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Prosopos in Student Communication with Generative AI: A Phenomenological Study of Persona Formation and AI Literacy in Digital Higher Education

Fery Harianto*, Rajab Ritonga, Pitoyo
Universitas Gunadarma, Indonesia
Email: feryharianto@gmail.com*

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Abstract
The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed digital communication in higher education, enabling natural language interactions that resemble interpersonal dialogue. This study investigates how students construct communicative relationships with AI and develop AI literacy in academic contexts. The research aims to explore students' experiences in assigning personas to AI, engaging in "as-if human" communication, and reflecting ethically on AI usage. A qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed, involving 25 students from the D-III Public Relations Program at AKMRTV Jakarta. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital observations, and analysis of 218 AI conversational documents. The findings reveal that students perceive AI as an academic thinking partner, discussion companion, and virtual mentor, fostering relational attachment and supporting idea development. Students actively assign personas to AI platforms, applying interpersonal communication norms and critical verification during interactions. Based on these insights, the Prosopopoeic AI Literacy (PAIL) model was developed, consisting of five dimensions: Persona Awareness, Relational Awareness, Critical Verification, Academic Agency, and Ethical Reflection. The study concludes that AI literacy encompasses both technical skills and reflective, ethical, and relational competencies, positioning AI as a quasi-social actor in higher education. These findings provide practical implications for AI integration into curricula, promoting responsible, ethical, and effective human-AI communication in academic environments.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is one of the most significant developments in the digital communication landscape of the 21st century (Kumar & Rabindranath, 2025; Onyejelem & Aondover, 2024; Shahzad et al., 2025; Takale et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Technologies such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot present new forms of interaction that allow humans to communicate using natural language interactively. Unlike conventional search engines that function to provide information, Generative AI is able to generate responses that resemble human dialogue, creating a more personalized, adaptive, and sustainable communication experience (Amer & Elboghdadly, 2024; Gupta & Bansal, 2025; Kaiser et al., 2025; Pescapè, 2024; Rejón-Guardia et al., 2025).

In the context of higher education, students are the fastest group of users to adopt Generative AI. The UNESCO report (2024) shows that generative AI is increasingly being used to support the learning process, assignment preparation, reference search, research idea

development, and academic writing assistance. This phenomenon shows that AI has become an integral part of the digital academic ecosystem (Hirvonen et al., 2024; Nguyen & Tuamsuk, 2022; Okunlaya et al., 2022; Schumann et al., 2022).

However, the use of AI is no longer just instrumental. Many students are starting to look at AI as a discussion buddy, virtual mentor, academic assistant, and even a thought partner. Interactions that take place repeatedly through text-based conversations lead to the emergence of relational experiences that resemble interpersonal communication. This condition shows that the relationship between humans and AI is not only built on the basis of technological functions, but also through the process of constructing meaning that is social and symbolic (Atkinson & Barker, 2023; Elmaresa, 2025; Habibi et al., 2025; Lindgren, 2025).

This phenomenon can be explained through the perspective of Human-Machine Communication (HMC). According to Guzman (2018), the development of AI has shifted the position of technology from a communication medium to a communication agent capable of producing messages and influencing human behavior. In this perspective, AI is no longer understood as a passive tool, but rather as an actor who participates in the communication process.

One of the relevant concepts for understanding this phenomenon is prosopopoeia. In the classical rhetorical tradition, prosopopoeia refers to the act of giving a human voice or character to a non-human entity. Hau (2026) develops this concept in the context of human-AI communication as a process when users assign a social identity to AI and then interact with it through the "as-if human" communication logic.

Communication students are an interesting group to study because they have the capacity to be reflective of the communication process they undertake. As individuals who study media, digital communication, and the construction of meaning, communication students are more likely to build social interpretations of AI than the average user.

