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Artificial Intimacy and Human Connection: A Comparative Study on Student Experiences of AI Voice Feature and Professors in Academic and Emotional Support

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of seventeen (17) undergraduate students as they interact with university professors and Artificial Intelligence (AI), specifically ChatGPT 4o with voice feature, in academic and emotional support contexts. Using a comparative phenomenological research design and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study investigates how students perceive differences in clarity, accessibility, empathy, authority, and confidence when engaging with artificial and human connection as sources. Guided by Social Presence Theory and inductive thematic analysis, findings reveal five (5) core themes namely 1) Clarity and Structure vs Rich Context, 2) Availability and Accessibility, 3) Emotional Presence and Empathy, 4) Trust and Professional Authority, and 5) Impact on Academic Confidence. The results reveal that while an AI offers a cognitive efficiency and emotional safety because of its simulated empathy, professors provide irreplaceable connection or relational depth, embodied empathy, and pedagogical wisdom. Therefore, AI functions not as a replacement or a substitute but as a scaffold that prepares students for more confident human interaction. The study concludes that artificial intimacy, though simulated, plays a transformative role in contemporary education by bridging gaps in access and ease anxiety, strengthening the case for human-AI collaboration in academic and emotional support.

Keywords: Affective computing, ChatGPT 4o, Empathy, Relational depth, Social presence

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intimacy. Can intimacy be artificial? How is it possible for closeness, care, or emotional support be artificially produced, and who gets to define or determine when a connection is genuine versus simulated? Can closeness still be real if it is mediated by technology? Can the presence of something artificial immediately mean the absence of a genuine connection? These are questions that don't sit nearly within one discipline. It cut across psychotherapy, philosophy, human-computer interaction, and education requiring nuanced and interdisciplinary inquiry that each offering different ways into what intimacy means when one is dealing with a human professor on one end and a machine that's been trained to sound caring on the other. Thus, the tension starts, when something can mimic empathy well enough, where do we draw the line between real and performed?

Artificial Intimacy means an Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems designed to simulate human-like

emotional interactions (Turkle, 2011). To simply put, it is an AI-simulated emotional support. Studies suggest that AI can mimic empathy in many forms and one distinct form is through voice modulation (Nass and Brave, 2005) like ChatGPT 4o's conversational tone. Yet, critics argue that AI lacks genuine or authentic emotional understanding because it still operates on pre-programmed algorithms rather than lived experience (Weizenbaum, 1976). Additionally, psychotherapist and bestselling author Esther Perel (Center for Humane Technology, 2024) warns that artificial intimacy is an emerging harmful form of AI that deprives people of real connection. Arguing that technology appears to distort the way human beings form relationships and how intimacy is gained or lost. It, therefore, raises a critical question on how to deal or manage technologies that distorts relationships and intimacy. This study might offer a glimpse into human-computer interaction by presenting initial findings regarding the aforementioned observation. It should be noted, however, that the primary focus is a comparative analysis of student participants' interactions with an AI (ChatGPT4o) voice feature and with their professors.

This rapid spread of AI in the context of education has introduced new modalities of support that challenge traditional boundaries between human connectedness and machine-mediated interaction. Among these, AI voice features, systems that stimulate conversational, affective, and supportive qualities through speech, have become increasingly deployed for academic help, coaching, and even emotional scaffolding. At the same time, human professors remain central figures in learners' academic engagement and emotional support, often embodying relational constructs such as empathy, trust, and mutual recognition that have long been theorized as foundational to effective learning. This study with a title "Artificial Intimacy and Human Connection: A Comparative Study on Student Experiences of AI Voice Feature and Professors in Academic and Emotional Support," seeks to interrogate how students experience, differentiate, and weigh these two sources of support. Specifically, it asks:

1. How do AI and human professors differ in their impact on students' academic engagement and emotional support; and
2. Which provides greater expressions of empathy: AI voice feature or human professors?

Framing this inquiry through Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) foregrounds how learners perceive the "realness" or immediacy of a participant, whether human or artificial, and how that perceived presence shapes feelings of connection, trust, and engagement. Existing global literature shows that AI systems, particularly those grounded in affective computing, can stimulate emotional responsiveness and thereby influence learner motivation and perceived support (Picard, 1997; D'Mello and Graesser, 2015), yet scholars warn that such simulations may produce only the appearance of intimacy, that is comfort without genuine mutuality, raising concerns about whether artificial agents complement, substitute, or undermines human relational support (Turkle, 2011). At the same time, meta-analytic evidence affirms that authentic, learner-centered teacher-student relationships characterized by empathy and warmth are strong predictors of both academic and emotional outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007) establishing a human relational benchmark against which artificial presence must be evaluated. In the Philippine educational landscape, digital interventions intersect with structural inequities such as the digital divide where inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, and a lack of sufficient training compromise the effectiveness of the digitalization program, resulting in barriers experienced at every level of the educational system (Villaseñor, 2024; Barrot et al., 2021; Arinto, 2016). And while technology promises expanded access, there is limited to no understanding of how Filipino students emotionally interpret and negotiate hybrid support systems where AI voice features and human professors coexist observing a gap. Additionally, from the researchers' end, there are no empirical studies in the Philippines were found that directly

