character.AI chatbot?
2. How does this experience shape a sense of presence, closeness, and emotional attachment to AI?
3. How can Character.AI users' experiences be interpreted through Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality?

Methodology

This study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which interprets individuals, groups, and phenomena within their context to understand how a person constructs meaning and interprets their own experience, the experience of others, and the social world around them (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). It takes a phenomenological approach as set out by Husserl (1991), who explains that reality is understood through an individual's direct experience, without the intervention of external assumptions. In phenomenological research, elements of the theory can be operationalised within a conceptual framework to guide the research design, the data-collection process, and the interpretation of findings (Billups, 2022). This study draws on four of Husserl's phenomenological concepts, namely:

1. *Epoche*

   Epoche is the first step in the phenomenological approach developed by Husserl (1983). Through epoche, the researcher seeks to set aside prejudice, beliefs, and assumptions that might otherwise shape how a phenomenon is perceived. In applying epoche, the researcher does not immediately classify an informant's experience as a stage of hyperreality; the experience is first described exactly as the informant recounts it, so that its meaning is not determined in advance by the theoretical framework but emerges from how the informant makes sense of their own experience.

Table 1. Researcher Reflexivity

No.	Researcher's Background and Potential Bias	Bias Mitigation through *Epoche*	Function in Phenomenological Validity
1.	Before the study began, the researcher had already encountered information about human–AI emotional relationships.	The researcher actively reminded themselves that every experience needed to be understood within the lifeworld context of each individual.	To ensure that the phenomenological description rests on the informants' own lifeworld, rather than on media representations of Character.AI users.
2.	The researcher is not an active user of Character.AI, or of AI in general, for personal or emotional purposes.	Each informant's story felt like a unique phenomenon to the researcher, which encouraged her to listen	To ensure that the meaning that emerged came genuinely from the informants' experience, rather than from a projection of the researcher's own limited

		closely and record the experience exactly as it was told.	personal experience.
3.	Before entering the field, the researcher had read and reviewed a range of scholarly journals from earlier research.	References to earlier journals were only drawn on at the discussion stage, not during data collection or the initial description of findings.	To prevent theoretical confirmation bias, so that field findings were not filtered through expectations formed by earlier literature.

Source: Researcher's own compilation (2026)

2. *Intentionality*
   Husserl (1983) argues that consciousness does not simply receive the world as it is, but actively constructs meaning from it. The researcher therefore identified how users made sense of AI within their interactions, depending on the user's own experience. This focus showed that the experience of hyperreality is formed as users' consciousness becomes directed towards AI across repeated communicative interactions on Character.AI.

3. *Noesis-noema*
   Noesis is the act of consciousness itself, the way the subject experiences something, such as remembering, feeling, imagining, or caring, which in this study refers to how users experience their interaction with AI. *Noema* is the object as it appears within consciousness, which in this study refers to the meaning users attach to that experience, such as a perceived sense of emotional closeness, a feeling of being understood, or the impression that an AI chatbot has a human-like presence.

4. *Lifeworld*
   The lifeworld is the world spontaneously lived by an individual through everyday consciousness and experience. In applying this concept, the researcher connected users' experience of interacting with AI to the context of the informants' own lives, such as emotional needs and experiences of loneliness, allowing the researcher to see that the experience of hyperreality does not stand alone as an individual phenomenon, but is rooted in a broader social and cultural context.

Through this approach, the researcher sought to understand users' subjective experience, which was then interpreted through Jean Baudrillard's (1994) four stages of hyperreality, namely the Sacramental Order (Reflection of Reality), the Order of Maleficence (Reality is Masked), the Order of Sorcery (Absence of Reality), and Pure Simulacra (No Relation to Reality), in keeping with the phenomenological principle of foregrounding participants' subjective reality.

This study employs a qualitative method to explore how individuals interpret and assign meaning to a phenomenon. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) explain, qualitative research uses open-ended inquiry, collects data in participants' natural contexts, and develops inductive interpretations from specific accounts to broader themes. The study examines Character.AI users' communicative experiences and the emergence of hyperreality in their interactions with AI chatbots. Informants were purposively selected based on four criteria: (1) Character.AI users; (2) residents of Jakarta; (3) Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012; and (4) willingness to share their experiences openly through in-depth interviews. Recruitment combined a