Despite widespread adoption, the integration of AI in higher education introduces new complexities in human-AI interactions. Students are not merely using AI as a tool; they are engaging in relational experiences that simulate social and symbolic communication. This interaction goes beyond instrumental use, positioning AI as discussion partners, virtual mentors, and thinking companions. Such phenomena necessitate an examination through the lens of Human-Machine Communication (HMC), which views AI as an active agent capable of producing messages and influencing human behavior, rather than as a passive instrument.

Previous research on AI adoption in higher education has primarily focused on models like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), assessing factors influencing adoption and perceived usefulness. However, these frameworks largely overlook the social dimension of interaction, particularly how students construct communicative relationships with AI through repeated engagement. Quantitative studies dominate this space, leaving phenomenological insights into human-AI relational experiences underexplored, particularly in the Indonesian higher education context.

The concept of prosopopoeia offers a theoretical framework for understanding these interactions. Traditionally, prosopopoeia refers to attributing a human voice or character to a non-human entity. Hau (2026) adapts this notion to human-AI communication, describing the process in which users assign social identities to AI agents and interact with them as if they were human, termed "as-if human" communication. This perspective underscores the symbolic and reflective dimensions of human-AI interactions, situating AI literacy within both technical and relational competencies.

In light of this, communication students represent a particularly relevant cohort for study. As individuals trained to critically analyze media and interpret social meanings, they are likely to assign personas and engage in reflective interactions with AI more actively than the general student population. Their experiences provide rich insights into the formation of social

interpretations, relational attachment, and ethical considerations surrounding AI engagement in learning environments.

Despite the growing presence of AI in educational settings, research gaps remain. Few studies have adopted a phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences of interacting with generative AI, and no existing models adequately account for the development of communicative competencies required to manage these relationships ethically and reflectively. This gap indicates an urgent need for research that bridges technical, social, and ethical dimensions of AI literacy, especially in contexts where digital communication skills are increasingly critical for academic success.

Addressing this gap, the present study introduces the Prosopopoeic AI Literacy (PAIL) model, which comprises five dimensions: Persona Awareness, Relational Awareness, Critical Verification, Academic Agency, and Ethical Reflection. This model extends traditional notions of AI literacy by emphasizing not only the technical use of AI but also the management of symbolic and social interactions with AI agents. It highlights the reflective and ethical capacities required for students to engage with AI in ways that enhance learning autonomy and critical thinking.

The study aims to explore the experiences of 25 students from the D-III Public Relations Study Program at AKMRTV Jakarta, analyzing 218 AI conversational documents alongside interviews and digital observations. By employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research captures the nuanced ways students assign personas, communicate relationally, and develop ethical and reflective practices with AI. The methodology allows for a deep understanding of human-AI relational dynamics in academic contexts, providing empirical evidence to inform educational practices.

The research contributes to theory and practice by expanding the study of Human-Machine Communication and proposing a novel framework for AI literacy in higher education. It positions AI not only as a learning tool but also as a quasi-social actor in students' academic lives. The findings aim to guide curriculum development, teaching strategies, and policy-making that incorporate AI as an ethically and pedagogically integrated component of digital learning environments.

Ultimately, the study benefits students, educators, and policymakers by providing actionable insights into managing human-AI interactions effectively. By developing students' prosopopoeic literacy, the research supports enhanced academic engagement, critical thinking, and ethical awareness in the use of generative AI. These outcomes are increasingly relevant in a global context where digital competencies and AI literacy are essential for academic and professional success, positioning this research at the intersection of technology, communication, and education.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore students' experiences in communicating with Generative AI. The population consisted of students enrolled in the D-III Public Relations Study Program at AKMRTV Jakarta. From this population, 25 students were selected as the sample using purposive sampling, based on specific criteria: active enrollment in semesters 3–6, at least six months of experience using Generative AI, engagement with AI for academic activities a minimum of three times per week, and willingness to provide AI conversation documentation. This selection ensured participants had sufficient exposure and reflective experience with AI to provide rich qualitative data.