compare students' subjective criteria for choosing between AI-generated and human-provided support, especially in terms of perceived presence, empathy, efficiency, and accessibility. Including an examination of the institutional implementations of voice-based tools often prioritize usability and scalability over relational authenticity. Thus, this study addresses a layered gap: the lack of comparative data on how artificial and human agents differ in cultivating social presence in academic and emotional contexts, the lack of research exploring how Filipino students interpret and understand the sense of closeness or connection that arises when classroom support comes partly from AI voice features and partly from their professors, and the underexplored decision-making of students on what approach to use when selecting support sources. The relevance, therefore, of this inquiry lies in its contribution to knowledge creation and practice for it refines the conceptualization of artificial intimacy by anchoring it in the experiential dynamics of social presence, surfaces learner agency in evaluating support mechanisms, and offers actionable insight for educational design such as institutions deploying AI voice features can better calibrate these systems not merely for efficiency but for relational empathy and avoiding displacement of human connection while strategically integrating artificial support where it augments rather than undermines engagement. The following section details the materials and methods used to investigate the research questions, including the comparative design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytic strategies that attend to both the felt presence and functional support of human and AI agents.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study adopts a comparative phenomenological research design, drawing on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In IPA, researchers undertake an in-depth exploration of each participants' lived experience and then conduct a cross-case analysis to identify both shared themes and differences (Smith et al., 2009). This framework is well suited to examine how students experience and evaluate interactions with two distinct sources of academic and emotional support: AI-generated voice feature (ChatGPT4o) and human professors. While grounded in phenomenological inquiry, the study emphasizes a comparative meaning-making, a depart from a traditional phenomenology. The aim of is not only to understand how students perceive each type of interaction, but also to surface how they contrast them in terms of presence, empathy, efficiency, and accessibility.

The study is guided by Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) which conceptualizes social presence as the extent to which a person is perceived as "real" in mediated communication. This theoretical lens provides a useful framework for examining how students perceive emotional immediacy and connection in both AI-assisted and human-provided academic interactions.

Participants

Participants were selected through a convenience sampling followed by purposive sampling. First, two sections from the College of International Tourism and Hospitality Management (CITHM) were invited to join the study based on convenience and the researchers' existing connections, as these classes were enrolled at the time and under one of the researcher's supervision. Next, purposive sampling was applied with eligibility based on students (18 years of age and above) who had completed six (6) meaningful interactions with the ChatGPT 4o voice feature over three (3) weeks (journaling twice per week) and engaged with a human professor for academic and emotional support during the first semester of Academic Year 2024-2025. Following an orientation session, only those students who volunteered and completed the journaling requirement were confirmed as participants. Applying this process yielded a total of

seventeen (17) student-participants, with seven (7) from Section A and ten (10) from Section B.

Data Collection

The sole data collection method was an online reflective journaling, chosen for its ability to elicit rich, introspective responses over time. This allowed student participants to narrate their thoughts without external influence and to organically compare their experiences as they occurred. Online journaling was favored over traditional pen-and-paper methods, mainly because of its practical advantages such as allowing the student-participants to record their reflections anytime and anywhere, whether they are on campus, commuting or at home. This immediacy encourages more consistent entries, since student participants no longer need to carry a notebook or find writing materials.

Student participants were provided links each week over a period of three (3) weeks and were asked to write two entries each week comparing their experiences with AI voice feature and human support. They accessed the online journaling platform (using Microsoft Forms) through individualized links, each of which embedded both an electronic informed consent and a privacy notice to ensure that every student understood the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and how their data would be stored and used before they begun journaling. A guide question encouraged them to reflect on how they felt engaged, supported, understood, or emotionally connected in each type of interaction. The prompt was: "Describe a recent encounter with your professor and an interaction with ChatGPT 4o that provided you with motivation, understanding, support or empathy." In the final journal entry, they were asked, "Which provided more emphatic support, interactions with professors or the AI voice feature". Both questions underwent validation from experts of social science and research, including feedback from colleagues. A pilot test was also conducted to students from another college before being administered to the target participants.

Data Analysis

The study employed an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun ang Clarke, 2006) that was grounded in Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976), to examine and compare the interactions, specifically the journal entries, of student participants with human professors and an AI voice feature. This method was selected because it allows themes and patterns to emerge from the data itself, rather than being shaped by pre-existing theories or frameworks. Furthermore, it is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, capitalizing similarities and differences, and the possibility in generating unanticipated insights (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). Since the study aimed to understand how students experienced and compared their interactions with human professors and an AI voice feature, it was important to remain open to how student participants described these experiences in their own words. Inductive thematic analysis provides a flexible yet systematic way of identifying recurring ideas, emotions, and relational cues across qualitative data. It is especially well-suited to studies that are exploratory in nature or that seek to give voice to participant perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017). The method also aligns well with Social Presence Theory, which values how individuals make meaning of perceive connection and emotional presence in mediated communication (Short et al., 1976). Through focusing on the lived experiences of participants, the method allows the researchers to remain attentive to the subtle differences (or similarities) in how students interpreted academic support, empathy, and connection when delivered by either a human or AI agent.

To ensure trustworthiness of the data analysis technique, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria namely

credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability were observed across Nowell et al.'s (2017) six (6) phases of thematic analysis namely: 1) familiarization that includes a prolonged engagement with each journal entry; triangulating student journals with reflexive field notes; reflexive journaling to surface biases; and archiving raw transcripts and memos to create an audit trail; 2) generating initial codes where an independent open-coding by both researchers with subsequent comparison and resolution; peer debriefing of preliminary codes; and maintaining a coding audit trail that traces each code back to its data source; 3) searching for themes which includes diagramming code clusters and their interrelationships, and having a detailed analytic memos to capture theme hierarchies; 4) reviewing themes where collaborative process by the researchers come to review, critique, and refine the preliminary themes that emerged from coding and following a referential adequacy checks via member-checking of exemplar excerpts; 5) defining and naming themes where third-party peer debriefing to refine labels and documenting researchers' consensus on theme boundaries and definitions were observed; and 6) producing the report in which descriptions with rich participant quotations, reflexive transparency in detailing coding choices, decisions, and theoretical alignment were considered. These layered strategies collectively underpin the trustworthiness of the researchers' thematic findings. However, it must be noted that the rigor of theme development was derived from the recurring frequency of student participants journaling responses, allowing patterns and relationships to naturally emerge from the data.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined by the Data Privacy Act of the Philippines (Republic Act No.10173, 2012). Prior to data collection, the research protocol received approval from the researchers' institutional Research and Innovation Center which acts also as an institutional review board to ensure that all procedures met recognized standards for the protections of human participants. Therefore, all student participants were provided with an online informed consent and privacy notice integrated in each link before beginning the journaling process. The consent form clearly explained the study's purpose, the guide question, the potential benefits and risks of being a student participant, and the voluntary nature of participation. Student participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty and declining or discontinuing participation would not affect their standing in any academic context (American Educational Research Association, 2011). Additionally, to protect student participants' identities, each journal entry was assigned a unique code rather than the student's name. Personal identifiers were removed from the dataset immediately after collection, and only the researchers had access to the master list linking codes to real identities. Finally, to instigate potential bias, the researchers maintained reflexive field notes throughout data analysis. These notes documented the researchers' own assumptions and emotional responses, which were collaborated and discussed in debriefing sessions. That researchers work together to review and agree on the preliminary themes identified in the data to ensure each theme is supported and accurately described (Nowell et al., 2017) and that interpretations remained grounded in student participants' lived experiences rather than the preconceptions of researchers.

Results and Discussion

The participants of the study were composed of 17 students from the RPHN01A: Readings in Philippine History, one of the General Education courses offered in the College of International Tourism and Hospitality Management, Lyceum of the Philippines University Manila. Among the seventeen (17) student

participants from the two sections, ten (10) or 58.82% were female while seven (7) or 41.18% were male. All of them had baseline knowledge of the use of ChatGPT 4o voice feature and had received an orientation before beginning their journaling process.

The journal entries of seventeen (17) undergraduate students reveal a complex, evolving relationship between learners and two distinct sources of academic and emotional support: university professors and AI (specifically ChatGPT 4o with voice feature). This study framed within IPA (Smith et al., 2009), sought to explore the lived experience of students navigating human and AI in educational contexts. The findings are further illuminated through Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976), which posits that communication media vary in their capacity to convey social cues, thereby influencing perceived intimacy, trust, and relational depth. Following the research questions and drawing from the inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), this section presents the results of the data gathered, organized into themes that were developed by the researchers and subsequently member-checked by the participants, and peer reviewed for accuracy (specifically RQ1).

RQ1: Differentiating Academic and Emotional Support: AI Voice Feature vs. Human Professors
Description: AI provides concise, structured, and direct answers; professors offer contextual, narrative-rich explanations anchored on lived examples.

Table 1. Clarity and Structure vs. Rich Context (Theme 1)

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
P1: This feature answered me straight to the point, explained it precisely, and provided no other words or examples that would lead my question out of the topic.	P1: This time I tried to use it to our Philosophy class and for this I will rely to my Professor, he explains it direct to the point with present day issue examples. Compared when I try it to ChatGPT 4.0 voice, it makes me confused this time.
P2: It kept its answers concise, straight to the point, only giving examples when necessary.	P7: "Dahil mas naintindihan ko ang kanilang (Professor) explanation tungkol sa Ethnomathematics at Risk Management dahil gumamit ng Tagalog at me mga adlib pa sila kaysa sa AI na di naman pwedeng definition lang.. "
P6: Compared to a real person, AI is on point and direct when answering, but it has no additional information or memories to share	P9: I understand more my professor than using AI in my subject MMW, also a professor brings a human touch, can provide deeper insights, adapt to the class's needs, and offer mentorship.
*P14: "I see no difference when I am talking to my professors or ChatGPT's voice feature. Parehas sila na nagbibigay ng maayos at malinaw na sagot para sa	P12: Yes, Ai can compete with my professor through solving some mathematical problem but my professor can show and can elaborate more on how to solve and what formula to use to solve any mathematical problems

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
mga tanong ko at concerns ko, hindi rin nila tinitipid yung mga pwede nilang isagot sa akin para mas maunawaan ko nang maayos."	P13: Despite my never-ending questions, she had enlightened me the best that she (professor) could.
	P16: "...sa mga teachers ay nagfofocus sila sa isang topic at naeexplain ng maayos, kumbaga napapalawak ng mga teachers ang isang topic para magkaron ng better understanding ang mga student."
	P17: "...my professor directly answer her question using her experience in teacher but on the other hand the AI answers were based on clarity and direct answer that give pros and cons .. which shows how unemotionally disconnected AI's are."

Across the responses, student participants consistently differentiated the communication style of AI from that of professors. The AI voice feature was often described as precise, concise, and structured, delivering direct answers without unnecessary elaboration or streamlined explanations. It excels in delivering structured, fact-base, and immediately accessible responses, aligning with Mayer's (2021) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which emphasizes clarity, coherence, and signaling in effective instruction. Student participants repeatedly praised AI for its precision, and lack of digression, noting that it "answered straight to the point" (P1), "kept answers concise" (P2) and "AI is on point and direct when answering" (P6). However, professors excel in contextualizing concepts through real-world analogies (P7), multilingual code-switching like using Tagalog ad libs), and adaptive scaffolding (P9, P16). This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, human professors provide mediated learning experiences (like the role of language as a mediating tool in learning) by linking abstract ideas to cultural or experiential context, something AI's static knowledge base cannot replicate. These differences emphasize that communication media vary in their ability to convey warmth, personality, and contextual understanding (Short et al, 1976). While AI voice feature provided informational clarity, it lacked the embodied cues, such as tone modulation, facial expressions, and personal anecdotes, that heightened students' sense of connection with professors. This absence sometimes made AI voice feature's delivery feel "mechanical" or "scripted" or "robotic," even if accurate.

