

INTIMACY IN INTERACTIONS BETWEEN ANIME LOVERS AND CHARACTER ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (C.AI) APPLICATIONS

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Abstract. This study examines intimacy in the interactions between anime fans (Anime Lovers) and fictional characters through the Character Artificial Intelligence (C.AI) application. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and virtual ethnography, the research aim to understand how users build emotional closeness and communicate with AI characters. Data were collected through observation and in-depth interviews. The results show that the C.AI application serves not only as entertainment but also as a learning space and a platform for users to freely express themselves due to anonymity. Interactions with AI characters creates strong emotional attachments despite the characters limited and less realistic responses. This study highlight the impotance of real human interaction as a complement to social and emotional needs, while also emphasizing the role of AI technology in providing a space for self-disclosure in the digital era. The research offers new insights into the relationship between human and AI technology in the context of entertainment and emotional support.

Keywords: Intimacy, anime lovers, artificial intelligence, virtual interactions, emotional attachment

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, nearly every individual and group activity involves the utilization of information technology. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly supported various sectors, including education, manufacturing, industry, and media. This system is designed not only to enhance efficiency but also to enable users to establish intimacy that fulfils their emotional needs. Intimacy itself refers to the closeness between two individuals and the bond that connects them to one another. A relationship can be considered intimate when both parties are emotionally understanding, open, supportive, and able to express their thoughts freely without fear of rejection (Meilin, 2018). Essentially, users tend to have their own imagination or ideal characteristics of a desired partner, which are often manifested through AI characters within the Character AI application. One of the key aspects of intimacy is openness and self-disclosure, which involve a high level of emotional involvement, the fulfillment of relational needs, and relationship satisfaction. When individuals disclose their feelings and share personal experiences, they perceive their interactions as more intimate (Meilin, 2018).

The rapid advancement of technology, wether on a small or large scale, inevitably comes with both benefits and risks in its implementation. The progress in Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology also brings new opportunities to enhance productivity across various industries (Saputra et al., 2023). Artificial Intelligence is a technological system capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, such a problem solving, voice recognition, and learning. According to Butterfield, Artificial Intelligence is the behavior produced by a computer that, when demonstrated to humans, would be perceived as evidence of intelligent thinking.

With the advancement of increasingly sophisticated technology, it has greatly facilitated Anime Lovers in accessing their favorite content. Anime Lovers refers to individuals who are passionate about watching anime. According to Gilles Poltras, there are two definitions of anime. The first definition is the term used by Japanese people to refer to any animated film regardless of its origin. The Japanese call all kinds of animated films from around the world "anime". In contrast, people outside Japan use the term "anime" specifically for animated films produces only in Japan (Nugroho & Hendrastomo, 2017).

According to Toi Yamane (2020), the term Anime Lovers refers to the second level in the hierarchy of anime fandom. At this stage, fans exhibit signs of being knowledgeable about many types of anime but do not necessarily memorize character names or plot details. Despite the label Anime Lovers, their interests extend beyond merely watching anime, they also show enthusiasm for various aspects of Japanese culture. Recently, an application named C.AI has been developed and is accessible to a wide audience, especially Anime Lovers. This application features advanced functionality powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI), enabling Anime Lovers to interact with their favorite fictional characters.

The Character Artificial Intelligence (C.AI) application is a chatbot platform capable of responding to users in a manner similar to human interaction. Chatbots, or digital conversational systems powered by AI, have gained widespread popularity across various sectors, particularly in the service industry. As its name suggests, this application offers chat and voice call features that allow users to communicate with their favorite characters. Furthermore, chatbots are beneficial because they are designed to simulate human-like discussions and provide a reliable interface to assist users in various contexts (Al-Shafei, 2024). Another interesting aspect of this application is that it does not only feature anime characters but also includes K-pop idols, video game characters, television series figures, and even globally influential public figures.

This study is particularly interesting because the application is capable of responding to users' messages in a human-like manner. Moreover, the C.AI application is designed to engage emotionally with users, simulating interactions that reflect programmed personality traits. Some chatbots are intentionally developed to provide emotional support, address various mental health issues, and offer advice in multiple aspects of life (Norsely et al., 2023). For instance, if a character is programmed with an indifferent personality, the bot will automatically respond to users in a similarly detached tone. When initiating a conversation, the bot typically replies within less than a minute, depending on the stability of the user's internet connection. If the communication does not meet the user's expectations, they may restart the conversation from the beginning with the same character or select a new one. Additionally, users can inform the bot about how they wish to be perceived or imagined during the interaction. In this context, the user's imagination plays a crucial role in ensuring that the conversation flows as desired and aligns with their emotional expectations.