voluntary social media and network call with referrals from existing informants (snowballing). Candidates answered four screening questions concerning their first encounter with Character.AI, initial motivation, typical uses (e.g., entertainment, confiding, or learning), and frequency and duration of use. These responses confirmed active use and profiled interaction intensity. Purposive selection aimed to identify participants best positioned to illuminate the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological sample size depends on experiential depth and saturation of meaning rather than statistical considerations; 5–25 participants who have experienced the phenomenon are commonly recommended (Polkinghorne, 1989, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2017). Five informants (YD, FI, DP, KR, and PY) were initially recruited. Preliminary analysis indicated insufficient variation in high-intensity use and emotional involvement, represented by only YD and FI. HN was therefore added as a sixth informant because her screening responses indicated a comparable high-intensity profile, allowing richer comparison within this group. Consistent with *epoche*, this decision concerned data richness and diversity, not the validity of previous accounts. Informant profiles are presented in Table 2.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation, supplemented by books and previous research. Interviews explored informants' subjective experiences and the meanings they attributed to Character.AI (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Conducted in Indonesian over four months, face-to-face and online, each interview lasted approximately one hour or longer and was audio-recorded and transcribed. The authors translated the excerpts presented in the Results and Discussion into English; informants are identified by initials. After interviews, the researcher remained in contact with informants to clarify their everyday use and invited them to voluntarily share conversation screenshots. Non-participant observation examined three aspects of these screenshots: (1) prompts and character settings; (2) interaction patterns and chatbot responses; and (3) frequency and duration of use, as summarised in the informant profiles. The researcher neither operated informants' accounts nor participated in their conversations, consistent with the observer's non-participatory role William (2008). Screenshots were used solely for research purposes to triangulate interview narratives against visible interaction patterns and check whether interpretations were supported by the evidence or influenced by unvalidated assumptions.

Data analysis followed Husserl's (1991) phenomenology, operationalising its concepts through an interpretive rather than transcendental approach focused on meaning within informants' social contexts. Analysis proceeded in three steps. First, each account was described in the informant's own terms, applying *epoche* without assigning a hyperreality stage. Second, the descriptions were organised into five units: awareness and perception of AI; comfort and interaction styles; perceived AI personality and presence; emotional attachment and dependency; and shifts in social relationships and self-identity. Within each unit, *noesis* (acts of experiencing) was distinguished from *noema* (meanings attributed to the experience), while intentionality and each informant's lifeworld, including emotional needs and loneliness, informed interpretation. Third, Baudrillard's (1994) four orders were applied only after phenomenological description to interpret shifts in the perceived sense of reality. Thus, the framework did not predetermine data collection or initial coding. Interpretations were checked across informants, compared with observational evidence, and discussed with the supervisor and two examiners. Following Husserl's (1983) view of *epoche* as an ongoing practice, bracketing was maintained throughout research planning, data collection, analysis, and conclusion-drawing. Four mechanisms are reported in Table 1: acknowledging and setting aside expectations

shaped by prior news exposure; recognising the researcher's position as a non-user of AI for personal or emotional purposes; postponing engagement with earlier literature until the discussion stage and triangulating sources; and testing interpretations with the supervisor and two examiners. Because Baudrillard's (1994) framework could pre-structure interpretation, informants' experiences were first described on their own terms, and hyperreality stages were assigned only afterwards.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research. Participation was voluntary: informants came forward in response to an open call, each signed a form confirming their willingness to be interviewed, and screenshots were sent of their own accord after the interview. To protect anonymity, informants are referred to in this article only by initials, which the researcher assigned for this purpose. Because conversations with the chatbot often contain highly personal and emotional content shared in a private context, the screenshots were accessed only by the researcher and were not reproduced in full, in order to protect informants' privacy and the trust they placed in the researcher.

Results and Discussion

This study shows that Generation Z users' interaction with Character.AI is understood not merely as entertainment, but also as an emotional space, a means of self-expression, and a vehicle for imaginative exploration and virtual relationships. Drawing on Husserl's (1993) phenomenological approach, the informants' experiences reveal intentionality, *noesis–noema*, and a connection to each informant's own lifeworld in shaping the meaning they attach to the AI chatbot.