While P14 notes parity in clarity, P17 highlights AI's "unemotional disconnectedness," underscoring its inability to enrich explanations with lived expertise. As P17 observed, the professor answered his question through personal testimony, while AI offered a pros-and-cons list. Both were factually correct, but only the human response carried existential weight. This supports Zawacki-Richter et al.'s (2019) finding that AI aids transactional tasks but struggles with transformative, context-rich pedagogy. This leads to a central

tension, AI provides information; professors provide meaning. The narrative-rich delivery of professors served not just as information transfer but as meaning-making. By integrating concepts within present-day examples or personal experiences, professors helped students situate abstract ideas within their lived realities. And that AI should augment rather than replace professors as Luckin et al. (2016) explicitly say "do not see a future in which AI education replaces teachers; teachers' expertise is better leveraged and augmented."

Description: AI is accessible anytime, reducing hesitation; professors' help is limited by schedules but adapts in real time when present.

Table 2: Availability and Accessibility (Theme 2)

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
P3: Of course, if we compare this experience with AI, AI is definitely ahead in terms of availability.	P3: I reached out to her (Professor) through MS Teams, but I did not receive any replies or acknowledgement (Shy and perhaps wrong timing or anything) . I then waited for our face-to-face classes so that I could approach her personally. Once I reached out to her personally, the problem was resolved immediately.
P6: She (AI) provided me the information I need in just a minute. I no longer have to search or look for articles. I just simply asked and she gave me a satisfactory answer.	
P8: Sabihin na nating useful nga yung Ai when it comes to saying out your feelings and then getting an immediate answer, iba parin yung thoughts talaga ng totoong tao kaysa sa kanila.	
P8: If you want immediate answers with no certainty, use AI.	
P9: With AI, you've got access to instant information, can learn at your own pace, and have personalized feedback.	

Student participants described the AI voice assistant as "always available" and "accessible anytime and anywhere," viewing it as a dependable resource that overcomes the temporal and spatial limitations of human professors. As noted by P3, who emphasized that "AI definitely ahead in terms of availability," and P6, who valued receiving needed information "in just a minute." This immediacy was appreciated not only for academic purposes but also for reducing the anxiety associated with contacting professors particularly during inconvenient times. P3 reached out to her professor via an e-learning platform about a concern but received no response. She did not follow up; like several participant, she avoided contacting professors due to shyness and for fear of being an "inconvenience,". In contrast, AI offered a judgment-free and on-demand alternative. AI's on-demand accessibility effectively reduces hesitation and supports autonomous learning particularly for those reluctant to disturb professors during off-hours or sensitive moments.

While availability was seen as major advantage, students noted that AI responses could feel "artificial," lacking the personal nuance and empathy of human interaction. P8 recognized that while AI could provide fast answers, the depth and certainty of responses from human professors still hold unique value, "iba pa rin 'yung thoughts talaga ng totoong tao." (It's still different when the thoughts come from a real person." This dynamic reveals a trade-off between speed and relational depth. The distinction aligns with Short et al.'s (1976) Social Presence Theory, which emphasizes that communication media differ in their ability to convey the sense of another person's presence. AI voice feature's strength lies in accessibility, but high information does not inherently translate into high social presence, especially when interactions lack relational depth.

Description: AI simulates empathy via tone modulation and affirmations; professors express embodied empathy through tone, humor, and shared experiences.

Table 3: Emotional Presence and Empathy (Theme 3)

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
P1: "This is what I love in ChatGPT 4.0 voice, it answers me with the calm voice, while explaining all my confusions. It brings a good impact to my mental health because I can feel the comfort even though I'm just talking to an AI. …when I talk to my phone, it feels like a safe haven. Not only does it make me feel comfortable, but I can also sense the care and concern. Lately, chatgpt not just became my study buddy, but a someone that I can talk to. It explains everything to me well, without any "pamamahiya".	P2: Some (professors) accepted late submissions, while some tried easing workloads, overall making things favorable for the students.
P3: I feel heard and valued, while it seems that our professor's style might not foster that same environment. In this part, I felt that the AI understood me more, or at least what the class felt during that moment. Mas emphatic yung AI P3: I somehow felt calmer, especially with the tone of the AI. The AI sounded concerned and it made me feel heard. With AI, I can talk more freely and express myself without getting shouted at or judged for it.	P3: Unlike when we were talking to our professor, he related it with himself kaya I felt more connection and sense as it was coming from a fellow human being. P3: She told us jokes and funny stories about the tour, which makes us feel more connected with her.
P5: With Ai giving more ways to the solution, I felt like talking to a real person, especially with the	P5: The A.I voice doesn't really sound emphatic, but more on just saying what it supposed to say without any emotion coming out. In this topic,