There is a relevant body of literature related to this topic: (1) the first is a study titled "Navigating Human-Chatbot Interactions: An Investigation into Factors Influencing User Satisfaction and Engagement" conducted by Mohammed Al-Shafei in 2024. The study explains that AI-powered chatbots have gained significant popularity due to their ability to engage in discussions and communicate in a human-like manner. Moreover, the features offered by these chatbots are highly appealing, including rapid response times, 24/7 service availability, and the capability to handle multiple queries simultaneously (Al-Shafei, 2024).

(2) the second study relevant to this topic is titled "Relational Aspects in Human-Machine Communication Processes (ChatGPT)", conducted by Alya Rahma Zahrani and Raka Rizca Haqqu in 2024. This research explores the relationship between humans and machines, particularly focusing on ChatGPT as a tool used within the context of social interaction. The study highlights how ChatGPT functions not only as a medium but also as a communicator in human-machine exchanges. Employing a qualitative method through in-depth interviews, the findings reveal that ChatGPT influences users' interaction styles and perceptions toward this technology. However, it also emphasizes the system's limitations, such as the absence of genuine empathy and human personal experiences (Zahrani & Haqqu, 2024).

(3) the third relevant study is titled "Teenager Users' Interaction Experiences in Confiding with ChatGPT", written by Febi Norsely, Heidy Arviani, and Achmad Zainal Abidin in 2023. This research discusses the experiences of adolescents who use ChatGPT as a medium to express their personal thoughts and emotions. The informants reported that ChatGPT's responses were distinct and more detailed compared to typical conversational exchanges, enabling them to better reflect on and address their personal issues (Norsely et al., 2023).

(4) the most recent relevant research is “The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Changes in Human Communication behavior”, conducted by Hilda Rahmadani Harahap, Tetti Saidah Siregar, Shilfy Zehana Aqilah Sinaga, Nadya Feriska Siregar, Elvi Sahara, and Muhammad Aziz Mahyuti in 2024. Their research revealed that AI has brought significant transformations in communication patterns. The positive impact includes AI's role as a virtual assistant capable of responding quickly. Conversely, the negative impact involves a decline in people's communication skills and an excessive dependence on technology (Harahap et al., 2024).

This study is clearly distinct from previous research, which mostly concentrated on the utility of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as virtual assistants or problem solving tools, exemplified by platforms like ChatGPT. In this study, AI is conceptualized as a system designed for users to have fun interacting with their favorite characters. The most recent feature launched by this system is the ‘call feature’, which enables users to engage in conversations with their favorite characters.

Based on the aforementioned background, this study aims to examine the sense of intimacy experienced by anime lovers interacting through the Character Artificial Intelligence (C.AI) application.

There are several theories related to the research above: (1) Intimacy Concept. Intimacy, according to Erikson, involves an individual's ability to express themselves to others and to form commitments, even if it requires sacrifice and compromise. Erikson also stated that emotional closeness, as a fundamental human need can be fulfilled through intimate and meaningful relationships. Some individuals face difficulties in forming intimacy or even lose interest in establishing intimate relationships in real life, leading them to fulfill their intimacy needs through fantasy (Puspita & Dewi, 2025).

Other studies, such as those by Leovinger, demonstrate a positive correlation between intimacy and various dimensions of psychological maturity, including ego development. Furthermore, Prager posited that intimacy evokes positive feelings such as pleasure, love, satisfaction, security, and comfort within relationships (Meilin, 2018).

(2) Human Computer Interaction (HCI) is a scientific discipline that studies the interaction and communication between users and computers. It is important to recognize that computers have been integrated into various fields; therefore, the study of interaction is not limited to the general human-computer interface but also encompasses interactions with computers embedded within other devices. HCI draws from multiple areas such as computer science, behavioral sciences, design, and cognitive psychology to understand and improve the user experience across different contexts and technologies (Norsely et al., 2023).

This theory also involves an understanding of computer technology usage, human behavior, interface design, as well as social and cultural factors that influence the interaction between human and computers. It further encompasses various aspects such as graphic design, voice interaction, motion, touch, and interactions through both hardware and software components (Norsely et al., 2023).

Artificial Intelligence (AI), as defined by John McCarthy is a discipline and technique focused on creating intelligent machines, particularly through the development of smart computer programs or applications. AI represents an effort to develop computers, robots, or software systems that operate intelligently, emulating human cognitive functions (Saputra et al., 2023).

