

The Paradox of Humanizing AI-Based Chatbots with Humanistic Communication among E-Commerce Users

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ABSTRACT

AI-based chatbots have become an integral part of e-commerce customer service. This study aims to explore the experiences of Shopee and Tokopedia users regarding the humanization of chatbots within the context of culture and consumer behavior, using Heidegger's interpretive phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, "lurking" non-participant observation, and documentation from three informants, and were subsequently analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The results indicate that chatbots are consistently perceived as machines, exhibit communication patterns distinct from humans, are viewed merely as tools, and have not yet been able to replace human communication. The study concludes that the humanization of chatbots remains inconsistent with culturally constructed humanistic communication values, such as friendliness, empathy, warmth, and interpersonal relationships

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI)-based chatbots continue to evolve rapidly and are now used in many fields, including e-commerce. Globally, chatbots have become an integral part of e-commerce, as they enable companies to assist customers 24 hours a day (Gao et al., 2025). In the local context, this phenomenon can be observed at Indonesia's two largest e-commerce platforms, Shopee and Tokopedia, which have positioned AI-based chatbots as the frontline of their customer service operations. According to recent findings, over 70% of Shopee's initial customer interactions are now handled by chatbots (Izzudin et al., 2025), while Tokopedia's chatbots handle 55% of customer inquiries each month (Wengkau et al., 2024). In communication studies, this phenomenon is known as the humanization of technology, which refers to the efforts to make machines appear and feel human-like in their interactions. In this context, chatbots do not merely answer questions but also mimic human-like language styles, emotional expressions, and conversational patterns (Flavian et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, despite technological advancements that have made chatbots increasingly sophisticated, significant gaps remain. The level of dissatisfaction with chatbot usage remains relatively high. According to a Gartner study (2024), 64% of customers actually prefer not to interact with AI as a virtual assistant in customer service interactions. In the local Indonesian context, numerous previous studies have revealed similar findings: while chatbots are effective at answering simple questions, they prove inadequate when faced with complex issues, making human agent intervention still necessary (Wardanu et al., 2025; Jupri & Fasa, 2025; Damayanti & Nuzuli, 2024).

This dissatisfaction is linked to the gap between expectations and reality. As noted by Haase & Hanel (2023), human expectations of AI-based chatbots tend to rise as machines are designed to become more sophisticated. When these expectations are not met, the resulting disappointment is even greater. This is known as the humanization paradox: the more a chatbot is designed to mimic human functions, the higher the standards users apply when evaluating it.

Most previous studies, such as those mentioned above, have focused on the technical aspects of chatbot interactions, including response speed and information accuracy, but have not addressed a more fundamental dimension: how users subjectively interpret their interactions with chatbots as a communicative experience. This gap is the focus of this study: understanding and exploring users' interpretations, which are far more important than merely measuring a chatbot's technical performance. Without this understanding, the development of truly human-centered chatbots will never address the root of the problem.

In the Indonesian context, this interpretation cannot be separated from deeply rooted cultural values, such as the custom of warm and empathetic communication, which directly shapes consumer behavior standards when interacting with chatbots, whether or not the interaction with the chatbot feels human. Chatbots operate using machine logic, while users bring expectations of communication imbued with humanistic values – constructed by their cultural background – which shapes consumer behavior; this is where the paradox

emerges. The novelty of this study lies in examining chatbot humanization from the perspective of users' lived experiences rather than from technical performance indicators such as response speed, accuracy, or system efficiency. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on technological effectiveness, this research investigates how users interpret chatbot interactions through the lens of humanistic communication values and culturally shaped consumer behavior. Furthermore, this study contributes to Human-Machine Communication (HMC) literature by demonstrating that the success of chatbot humanization is not determined solely by technological sophistication but also by the alignment between machine communication and users' culturally embedded expectations. Practically, the findings provide insights for e-commerce platforms in designing chatbot communication strategies that are more empathetic, culturally sensitive, and human-centered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human-Machine Communication (HMC)

Communication no longer occurs solely between humans, but can also take place between humans and machines. The phenomenon of interaction between humans and all technological products is referred to as human-machine communication (HMC), which is the process by which meaning is formed when humans and machines exchange and interpret messages (Guzman, 2016, 2018). Guzman & Lewis (2020) divide HMC into three main dimensions: (1) the functional dimension, in which machines act as communicators; (2) relational dynamics, in which human-machine interactions form social relationships akin to those between humans; and (3) metaphysical implications that blur the ontological boundaries of what constitutes communication—a process that previously occurred only between humans but now extends to machines.

Humanization of Technology

As technology becomes increasingly sophisticated, AI systems—including chatbots—exhibit a number of communication characteristics that make it more human-like, such as the use of natural language (Collins et al., 2021), understanding the flow of conversation (Mariani et al., 2023), and even displaying emotional and engaging aspects (Flavian et al., 2024). This is inseparable from efforts to humanize technology, namely AI technology designed to mimic human thinking abilities, ranging from reasoning, learning, and problem-solving to self-improvement (Adhikari, 2024). Moreover, humans naturally tend to view the objects they use as “other humans” (Marszałek-Kotzur, 2022), so that, to a certain extent, humans feel they are communicating with fellow humans, not with machines (Nah et al., 2020).