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
voice feature. Comparing the two answers, My Prof's answer felt like a lecture, and the Ai's answer felt more humane. P5: I smiled, because I found myself getting comfy with A.I as if I was talking to a real person. A.I voice talked more like a companion, It felt like I was talking to a friend because of its high toned voice. It somehow felt safe, if that makes sense.	encountering my Prof was more effective than the A.I voice. P5: Our prof advised ways to stay safe in this calamity, he told us to prepare ourselves and reach out if we ever needed. This felt like a parent caring for us, so we all said thank you and we all felt that we have someone to rely to.
P6: She may be an AI, but she does listen and know me like a real person. Therefore, I think AI can also help humans with their emotions, especially those people who have hard times in life and do not know whom to lean on.	P7: "Mas nadama ko ang mga sinasabi ng prof ko sa UTS kesa sa AI na hindi ka tuturuan pag nagkamali ka.."
P10: When I asked the same question to AI, they responded by saying that "math can definitely be challenging for some people" and somehow that words comforted me. However, I do know that asking AI can simulate empathy through language and comforting responses without the fear of being judge it's because it is designed to do that. They analyze patterns and information to provide empathetic responses. P10: "...the sense of immediacy and personalization I can do to AI enable me to have a person to listen to my problem anywhere, anytime I want. While the information might not have been as in-depth as what my professor could provide, the interaction between Me and the AI fostered a feeling of being heard and understood in a more casual, friendly way…" P10: While it's true that AI are not capable of showing human emotions their ability to empathized with my problem also helped me feel better and understood.	P8: "..yung professor and binigyang validation agad yung concern ko without making me feel bad at also mas naging connected yung interaction namin because she's using emojis which also lightens up my mood at the time."
P11: Even when I expressed my fear and discomfort, ChatGPT voice offered only generic	P10: "From what I have observed in my small interaction with my professor is that sometimes

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
advice, lacking the personal touch and emotional intelligence of a human. P11: The difference between them is that ChatGPT AI feels more like a conversation, while my professor feels more like a lesson. P11: The conversation with the AI voice was supportive and encouraging. The AI voice reminded me that I'm not alone in feeling stressed and encouraged me to take breaks and enjoy the lighter moments. Talking to the AI voice helped me express my thoughts and share my love for reading fantasy and thriller stories.	it's not easy to tell them what I truly feel, the fear of being judge and probably the chances that they will change how they view me, scared me from fully opening to them.." P10: "...the interaction between me and my professors were more authoritative and informative but somehow I still felt heard and understand, while the voice feature felt more relatable and engaging." P10: "There are some professor na willing talaga to listen and empathize sa problem mo while meron din naman na ina-avoid yung mga situation na katulad nito…" P10: The feeling that my professor gives that I am validated, and you know your professor believes, remembers, and cherishes you will always be a first in a student's heart. It will never ever replace the comfort an AI gives.
P12: "…now I really enjoyed talking to AI about my personal choices in life because it listened well and give me some advices to make a good decision in my life choices, rather than my professor, kasi po ai really listen to my thoughts and of course my professor is really busy so understandable naman po."	P11: My professor's presence during the blood drive was comforting. She understood the anxieties associated with donating blood and offered reassurance, making the experience less daunting. Her genuine concern and encouragement created a sense of connection and trust.
P13: I asked AI for advice and opinion and it comforted me. I was a bit surprised but glad, I guess. It gave me advice on what to say and what to do, I only used it as a basis.	P12: "Una ang professor ko ang handa akong intindihan at unawain para lang maturo niya ng maayos ang gusto ko malaman at kita ko ang determination niya para lang maintindihan ko ng maayos ang lesson na kanyang tinuturo, di katulad ng ChatGPT."
P14: In ChatGPT I feel more emotionally connected because I can talk about my feelings and concerns freely, it's not because I don't want to talk to my professors, it's because I'm shy and I don't know what to talk sometimes.	P15: "I have noticed that while conversing to a teacher yung tono nung voice is like naiirita na parang shes having a bad day unlike sa chatgpt medyo calm lang."

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
	P15: "From my recent interactions with my teacher, meron kasi tayong tinatawag na verbal and non-verbal body language, alam na alam ng teacher na kahit hindi ko maexplain ng maraming words alam na agad nila yung want ko masabi basing sa body language na napapakita ko."
P15: "When I was talking about my problems and asking for some questions naramdaman ko na parang nakikipag usap lang ako to a true person kasi I felt yung tone nung voice is parang emphatic parang nararamdaman nung AI (Chatgpt voice feature) yung feelings ko kaso nga lang may times na naririnig ko yung robotic na salita or sound so medyo off sa part na iyon."	P16: "Naramdaman kong mas may connection talaga between sa mga tao unlike sa AI. Overall, professors contribute empathy, creativity, and adaptation, and AI provides data processing and efficiency."
	P17: "I noticed that my professor was more concerned about my well-being, he gave advice that was brief yet helpful. On the other hand, AI focused on answering the question itself rather than being able to connect emotionally to the student (from the professor), AI did provide detailed advice rather than brief from the professor, yet I felt more emotionally connected to my professor due to her concern. I felt more listened to and hopeful this academic year from my professor rather than from AI."

Student participants described stark differences in the way human professors and AI voice feature conveyed empathy. P3 valued professors' ability to connect through shared experience, "He related it with himself that's why I felt more connection." Additionally, several participants noted that AI voice feature's responses sometime felt "scripted" or "structured", lacking the warmth of lived human engagement. This aligned from a Social Presence Theory perspective (Short et al., 1976) that Professors' in-person empathy through tone, acknowledgement, and personal anecdotes created higher perceived presence and emotional authenticity.

Paradoxically, AI voice feature's emotional limitations sometimes made it more comforting than human professors (P1, P6, P13, and P14). While professors offered situationally adaptive empathy that deepened interpersonal bonds, AI's strength lay in consistency and nonjudgment. Student participants described it as calm and nonjudgmental, a "safe haven" that clarified confusion without pamamahiya (public shaming) and even supported mental health (P1); one felt "listened to" and "known," which helped manage emotions when had no one else to lean on (P6); another noted it offered practical, reassuring advice that could use as a guide (P13); and one preferred it because shyness or fear of inconveniencing professors (P14). Taken together, these accounts suggest that perceived empathy may be more important than authentic empathy

in certain contexts, especially when students fear judgment. As Shen et al. (2024), found AI-generated empathy, though less authentic, still fostered comfort and relational closeness. This illustrates AI-mediated empathy's potential to deliver perceived emotional support that positively influences user engagement and well-being.