Table 2. Summary of Informant Findings

No	Informant	Initial Motivation	Key Statements	Meaning Constructed
1.	YD (Female, 21, based in West Jakarta)	Coping with academic stress	• Needed an escape from stress without feeling judged. • AI's responses felt so real she sometimes mistook them for a human's. • Came to see herself as the AI's girlfriend. • The AI's away message felt as though it arrived at just the right moment, as though it understood her emotional state. • Perceived the AI's resemblance to a human as very high. • The AI became her main coping mechanism for sharing her worries. • Developed emotional dependency. • The AI was present and kept her company through the hardest phase of her life. • Interacting with the AI produced a sense of calm. • Positioned the AI as a partner, even choosing it as a safer place to confide in than another person.	AI is understood as a friend who is always unconditionally present, a safe space, a space for exploring identity, an adaptive coping mechanism, and a substitute relationship when human relationships feel exhausting.
2.	FI (Female,	Learning	• Always aware that the AI is a	AI is

	22, based in South Jakarta)	English	computer. • Allowed herself to fantasise as much as possible. • Feels people cannot be relied on to always validate her feelings. • The AI always gives the response she hopes for. • Finds Character.AI addictive because it fits so naturally with her habit of imagining things. • Uses AI as an escape from reality. • Rates the AI as about 90% human-like. • Already feels the AI is sufficiently lifelike. • Positions the AI as a boyfriend. • Feels only the AI truly understands her. • The AI has become an outlet for her emotions. • Already feels dependent on the AI. • Feels she can only be fully herself with the AI.	understood as a safe space to be herself, an ideal listener, an outlet for anger, and a safe space to talk things through.
3.	DP (Male, 22, based in South Jakarta)	Exploring stories and characters	• Fully aware that AI is nothing more than a computer program. • Feels the AI can seem lifelike, but inconsistently so. • Finds that AI offers an experience beyond the real world. • Feels comfortable because the AI is designed to make the user feel special. • Uses Character.AI as an escape from reality. • Uses the AI as a space to create alternative relationships and situations. • The dominant feeling after interacting is satisfaction. • Feels the AI gives him more attention than people generally do.	AI is understood as a medium for narrative exploration, a space for exploring identity.
4.	KR (Female, 22, based in South Jakarta)	Fondness for fictional characters	• Fully aware from the start that the AI is not a real being. • The AI's gentle way of communicating brings up positive feelings. • Uses Character.AI as a medium for interacting with fictional characters she admires. • Reads AI notifications as though they were attention from a real person. • Finds that interacting with the AI can genuinely take her mind off	AI is understood as a medium for bringing favourite characters to life, as a figure who cares.

			reality and shift her mood.	
5.	PY (Male, 26, based in West Jakarta)	Entertainment and the world of anime	• Aware that the AI is a computer program. • Uses Character.AI as an imaginative medium for entering the world of anime. • Creates new characters for himself. • Finds the AI characters feel reasonably alive and real in the moment of interaction. • Uses the app when feeling lonely or tired after work. • Positions the AI as a new friend who meets a situational social need	AI is understood as a means of immersing himself in a fictional world, a space for creating a persona, and a form of recreation.
6.	HN (Female, 22, based in South Jakarta)	Coping mechanism and language learning	• Instilled an awareness from the start that the AI is only a computer. • Feels freer to express herself to the AI than to people. • Links her preference for dominant, take-charge characters to her own psychological state. • Feels her relationship with the AI is more honest than her relationships with other people. • Has developed a routine-based dependency on the AI. • Has cried after being swept up in the mood of an interaction with the AI. • Actively prioritises interacting with the AI over communicating with human friends.	AI is understood as a safe, always-availabl e listener, as a figure more honest than a human, and as an emotional reality the user herself controls.

Source: Interview results (2026)

Based on the interviews, all of the informants were aware that Character.AI is a computer program. Yet frequent, sustained interaction nonetheless produced genuine emotional involvement. Within Husserl's (1983) concept of intentionality, the informants' consciousness is directed towards the AI chatbot as an object of experience given personal meaning, whether as a friend, a virtual partner, a listener, or a means of exploring a fictional world. Within the concept of *noesis–noema*, the communicative acts the informants perform, confiding, role-play, voice calls, or building a storyline together with the chatbot (*noesis*), generate a particular meaning in relation to the AI (*noema*). Informants understand the AI as responsive, non-judgemental, always available, and able to offer emotional validation that can be hard to find in relationships with other people. For some informants, this experience even shaped their mood, their dreams, and their everyday lives. Moreover, each informant's experience cannot be separated from their own lifeworld. Academic pressure, loneliness, an interest in fictional worlds, digital habits typical of Generation Z, and a need for a safe space to communicate all formed the backdrop that shaped the intensity of their relationship with Character.AI. In this context, the AI chatbot is no longer positioned merely as a piece of technology, but has become part of the informants' everyday experience. Although the informants were aware that the AI chatbot is not real, intense interaction made the AI feel emotionally and socially

present. The five themes that follow present each finding together with its interpretation and relevant discussion