Humanistic Communication

The humanization of technology does not automatically result in a satisfying communication experience, because humans actually have their own humanistic standards of communication. Humanistic communication is a form of communication practice that aims to foster mutual understanding among the parties involved, while upholding humanistic values such as dialogue, active listening, and ethics (Elshof & Hendrawan, 2022). According to Rogers (1961) and

DeVito (2016), there are several key characteristics of humanistic communication: authenticity (congruence), empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, openness, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. In this study, humanistic communication serves as the benchmark for assessing the extent to which the chatbot has been able to communicate in a human-like manner.

Culture and Consumer Behavior

Humanistic communication standards do not simply emerge on their own, but are constructed by culture. According to Hofstede (2011), culture is the “collective programming of the mind” that distinguishes one group from another in shaping the way individuals think, feel, and respond to experiences in social interactions. In the realm of consumption, this cultural background is reflected in consumer behavior, that is, the dynamic interaction between thoughts, feelings, actions, and the environment in an individual’s consumption life (Peter & Olson, 2010). This, in turn, shapes consumers’ expectations regarding a service. Consumers will evaluate a service, including a chatbot, by comparing whether their expectations have been met or fall below an acceptable tolerance threshold (Parasuraman et al., 1991).

AI Chatbots on Shopee and Tokopedia

Chatbot humanization can be found on Shopee and Tokopedia, Indonesia’s largest e-commerce platforms (Ministry of Trade, 2024). Shopee features a chatbot named Choki, while Tokopedia has Tanya, both designed to handle initial consumer interactions and partially replace human agents in customer service (Shopee, 2025; Tokopedia, 2025). Although chatbots on both platforms are becoming increasingly sophisticated in mimicking human communication patterns, both Shopee and Tokopedia continue to provide human agents as an alternative when chatbots are unable to resolve complex issues or when consumer complaints require more in-depth handling.

The theoretical integration of this study is grounded in the relationship between Human-Machine Communication (HMC), technology humanization, humanistic communication, and culture-based consumer behavior. While chatbot technology is increasingly designed to mimic human communication through the humanization of technology, users evaluate these interactions based on humanistic communication values such as empathy, authenticity, and interpersonal warmth. These evaluations are further shaped by cultural backgrounds and consumer behavior patterns. Consequently, the extent to which chatbot communication is perceived as human-like depends not only on technological sophistication but also on users’ culturally constructed expectations of communication. This theoretical integration provides the foundation for understanding the paradox of chatbot humanization explored in this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using the interpretive phenomenology method based on Martin Heidegger’s thought, in which reality is understood as inseparable from an individual’s lived experience within the

context of their world (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). There were three informants in this study, as in interpretative phenomenology this number is sufficient for research at the undergraduate and master's levels (Noon, 2018), allowing for a more in-depth analysis of each informant's experience (Smith in La Kahija, 2017). The three informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria (Kumara, 2018), namely being aged 20–40 years, actively shopping on Shopee and/or Tokopedia at least twice a month, and having previously interacted directly with a chatbot on both platforms. They were ERD (a 35-year-old housewife, a user of Shopee and Tokopedia), RFN (a 33-year-old entrepreneur, a user of Shopee), and KEAP (a 29-year-old private-sector employee, a user of Shopee and Tokopedia). These three informants were selected because they have had repeated and in-depth experiences interacting with chatbots on e-commerce platforms, enabling them to provide rich insights into the phenomenon under study.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or through online communication platforms, depending on participant availability. To ensure consistency, all interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide focusing on participants' experiences, perceptions, expectations, and evaluations of chatbot interactions on Shopee and Tokopedia. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data collection was conducted using three techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary method for exploring informants' subjective experiences; "lurking" non-participant observation to observe informants' interactions with the chatbot in a natural setting without researcher involvement; and documentation in the form of interview transcripts and screenshots of informants' conversations with the chatbot (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; William in Given, 2008). The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through six stages: thoroughly re-reading the interview transcripts, developing themes emerging from the data, identifying connections between themes, moving on to the next informant with an open mind, identifying consistent thematic patterns across informants, and deepening the analysis using theory as an interpretive lens (Finlay in Miller & Barrio Minton, 2016).

Data validity was ensured through two techniques: source triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), by aligning interview results with screenshot documentation; and the application of the principle of reflexivity as part of Heidegger's phenomenological approach to minimize researcher bias in the interpretation process (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016).

To enhance trustworthiness, preliminary interpretations were continuously compared with interview transcripts and supporting documentation throughout the analysis process. This procedure helped ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected participants' experiences and minimized subjective bias during interpretation. Provide clear and concise versions of your methods of conducting research, population and samples, and data analysis tools.