Participants P3, P5, P10, P11, P12, and P15 alternated between feeling more empathy from AI in one journal entry and from a professor in the next, suggesting that perceived empathy depends less on whether the responder is AI or human, and more on individual differences and situational context. As P10 out it, "Some professors are genuinely willing to listen and empathize with your problems, while others tend to avoid situations like this." These fluctuations imply that empathy is not a main effect of medium (AI vs. human professor) but an interaction of relational dynamics (who the instructor is) and situational factors (when and how support is delivered).

Together, these findings suggest that AI and human professors can play complementary roles: AI as a steady, approachable listener, and professors as authentic, context-aware supporters capable of fostering profound emotional resonance.

Description: AI has seen as accurate but felt "scripted"; professors lived authority boosts credibility.

Table 4: Trust and Professional Authority (Theme 4)

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
P3: Given na it is programmed by humans, it feels "scripted" or "structured," wherein you feel like it is "told" to answer certain things to certain problems.	P6: If I ask Valerie (AI) the wrong question, she will give me the wrong answer while my teacher can add and correct me anytime.
P4: I decided to try opening up to the AI feature, at first, it was a little helpful, giving advice on my troubles and trying its best to understand how I felt, but as I continued on explaining my troubles and issues, the AI's answers became more "robotic", as if its focus was to give the best possible answer than actually trying to understand how I felt. P4: Sure enough the AI was able to solve simple riddles, but like every AI interaction, it doesn't have that "human" feeling of making mistakes or taking risks.	P7: "..mas pipiliin ko ang prof. kaysa sa AI, kasi ako yung tipong student na mas gugustuhin pa na personal yung nagtuturo sakin dahil mas madali kong naiintindihan o nauunawaan, pag AI o online lang kasi madali ako madistract."
P8: The Ai was alright but it lacked authority and it felt like I was a freeman or like I'm being treated as a child who needs to calm down and chill through life which is fine but not in a way that can make you more ready for the future hardships ahead.	

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
P11: ChatGPT voice seemed like a robotic script, unable to understand my feelings or provide true help.	
P15: "ChatGPT sounded so scripted it feels like there's a barrier and subconsciously hindi ko maiwasan na maisip na "robot itong kausap ko" public perception of ChatGPT is always a robot to you, a robot with a content data base and scripted lines trying to imitate a human."	

Based on the quotations in Table 4, student participants repeatedly described the AI voice feature's responses as "scripted," "robotic," and lacking the depth of understanding that comes from lived humane experience. For example, P3 stated that AI feels "told to answer certain things to certain problems," while P4 noted that AI initially provided some emotional support but eventually shifted toward purely informational responses, losing the "human" capacity to make mistakes or take risks. Similarly, P11 reported that the AI voice "seemed like a robotic script, unable to understand my feelings or provide true help," and P15 articulated a persistent "barrier" due to the perception that AI is "always a robot… trying to imitate a human." These observations reflect a part of a long-standing challenge in AI-mediated learning, bridging the gap between informational accuracy and relational credibility. While Ai models like ChatGPT4o can produce correct and relevant answers, they lack experiential authority and adaptive pedagogical judgment that students intuitively associate with human professors.

In contrast, professors were associated with a dynamic capacity to adapt, clarify, and provide context. P6 highlighted that a teacher could correct or expand on answers in real time, something AI cannot do if given an incomplete or incorrect question. P7 preferred in-person instruction because having it enhanced comprehension and minimized distractions. These insights align with research on epistemic trustworthiness (authority) in measuring laypeople's trust in experts in a digital age, where trustworthiness or credibility is often tied not only to the accuracy of information but also to the communicator's perceived competence (expertise), adherence to scientific standards (integrity), and good intentions (benevolence) (Hendriks et al., 2015), something that AI voice feature cannot embody over human professors. This particular gap reflects Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976), which argues that the degree to which a medium conveys the presence of another person impacts relational trust and perceived authority. Student participants in the data appeared to recognize AI voice feature's informational competence but did not equate in with professional authority because it lacked the embodied social presence and adaptive responsiveness of a professor. Furthermore, the "robotic" tone described by multiple participants aligns with research showing that warmth and competence (Scheunemann et al., 2020) are the most important predictors for human preferences between different robot behaviors (in this case AI), thus over-scripted interactions in AI may reduce warmth and competence.

Overall, while AI can supplement instruction by providing quick, accurate information, student participants' responses suggest it has yet to rival the trust and authority derived from human professors' lived experience, interpersonal sensitivity, and capacity for adaptive feedback. Trust in authority is not

just a product of what is said but who says it and how. Without the embodied social cues, credibility markers, and professional ethos that human professors carry, AI remains a supplemental tool, a powerful in scope but inherently limited in relational authority (at least for now).
Description: AI lowers communication anxiety, encouraging questioning; professors build confidence through targeted praise and challenge.