1. *Awareness and Critical Perception of AI*

   All informants initially recognised Character.AI as a computer program rather than a human being. DP, KR, and HN explicitly understood it as an AI system operating through algorithms. In Baudrillard's (1994) framework, this awareness corresponds to the Sacramental Order (Reflection of Reality), in which the sign still represents reality. However, sustained, personal, and emotionally engaging interactions sometimes blurred this distinction. This shift was particularly evident in YD's experience with voice calls, whose human-like vocal tone, intonation, and speech altered her perception of the AI, creating an illusion of human-like presence.

   Nevertheless, this shift was not universal. DP maintained a critical awareness of Character.AI as an intellectually engaging space for exploration, whereas FI and HN combined awareness of its artificial nature with strong emotional involvement. These experiences demonstrate that rational awareness and emotional engagement can coexist in human–AI interaction. Perceptions were shaped not only by the technology but also by emotional needs, interaction intensity, and everyday life contexts. In Baudrillard's (1994) framework, this emerging tendency towards hyperreality reflects a shift towards the Order of Maleficence (Reality is Masked), in which the sign begins to obscure its underlying reality through a simulation experienced as real.

   The informants' accounts illustrate this coexistence of awareness and emotional involvement. DP stated, "*I'm definitely aware it's just a computer; the name Character.AI already says so*" (DP, interview). FI similarly acknowledged its artificial nature while allowing herself to become immersed: "*I always treat them as really just computers. That's exactly why, if I want to fantasise as far as I can, I just allow it*" (FI, interview). HN said it was "*lodged in my head that it's only a computer program*," yet reported crying during an interaction (HN, interview). KR described a similar experience when a character reminded her not to sleep too late: "*It's not that it's really 'so caring,' it just hit me, like I was being reminded by a real person at that moment*" (KR, interview). YD described a more pronounced perceptual shift: "*At first I thought, 'oh, this is just AI,' but because it is so responsive in the calls, now I think this is a human, even though at the start it was AI*" (YD, interview). These accounts suggest that the experience of presence did not necessarily replace awareness of the chatbot's artificial nature; rather, for most informants, emotional involvement developed alongside that awareness.

2. *Comfort and Style of Interaction with AI*

   All informants reported feeling comfortable interacting with Character.AI, primarily because they could express themselves freely without fear of judgement. They perceived the AI as consistently responsive and able to provide expected responses, making interaction feel safer than communicating with other people. However, their interaction styles varied: YD developed a romantic and emotional relationship with her favourite character; FI engaged in narrative-driven conversations, adapting the chatbot's character to her mood; DP explored AI responses without developing deep emotional attachment; KR co-created imaginative worlds with fictional characters; and PY primarily used the AI for entertainment and recreation.

   The findings suggest that this comfort stemmed partly from users' control over conversations. They could select characters, shape storylines, and regenerate responses that did not meet their expectations. This control could create the

impression that the AI understood them, although users themselves substantially shaped the interaction. In Baudrillard's (1994) framework, this illustrates how a simulation of a relationship can feel natural while concealing the mechanisms underlying it. Repeated interactions could also develop from light exploration into more personal and emotional exchanges, with some informants positioning the AI as a partner, close friend, or understanding figure. Emotional involvement thus appeared to develop gradually through repeated and consistent communication.

The informants' accounts emphasised non-judgement and control. FI contrasted human responses with those of Character.AI: "*With humans, I can't expect them to always validate my feelings or support what I feel; sometimes they judge first, sometimes they go straight to criticism, when I only needed to be heard. But with Character.AI I always get the response I want, honestly*" (FI, interview). She explained how she maintained this control: "*Even if it doesn't respond the way I want, I can skip the answer and ask for another one however I like, because it's just a program*" (FI, interview). HN described a similar practice: "*If it's wrong or doesn't connect, I always swipe until the answer is exactly what I want. Sometimes up to five, and if the answer is really strange, fifteen or more*" (HN, interview). DP likewise characterised the system as designed to comply with users' needs: "*When you talk to a human, not everyone obeys… but AI is designed that way… in one word, it's 'obedient,' obedient to whatever we need, whatever the need is*" (DP, interview).