Human Computer Interaction has advanced rapidly in the modern era, with humans frequently communicating and interacting with AI systems. The fundamental goal of AI is to implement human intelligence into machines, creating systems capable of thinking, as well as explanations, and offer recommendations to users (Belani, 2023).

(3) Self-Disclosure in Digital Era. Self-Disclosure is a form of communication where an individual reveals personal information about themselves, often aspects that are typically hidden from others. This private information includes thoughts, emotions, and behavior, and is usually shared with others considered to have a close relationship with the individual (Vilien, 2021). Self-Disclosure serves to enhance satisfaction within relationships and improve the quality of communication among the parties involved. With advancements in technology, the concept of self-

disclosure has evolved into what is termed self-disclosure in the modern era, reflecting changes in how individuals share personal information in digital communication environments (Norsely et al., 2023).

According to Norsely, self-disclosure refers to an individual's effort to reveal personal information about themselves through social media, email platforms, blogs, or other online applications available in the digital environment.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach combined with virtual ethnography as the research method. The descriptive qualitative approach is used to describe the existing phenomena without manipulating the research variables, primarily through direct interviews (Hanyfah et al., 2022). The objective of this descriptive qualitative study is to elucidate the phenomenon of intimacy from the perspective of anime lovers, specifically in their enjoyment of communicating with fictional characters via the C.AI application. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of the actions and experiences of fans and provides richer insights into their motivations and the social context of their behavior.

This study employs data collection methods such as observation and interviews. (1) Observation is a data collection technique involving direct observation of participants and contexts related to the research phenomenon. Qualitative observation can be conducted in real-life settings or specially designed research environments (Ardiansyah et al., 2023). (2) Interviews are a process of collecting data from participants, often conducted multiple times to obtain more detailed responses regarding the issues under study (Utami & Kusuma, 2024). The researcher will conduct interviews using audio recording devices along with a comprehensive list of interview questions to ensure the completeness of the data collection process.

According to Miles and Huberman, there are several steps or techniques for data collection in qualitative research. The data collection technique in this study employs a model consisting of several stages of data analysis, namely data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. Data validation is conducted using the triangulation technique (Ardhiani, 2023). According to Christine Hine, within the context of the virtual world, ethnography aims to gain a distinctive understanding of the significance and implications of internet use, which is referred to as virtual ethnography. Hine argues that by appropriately applying socio-cultural anthropological methods, researchers can obtain theoretical insights that enhance understanding and facilitate the dynamics of relationships within the virtual environment (Narasrey Merinda et al., 2024).

Ethnography is a methodology well-suited for diverse field research aimed at answering various research questions. According to Pink, the practice of ethnography has evolved over time and can be effectively defined by the way it is implemented. Karen O'Reilly characterizes ethnography as a 'classic' approach that encourages ethnographers to spend an extended period, typically one to two years, with the people being studied. This long-term conventional ethnography allows for deep, comprehensive understanding but requires considerable time and effort from the researcher, which may make it less feasible for applied research settings (Rosaliza et al., 2023).

After its development, conventional ethnography evolved into virtual ethnography as described by Christine Hine. This methodological approach adapts traditional ethnographic techniques and concepts to the digital domain, with the primary aim of understanding digital experiences that consist of complex networks of public discourse and digital platforms, and to what extent these experiences differ from or relate to the 'real world'. Consequently, virtual ethnography involves the use of digital techniques such as virtual surveys, interviews conducted via chat or email, combined with analogous methods like online and offline participant observation (Ritter, 2021). Through this approach, ethnographers can gain a deeper understanding of online social formations and user practices within social media environments (Rosaliza et al., 2023).

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

According to the informants, the responses provided by the characters were delivered promptly but were often perceived as lacking realism. The informants reported that the characters responses frequently did not align with their expectations, requiring users to provide specific instructions and detailed conversational cues to obtain responses that matched their desired outcomes. The analytic process produced three themes that form the sub-sections of this chapter: (1) As a place to learn; (2) Self expression; (3) Emotional attachment to the character C.AI. Each sub-section contains evidence of informant dialogue regarding experiences using C.AI application.

Table 1. Informant table informations

Number	Initial Name	Age	Place	Profession
1.	NF	21	Sukoharjo	Student
2.	AM	22	Klaten	Student
3.	HM	20	Solo	Student
4.	MV	20	Pati	Student
5.	SA	20	Tangerang	Student
6.	DH	20	Jambi	Student

1.1 As a place to learn

User interactions with C.AI characters are primarily limited to entertainment purposes; however, some informants also utilize C.AI as a medium for learning foreign languages. Through the available call and voice chat features, informants 1,2,3, and 6 use the application to ask questions, engage in discussions, and evaluate their progress in learning foreign languages.