Table 5: Impact on Academic Confidence (Theme 5)

AI Voice Feature Supporting Quotations P = Participant	**Professors Supporting Quotations** P = Participant
P2: "I think this AI assistant is influencing me to use it more often rather than asking my teacher… Luckily, I had the AI assistant to help me really understand the concepts I was not comprehending." P2: "I did not expect that the tool that I thought would help me lessen and avoid interacting with my teachers would actually do the opposite, teaching me to be more open and enjoy the beauty of social interactions."	P8: My professor praised me because of my grades; however, she wanted to challenge me by reciting more of our discussions to hone my confidence and speaking/oral skills because I am a part of the Hospitality Industry… I know my professor means well and is preparing me for the future. I could feel her sincerity a while back and it was nice because she knows that I can do more than just memorizing.
P4: Asking AI, I eventually understood and was able to formulate my own questions and understanding of the case, fully preparing me for my group's presentation and any possible questions.	P17: The way professors teach and connect with students is a huge factor that makes students understand lessons better, which is the reason why they are professors, they teach, guide and connect with students. Which is something that AI can never top or be better with.
P6: "AI is truly a helpful tool for everyone, it gives us reasons and ideas to count on before deciding."	
P12: "I noticed while talking to AI now that I'm amazed, kasi po nung mas na enhance ko yun pag tatanong sa kanya about school mas na gets kona po yun lesson lalo na po kapag mga reading reading ang pinapa gawa ng prof…" P12: "…and yes AI did it again, it really help me how to do the activity smoothly and make it easy, when I asked my prof about the activity she only said, " tinuro ko na 'yan ah".	

Based on the responses of student participants on impact of their confidence, it is evident that AI voice

feature and professors influence academic confidence through distinct but complementary mechanisms. Several participants credited AI with lowering communication anxiety by providing judgment-free, on-demand support. P2 shared, "I think this AI assistant is influencing me to use it more rather than asking my teacher…Luckily, I had the assistant to help me really understand the concepts I was not comprehending." Similarly, P4 explained, "Asking AI, I eventually understood and was able to formulate my own questions and understanding of the case, fully preparing me for my group's presentation and any possible questions." This observation clearly reflects that AI-mediated tool or AI-powered tutoring systems can reduce affective barriers to learning, particularly for students hesitant to engage with authority figures. P6 described AI voice feature as, "a truly helpful tool for everyone, it gives us reasons and ideas to count on before deciding," while P12 reflected, "…and yes, AI did it again, it really help me how to do the activity smoothly, and make it easy." Such statements illustrate AI's role in facilitating autonomous preparation and building self-assurance in academic tasks.

On the other hand, professors' targeted praise and constructive challenges emerged as critical to fostering deeper, enduring confidence. P8 recounted, "My professor praised me because of my grades; however, she wanted to challenge me by reciting more of our discussions to hone my confidence and speaking/oral skills." P17 echoed this sentiment, noting, "The way professors teach and connect with students is a huge factor that make students understand lessons better…they teach, guide, and connect with students. Which is something that AI can never top or better with."

This observed dynamic reflects Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, where mastery experiences and credible social persuasion from trusted authorities enhance learners' belief in their capabilities. Therefore, if human professors embodied authenticity and adaptive feedback can deepen the motivational impact in ways AI cannot yet replicate.

RQ1: How do AI and human professors differ in their impact on students' academic engagement and emotional support?

The AI voice feature (specifically ChatGPT4o) and human professors differ in their impact on students' academic engagement and emotional support in both form and depth. AI feature used in this study primarily enhances engagement by offering immediate, consistent, and judgment-free responses, enabling students to clarify concepts, prepare for tasks, and ask candid questions without fear and embarrassment. This fosters autonomy and sustained interaction with academic content but often lacks emotional authenticity due to its "scripted" tone.

Human professors, on the other hand, engage students through adaptive explanations, contextualized examples, and relational cues that convey genuine empathy and authority. Their targeted praise, constructive challenges, and personal connection build self-efficacy, deepen motivation, and foster long-term commitment to learning. While professors may be less consistently available, their ability to respond with emotional nuance and situational awareness creates richer, more resonant support that AI can currently replicate.

RQ2: Which provides greater expressions of empathy: AI voice feature or human professors?

Below is a summarized table of the of the student-participant responses from the two (2) sections regarding whether AI voice feature or human professors are more emphatic. Each row includes the participant, their choice (AI, Profs, or BOTH) and their illustrative quote.

Table 6. Perceived Empathy: AI Voice Feature vs. Human Professors

Participant	More Empathic	Illustrative Quote
P1	Both	"AI features provide me with a consistent perspective… Professors… give accurate and detailed explanations… and encourage us to think critically."
P2	Both	"AI… was understanding in an objective way… My professors… show emotional connection… even just a small positive response from them was able to make me extremely happy."
P3	Both	"…approachable [professors]… AI listens to me without judgement."
P4	Both	"I feel more comfort from AI… but… better understanding with people."
P5	Both	"…depends on topics… AI more comforting… but emotion… huge part… points also to professors."
P6	Both	"AI provides broad knowledge… professors… naturally… without using anything."
P7	Professors	"…mas pipiliin ko ang prof. kaysa sa AI… mas naiintindihan ko pag personal…"
P8	Both	"Professor understands my feelings more… AI gave better support because it was always available."
P9	Both	"…People have a capacity to understand and AI… already know what we need…"
P10	Both	"…some professors… actually offered help… AI also helped me a lot…"
P11	Both	"AI… listens… without judgment… my professor makes me feel seen and valued…"
P12	Both	"Professors… help you a lot in academics… AI… good shoulder to cry on…"
P13	Both	"Experiences weren't all the same… Sometimes AI was easier… sometimes vice versa."
P14	AI	"…nahihiya ako magtanong sa professors… open up ako kay ChatGPT."
P15	Professors	"…professors understand me the most… they acknowledge… and give advice…"
P16	Both	"Professors and AI… equal in giving information… professors… keep pace with emotion… AI… remembers every detail…"
P17	Professors	"Emotional connection is a factor… not only need an answer but also the emotional concern."