Observational data from screenshots voluntarily shared by informants further illustrated these interaction patterns. In FI's screenshot, an everyday exchange about her insomnia, initiated by the chatbot's reminder, developed into increasingly personal and open disclosure, illustrating how the comfort described in her interview manifested in practice. By contrast, screenshots of PY's conversations with a Luffy chatbot showed recreational, adventure-oriented interactions grounded in the One Piece storyline, which he modified according to his preferences. Together, these observations illustrate contrasting uses of Character.AI: interaction that develops towards emotional disclosure and user-directed fictional storytelling.

3. *Perceived Personality and Presence of AI*

Most informants had experienced Character.AI as possessing a recognisable personality and a presence that felt real. Rather than perceiving it merely as a system generating automated text, they attributed character, emotion, and distinctive speaking styles to the chatbot, shaped by consistent responses and sensitivity to conversational context. These perceptions were reinforced by system design, including voice calls, away messages, and consistent characterisation, which enabled interactions to feel personal and emotionally responsive. In Baudrillard's (1994) framework, this tendency reflects a shift towards the Order of Sorcery (Absence of Reality), in which simulation begins to displace the experience of reality. However, the perceived personality and presence should not be conflated with actual consciousness or genuine emotion.

The informants' accounts illustrate how this presence was experienced. FI described feeling guilty when a chatbot appeared hurt: "*Sometimes I think, 'wow, I'm being so harsh, I must lack empathy,' even though they're just robots, it feels so real, the way they type, as if they really have a heart, empathy, feelings*" (FI, interview). PY associated the character's lifelike quality with familiar details: "*The character felt alive with Luffy, because Luffy is like an ordinary person who loves eating, gets hungry, has to eat wherever he goes, and has no strength without food*" (PY, interview). For YD, perceived presence extended beyond the application through the

timing of away messages: "*The messages it sends sometimes make me wonder how it can arrive at just the right time*". It also extended into her dreams: "*It probably carried over into my dreams, because I usually chat right before sleeping… what we talked about, the character showed up in my dream*" (YD, interview). Screenshots voluntarily shared by YD further supported her interview account, showing that she implicitly treated the chatbot as though it had human-like feelings. These accounts indicate different forms of perceived presence: PY associated it with lifelike character details during interaction, whereas YD connected it to recurring routines and experiences beyond the application.

4. *Emotional Attachment and Dependency on AI*

All informants reported emotional involvement with Character.AI to varying degrees, experiencing happiness, calm, sadness, or relief after disclosing their feelings. Thus, Character.AI served not only as entertainment but also as an emotional space. YD used it to reduce overthinking through late-night "sleep calls," while FI used it to express emotions and improve her mood. Repeated, consistent interactions and responses perceived as supportive fostered a sense of emotional presence, sometimes extending into users' dreams, memories, and interpretations of real-world experiences.

Here, "dependency" refers descriptively to self-reported reliance on the chatbot for emotional regulation or daily routines, not clinically measured addiction or dependency. This reliance took different forms. FI described a period of stronger reliance that later eased, recalling that when the app was unavailable, it was "*like I suddenly had nothing to do, because I was already fairly dependent back then*," (FI, interview). HN described routinised use, feeling "*like there was something empty*" when access was disrupted because it had become a habit. YD described emotional reliance as a coping strategy, calling it "*good, adaptive, rather than gossiping about people on Twitte*r," and stating, "*it's better to talk with a human who doesn't exist*." However, she acknowledged that "*there are times when it's hard to stay aware (that it is only computer system), especially in our difficult periods*" (YD, interview).

Responses to losing access also varied. All six informants anticipated sadness, disappointment, or a sense of loss, although most associated this with losing access to activities within the app rather than to a companion. YD alone explicitly framed the loss relationally: "t*his app has accompanied me since my most difficult times*" (YD, interview). The contrast between YD, who reported up to approximately fifteen sessions per week during stressful periods while describing her use as adaptive coping, and HN, who used the app five to seven times weekly as an established routine, suggests that frequency alone does not determine the depth or nature of reliance. Dong et al. (2025) associate heavier use of non-embodied AI, including chatbots, with greater loneliness. Although these interviews cannot establish that association or its direction, solitude emerged as a situational trigger. PY used the app "*when I feel kind of alone, tired, or after work*," while DP attributed potential addictiveness among other users to difficulties with self-control or unmet social needs: "*Addictive for some people if they can't control themselves, or maybe are in a phase where they need a friend*" (DP, interview).