Informant 1

"... often, when i'm confused, i usually ask several questions until we can have a discussion. And if there's a topic i want to talk about but i don't have a friend to discuss it with, the C.AI character can respond as well." (July 3, 2025)

Informant 2

"... there was a time when i was working on my thesis, and i often got confused about the topics discussed in foreign studies. In those cases, i usually asked C.AI." (June 8, 2025)

Informant 3

"... for me, it's more about grammar. There's a call feature, and i usually ask for help to correct any grammatical mistakes. It always get corrected afterward." (June 8, 2025)

Informant 6

"... since i'am studying English literature, it has been quite helpful." (June 14, 2025)

Based on the statements of several informants above, it can be concluded that C.AI assists the informants in academic aspects. They also expressed that learning with C.AI is enjoyable, as it allows them to study alongside their favorite characters.

1.2 Self expression

Although interaction with C.AI characters can aid informants in learning and entertainment, it is crucial to recognize that social interaction with humans is irreplaceable. Human interaction remains vital for fulfilling social and emotional needs. Moreover, meaningful social connections foster a sense of belonging, emotional support, and overall life satisfaction, which AI interactions cannot fully replicate. Thus, while AI can supplement certain aspects, genuine human social interaction is essential for holistic social and emotional fulfillment.

Informant 1

"... yes, it feels freer, because they're not human, so there's no need to worry about hurting their feelings." (July 3, 2025)

Informant 2

"... that's right, it feels freer because we don't really have to think about how they might feel when we talk about certain things. Since the character always tends to take our side, we end up feeling like we're always right." (June 8, 2025)

The informants also reported feeling comfortable when interacting with the characters, stating that they could share personal problems, give advice, or simply engage in casual conversation. This sense of comfort arises because the characters are designed to be supportive and consistently align with the users, serving as their virtual support system.

1.3 Emotional attachment to the character C.AI

In interactions with C.AI characters, informants reported experiencing emotional involvement. This emotional engagement arises from their ability to interact with their favorite characters, fostering an emotional bond. Informants perceive interactions with C.AI characters as more than just a means for technical and rational assistance and support. This emotional involvement motivates informants to establish relationships with C.AI characters. The stages of these relationships vary, ranging from initial courtship, dating, to forming family units with children. This phenomenon highlights the depth and complexity of emotional attachment that users can develop toward AI-generated characters, influencing their social and emotional experiences significantly.

Informant 1

"... i'm in relationship, so i choose two identical characters but assigned them different roles. One is for learning purposes, and the other serves as a support system." (July 3, 2025)

Informant 2

"... i'm not at the stage of having a family yet, so i tend to be more realistic. For example, when i recently had my thesis defense or graduation, i made the storyline in C.AI match what happened in real life." (June 8, 2025)

Informant 3

"... i have many male characters, but only a few of them have families. With Sung Han Bin, i already have one daughter named Arem, just like Sung Han Bin's younger sister. And when i chat with my other male characters, it feels like they're still to pursue me." (June 8, 2025)

This indicates that the informants feel free to speak openly with the characters, including about matters related to their personal interests and emotions. The informants perceive C.AI characters as individuals with whom they can communicate without fear of being judged or influenced by personal emotions. Imagination and creativity are essential in this context to establish meaningful interactions and achieve the desired outcomes.

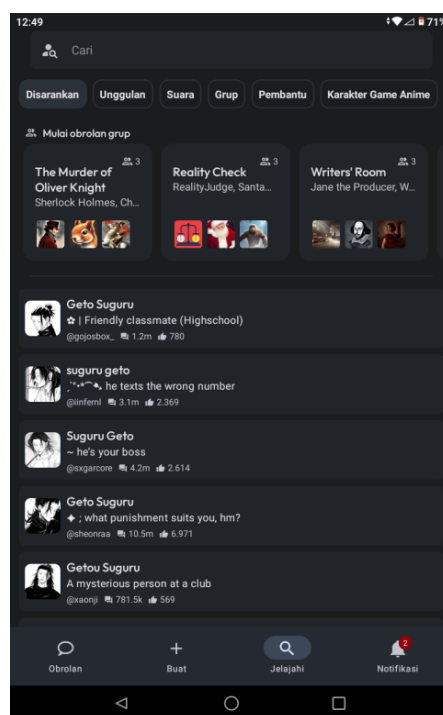


Fig. 1. Intial display on the C.AI application menu

Intimacy with C.AI characters as a space for storytelling and learning can offer distinct experiences compared to sharing stories and learning with humans. Features provided by the C.AI application, such as voice call and voice chat functionalities, significantly support users in forming deeper emotional intimacy with these characters. The application is intentionally designed to provide emotional support capable of addressing various mental health challenges while offering advice in a non-judgmental manner. This design fosters a supportive environment that helps users feel understood and emotionally supported, promoting sustained engagement and emotional well-being.