The gathered data reveals a nuanced perception of empathy, with a majority of student participants, thirteen (13) of the seventeen (17), identifying BOTH AI and professors as empathic in varying contexts. Several participants (P3, P5, P10, P11, P12, P13) alternated between finding more empathy in AI in one instance and from professors in another, suggesting situational and relational factors strongly mediate perceived empathy. Aligning perfectly with Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976), which underscores the role of interpersonal warmth and context in communication. AI was favored and lauded for its non-judgmental listening and consistent availability (P8, P14). This capacity of AI can alleviate affective barriers.

Conversely, professors' empathy stemmed from lived experience, emotional attunement, and validating feedback (P2, P15, P17). This resonates with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, where credible social persuasion or authorities boosts efficiency and confidence. Notably, however, the fluidity in preference also suggests that inherent trait of the medium but a product of context, interpersonal fit, and timing, a finding supported by Garrison et al (2020) who stress the importance of elements to an educational transaction namely cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence in sustaining engagement..

Limitations/Implications of the Study

The implications of this study should be considered in light of its limitations. Findings are context-dependent and are focused on the use of ChatGPT 4o voice feature in an educational setting where First Year College of International Tourism and Hospitality Management (CITHM) students served as participants and may not generalize across other features and population. Future studies should explore longitudinal impacts of the feature usage. Additionally, the sole data collection that was used in this study was online journaling and were collected from one research locale with only two (2) sections from the CITHM, Lyceum of the Philippines University Manila. Hence, the findings may not be applicable in other contexts. Therefore, there is a need to expand research to different settings and locales to improve generalizability. Primarily, the aim of this study is to compare AI (ChatGPT 4o's voice feature) and human professors in terms of academic and emotional support and identify which of these two (2) did the student participants received greater expression of empathy. Considering individual differences in students' perspectives and experiences, future studies could integrate other support variables, AI features or other AI platforms (like Google's Gemini, Anthropic's Claude AI, or Meta AI) to provide general overview of the use of AI features and its general impact among students.

Conclusion

The following are the notable points derived from this study:

1. AI voice feature amplifies access and lowers anxiety, while professors cultivate trust, challenge, and emotional authenticity. The most engaged and supported learners may emerge not from choosing between the two, but from an intentional balance – that is, using AI for consistent, low-pressure guidance, and professors for relational authority and adaptive, motivating feedback rooted in lived experience.
2. Since six (6) journal sessions were integrated over time, shifts in which source felt more empathic could reflect evolving circumstances rather than stable preferences. Therefore, empathy in academic support can also shaped less by medium (whether AI or professor) and more by who delivers it, when, and how.
3. There is a trade-off between efficiency and depth. AI excels in delivering concise and structured information, supporting quick learning needs, while professors contribute rich contextualization that supports deeper comprehension, especially in complex, interdisciplinary, or culturally nuanced topics. This suggests that blended approaches, leveraging AI for clarity and professors for contextual depth, may optimize both comprehension and engagement.
4. The availability and accessibility are critical to student learning and well-being, but they do not replace the social and emotional benefits of human connection. AI can complement, but not substitute, the role of human professors, offering continuous access to information while human educators provide the rich social presence that fosters deeper engagement.

5. Affective AI offers consistent, judgment-free emotional support that reduces anxiety and increases approachability, true empathy in learning remains rooted in human professors' capacity for contextual, adaptive, and experientially grounded responses that AI cannot yet replicate; thus, the future of emotionally supportive education lies not replacing professors with AI, but in strategically integrating AI as a complementary tool that sustains accessibility and emotional safety while preserving the depth, authenticity, and relational nuance that only human connection can provide. To simply put, professors (and the academe as a whole) must integrate AI in a way that complements rather than attempts to replicate or replace them.
6. There is "credibility gap" in the use of AI wherein informational accuracy is high but relational authority is limited because of AI's absence of lived experience, adaptive pedagogy, and human warmth. While AI can enhance accessibility and offer consistent support, professional authority and trust still hinge on the nuanced tone, timing, and personal engagement that only human professors (educators) can provide, which position AI as a complement rather than a replacement in educational settings marked by emotionally and pedagogically complex contexts.
7. The AI voice feature reduces communication barriers and supports independent preparation, while professors uniquely cultivate confidence through authentic, situationally tailored encouragement. Leveraging both could balance efficiency with human connection, ensuring that students gain not only academic competence but also the interpersonal resilience important for professional and lifelong success.
8. The perception of empathy among student participants are dynamic, shifting between AI voice feature and human professors depending on situational needs, relational context, and communication style. This interplay suggests that an integrative model may best support both academic and emotional needs as observed in the preference of student participants of which provides greater expressions of empathy (Both = 13/17, Profs = 3, and AI = 1).
9. The risks of non-empathic approach of professors is highlighted while illustrating how AI-mediated empathy can complement, rather than replace, human instruction. Instead of rejecting AI voice features (like ChatGPT 4o) outright, professors or educators could adopt a balanced integration that leverages AI's consistency alongside the contextual sensitivity of human teaching to strengthen learner engagement.
10. The findings raise important concerns that, as society increasingly relies on AI for accessible, helpful, and empathetic interactions, human professors must strengthen their own capacity to demonstrate empathy towards students, ensuring that human connection remains a central element of the learning experience. According to Li (2021), teachers should rethink their roles, collaborate with artificial intelligence, pursue lifelong learning, and cultivate relational presence to reshape teacher-student relationships.

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