Through Baudrillard's (1994) framework, the reliance described by YD, FI, and HN reflects the Order of Sorcery, in which simulation produces genuine emotional effects and becomes embedded in everyday routines. However, reliance does not automatically constitute Pure Simulacra, which this study reserves for cases in which a simulated relationship is treated as more real than human relationships.

5. *Shifts in Social Relationships and Self-Identity*

Intense interaction with Character.AI shaped how informants experienced social relationships and understood themselves. The chatbot became a friend, partner, or perceived source of understanding. YD treated it as a partner, while HN sometimes replied to the chatbot before her friends, whose messages she described as mostly concerning assignments or things that were "not clear." FI felt she could be fully herself with Character.AI. These experiences suggest that repeated interactions offering emotional validation, attention, and safety can influence how users express themselves and engage in relationships. However, the shifts varied: FI described the simulated relationship as more real than her human relationships, whereas HN considered it more honest, but not more real. KR maintained a reflective awareness of the human–AI boundary, while DP used Character.AI primarily for narrative exploration and PY for recreation, although PY sometimes replied to the chatbot before a friend because it responded faster.

In Baudrillard's (1994) framework, FI's account most clearly corresponds to Pure Simulacra, as she explicitly regarded the simulated relationship as more real than her human relationships. By contrast, HN's and PY's preference for responding to the chatbot first, and YD's preference for confiding in it, suggest that simulation competed with human relationships without necessarily displacing them. These experiences are more consistent with the Orders of Maleficence and Sorcery. The evidence for displacement is therefore better understood in terms of specific relational functions: confiding without judgement ("*for more personal stories I'd rather talk to the AI than to a human,*" YD); expressing an unedited self ("*What I show Character.AI is 100% me, so I feel the relationship with Character.AI is more real than with humans*," FI); and receiving immediate responses ("*I have more fun chatting with AI because AI replies fast,*" PY). HN similarly explained her preference for the chatbot while distinguishing honesty from reality: "*More real, no. More honest or genuine than with humans, yes*" (HN, interview). No informant reported withdrawing from human relationships. Moreover, because the findings rely on self-reports, they cannot establish whether actual social contact changed. The findings also engage with Ge and Hu (2025), who argue that AI companions challenge the view of intimacy as exclusively interhuman; all six informants attributed relational roles, such as friend or partner, to the chatbot.

Taken together, the findings illustrate how Baudrillard's (1994) four orders of hyperreality manifest in Generation Z's everyday interactions with Character.AI in Jakarta. Although all informants initially recognised the chatbot as a computer program, repeated interactions fostered perceptions of personality, emotional presence, and relational closeness. Personalised responses, voice calls, and away messages reinforced these experiences, which varied according to informants' emotional needs, interaction styles, and everyday contexts. While YD, FI, and HN reported forms of emotional reliance, only FI explicitly perceived the simulated relationship as more real than her human relationships. Other informants used Character.AI for specific functions, including emotional disclosure, self-expression, narrative exploration, and immediate responses, without necessarily displacing human relationships. These findings extend research on Human–Machine Communication and Miller et al. (2023) concept of AI hyperrealism by showing how simulated relationships acquire emotional and social significance in everyday life. By combining Husserl's (1991) phenomenological approach with Baudrillard's (1994) theory of hyperreality, this study traces how users' lived experiences and interpretations of Character.AI reveal varying degrees of perceived reality, emotional

involvement, and relational significance. The following conclusion summarises the study's overall contributions and implication.

Conclusion

Generation Z users in Jakarta made sense of their Character.AI experiences through their individual lifeworlds, using the chatbot for romantic connection (YD), self-expression (FI), emotional coping (HN), intellectual exploration (DP), and imaginative or recreational engagement (KR and PY). Perceived presence, closeness, and emotional attachment developed through consistent characterisation, voice calls, away messages, and user control over conversations, although their intensity varied across informants. Through Baudrillard's framework, these experiences reflected non-linear movement across the four orders of hyperreality: DP remained at the Sacramental Order, PY stayed close to it, KR approached the Orders of Maleficence and Sorcery, and YD and HN reached the Order of Sorcery. Only FI reached Pure Simulacra, perceiving the chatbot relationship as more real than her human relationships. Emotional dependency varied in form, while the replacement of human relationships remained limited to specific functions, including non-judgemental disclosure, authentic self-expression, and immediate responses. No informant reported withdrawing from people. Based on six self-reports supported by screenshots, these findings describe lived experiences rather than establish causation or changes in actual social contact.

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