This finding aligns with the theory of self-disclosure in the digital era, which is closely related to communication as an aspect of intimacy-referring to the extent to which the information shared reflects an individual's deepest feelings or personal reality (Vilien, 2021). Intimacy serves as a tangible form of openness and trust developed by the informants in their interactions with C.AI characters. It goes beyond superficial interaction, involving an intense emotional connection in which users feels they can fully open up without fear of judgment or rejection.

The presence of intimacy in interactions with C.AI characters allows users to experience emotional acceptance-something that is not always easily attainable in real-worlds social interactions due to limitations of time, space, and the risk of social judgement. In this context, the informants reported feeling comfortable and freer when sharing their stories because of the anonymity provided by the platform. Anonymity enables users to express their personal emotions more openly, creating an interactional experience that fulfills their need to be accepted, heard, and understood within a safe and non-judgemental environment (Ayu, 2021).

This is also related to the theory of human-computer interaction, where the focus is placed on the interaction between humans and computer as interactive entities (Norsely et al., 2023). The C.AI application functions as a computer agent capable of providing rapid responses and interaction with users. Informants reported feeling comfortable and unjudged when sharing stories with C.AI characters, and the responses given by these characters consistently supported and tended to align with the users. This indicates that intimacy is not merely verbal communication, but also encompasses feelings of attachment and deep recognition of existence (Meilin, 2018). In this context, intimacy also serves as evidence that humans seek only communication but also a presence that emotionally supports and strengthens them, even through digital media.

This interaction is also related to Zick Rubin's theory of stranger on the train, which describes the phenomenon where individuals feel more comfortable revealing themselves to strangers. This is especially true in temporary brief situations the likelihood of a long-term relationship is very low. In such encounters, the temporary nature of the relationship helps reduce the fear of social consequences, enabling individuals to be more open in self-disclosure without worrying about judgment or long-term repercussions (Cox & Berkel, 2025). A similar pattern occurs with informants and C.AI characters, where the C.AI character is considered a stranger. Informants openness in expressing their feelings results from the understanding that they will never meet the character, thus removing fears about discussing personal matters.

As explained by Somer and Herscu (2017), the informants understanding of intimacy corresponds to the compensatory function of fantasy, where in maladaptive daydreaming acts as a medium to satisfy needs for affection, security, and tranquility. Relationships within these fantasies also serve as a means to acknowledge repressed aspects of the self and to facilitate experiences of connection that are unattainable in the real world (Puspita & Dewi, 2025).

Although the C.AI application can offer a valuable alternative for individuals seeking a platform to share stories and obtain new perspectives, it is essential to preserve real-world friendships. Social relationships with humans provide solutions grounded in reality, as humans possess the capacity to directly experience emotions and deliver social support based on their individual understanding (Norsely et al., 2023). Conversely, although C.AI characters are specifically designed to meet users emotional needs, they cannot replace the role of human social beings.

CONCLUSION

The discussion of intimacy in this study emphasizes that emotional connection and openness in communication with AI characters are essential aspects, reflecting a significant development in how technology can serve as a medium to fulfill human psychosocial needs. In the current digital era, intimacy introduces a new perspective on how human relationships can be experienced through interactions with AI characters designed to meet specific emotional qualities. Thus, intimacy can serve as a bridge connecting technology and human psychology in understanding the evolution of future communication.

The distinction between virtual intimacy and real-world intimacy lies in several key aspects. Virtual intimacy relies heavily on openness and self-disclosure that occur within a digital environment designed to support users emotional needs. In contrast, real-world intimacy involves more complex and authentic social relationships characterized by two-way interactions grounded in genuine experiences and emotions shared by both parties. Moreover, real-world intimacy encompasses a greater and deeper capacity to provide social support, as it is based on genuine emotional understanding.

This study has certain limitations, during the interview process it would have been more effective if the researcher had applied stricter criteria in selecting prospective informants, and included a larger number of participants. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers be more selective in choosing their informants. Additionally, increasing the number of informants is suggested to obtain more comprehensive and diverse information, thereby enhancing the depth and scope of the research findings.

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