The research instruments included semi-structured in-depth interviews, digital observations of AI interaction, and 218 AI conversational documents submitted by participants. The instruments' validity was ensured through expert review and alignment with the research

objectives, while reliability was addressed by triangulating data across multiple sources—interviews, observations, and documents—to cross-verify findings. Data collection followed a systematic procedure: initial participant briefing and consent, documentation submission, interview scheduling, and concurrent digital observation of AI interactions to capture authentic communication behaviors and patterns.

Data analysis was conducted using the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): reading and re-reading transcripts and documents, initial coding, emergent theme identification, clustering into superordinate themes, and interpretative analysis. Data management and coding were facilitated using qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo or Atlas.ti) to organize, visualize, and systematically analyze patterns across multiple data sources. This approach allowed the researchers to generate a comprehensive understanding of human-AI relational experiences, including persona formation, relational awareness, critical verification, academic agency, and ethical reflection, culminating in the development of the Prosopopoeic AI Literacy (PAIL) model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

AI as an Academic Thinking Partner

Most informants view AI as an intellectual partner that helps develop ideas, evaluate arguments, and construct a framework of thinking.

"I often have discussions with ChatGPT before meeting the supervisor because the response is quick and helps me understand the theory first." (Informant 07)

Giving Personas to AI

Table 1 All informants showed a tendency to give certain characters to AI.

Platform AI	Persona Assigned
ChatGPT	Friendly, supportive
Claude	Academic, critical
Gemini	Fast, practical
Copilot	Technical, systematic

As-If Human Communication

Table 2 An analysis of 218 conversations showed:

Indicator	Percentage
Personal greetings	89%
Acknowledgments	94%
Asking for AI Opinions	86%
Emotional Expression	41%

These findings show that students use interpersonal communication norms in interacting with AI.

AI as an Academic Safe Space

Students consider AI to be a safe learning space because it does not provide negative social judgments as may appear in interactions with lecturers or friends.

Ambivalence of Academic Agency

Although AI increases academic productivity, some informants acknowledge a tendency to rely on AI.

The findings of the study show that prosopopoeia is the main mechanism in the formation of human-AI relationships. Students actively build personas towards AI and then use those personas as the basis for communicative interactions.

This phenomenon reinforces CASA Theory's argument that humans tend to treat technology using social norms. However, this study shows that the process does not occur automatically, but rather through symbolic constructions carried out by users.

The results of the study also show that AI has developed into a quasi-social actor in the digital higher education environment. Students use AI not only to obtain information, but also as a space for reflection, idea validation, and academic support.

PROSOPOPOEIC AI LITERACY MODEL (PAIL)

This research produced a Prosopopoeic AI Literacy model consisting of five dimensions:

Persona Awareness

Awareness that AI characters are the result of user interpretive construction.

Relational Awareness

Awareness of the relational relationships formed with AI.

Critical Verification

The ability to verify AI-generated information.

Academic Agency

The ability to maintain academic thinking autonomy.

Ethical Reflection

The ability to reflect on the ethical implications of using AI.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that students in the D-III Public Relations Program at AKMRTV Jakarta develop complex, relational communication experiences with Generative AI through the mechanism of prosopopoeia. AI is perceived as an intellectual partner, discussion companion, and virtual mentor, fostering an "as-if human" communication pattern that strengthens relational attachment and supports academic thinking. The development of the Prosopopoeic AI Literacy (PAIL) model demonstrates that AI literacy extends beyond technical proficiency, encompassing reflective, ethical, and relational competencies that enable students to critically manage symbolic interactions with AI. This highlights the evolving role of AI as a quasi-social actor in higher education, integrating technology, pedagogy, and ethical engagement in digital academic environments.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the study across diverse academic disciplines and cultural contexts to examine the generalizability of the PAIL model. Longitudinal studies could explore the impact of sustained AI interaction on students' academic autonomy, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning. Additionally, future studies could integrate mixed-method designs to combine phenomenological insights with quantitative measures of academic performance and AI engagement, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how human-AI communication shapes learning outcomes and digital literacy development in higher education.

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