RESEARCH RESULT

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in the processing and analysis of data from three informants, eight themes were found to emerge consistently across all informants, two themes appeared in two informants, and four themes were unique to specific informants. The distribution of these themes is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Theme Distribution

Categories	Theme	Informants		
		ERD	RFN	KEAP
Consistent Themes	Chatbots are consistently identified as machines	✓	✓	✓
	Chatbot communication styles and patterns are different from humans	✓	✓	✓
	Chatbots fail to meet consumer expectations	✓	✓	✓
	Consumer disillusionment with chatbots	✓	✓	✓
	Cultural factors in shaping humanistic communication standards	✓	✓	✓
	Chatbots are only effective for simple cases	✓	✓	✓
	Chatbots are viewed merely as tools	✓	✓	✓
	Chatbots will never replace humans in communication, no matter how sophisticated	✓	✓	✓
The Theme of Two Informants	Chatbots as gateways to human customer service agents	✓	✓	-
	No impact on purchasing decisions	✓	✓	-
Unique Themes	Database limitations are the root cause of chatbot failure	✓	-	-
	Still needs adaptation	-	✓	-
	Frustration and self-directed problem solving	-	-	✓
	Impact on purchasing decisions	-	-	✓

All informants were consistently aware that they were interacting with a machine, not a human, when using AI-based chatbots on Shopee and Tokopedia, due to the rigid and structured language style, as ERD explained: "I'm still aware that it's a robot; the chatbot doesn't feel human yet, even though it greets me and introduces itself – it still feels like a template." Regarding dissatisfaction, which also consistently emerged among all informants, chatbots were deemed

incapable of resolving complex issues and lacked empathy in communication, as KEAP noted: “It’s just the same old thing, but it’s not solution-oriented, so it just makes me more frustrated. But even if I want to get angry, who am I supposed to be angry at? It’s like getting angry at the wind and stones.” Cultural factors were found to play a significant role in shaping users’ expectations for humanistic communication, where values such as friendliness, empathy, and politeness serve as the standards informants use to evaluate interactions with chatbots, as expressed by RFN: “As a native of Surabaya, we just want things done quickly – we want it fast.” These cultural factors then shape consumer behavior toward interactions with chatbots, where informants had clear expectations of chatbots as solution providers, not merely question-answerers, as conveyed by ERD: “Because our goal in using a chatbot is to get a solution; if there’s no solution, what’s the point?”, and also by KEAP: “Sometimes empathy is set aside, as if shopping isn’t important—like it’s just ordinary consumer behavior, not considered a necessity.”

Ultimately, all informants agreed that chatbots are merely tools and will never be able to replace human customer service representatives, even as technology continues to advance, particularly in the area of communication, as RFN put it: “Chatbots will never be like humans, because they still have limitations, but humans remain superior. Chatbots may get closer, but humans cannot be replaced,” and KEAP added: “They can’t. Humans remain superior even though AI chatbots may become increasingly sophisticated. There is a human element that cannot be replaced by chatbots in terms of communication.”

DISCUSSION

This study fills a gap in previous research, which has largely focused on the technical aspects of AI-based chatbots, by revealing users’ subjective interpretations of their interactions with chatbots, which are far more complex than mere issues of response speed or information accuracy. These findings also address a second gap: that culture and consumer behavior play a significant role in shaping users’ expectations of chatbots, where humanistic communication values deeply rooted in the informants’ daily lives serve as the primary standard they used to assess whether interactions with chatbots feel human or not.

A paradox emerges in several areas, one of which is the communication patterns of chatbots. Chatbots are designed to provide quick, consistent responses and be available 24 hours a day, as a form of humanizing technology (Adhikari, 2024). However, it is precisely that speed of response that signals to informants that they are dealing with a machine, not a human. The speed that should be a chatbot’s strength instead becomes a barrier that highlights the difference between humans and machines in communication, as perceived by ERD: “If it’s fast (in replying), it means it’s automated. If it’s a human, there’s a ‘typing’ sign, there’s a pause.” The pause, which was previously seen as a weakness of technology before AI, is now interpreted by users as a sign of ‘humanity.’ Likewise, as the problems faced become more complex, the frustration deepens, because the chatbot cannot step outside its system’s limits to truly understand and resolve the consumer’s issue, as expressed by KEAP: “Even

if I want to get angry, who am I supposed to be angry at? It's like getting angry at the wind and stones."

The next paradox arises when the humanization of chatbots is compared against the standards of humanistic communication. According to Rogers (1961) and DeVito (2016), humanistic communication has distinctive characteristics such as empathy, authenticity, and equality in interaction. While chatbots can indeed provide empathetic responses, the three informants actually perceived them as hollow and insincere, as RFN noted: "There might be phrases like 'we understand your problem,' but the language is so stiff." KEAP added: "In communication, a chatbot is just a template. A human customer service agent, when faced with a problem, can get to the root of the issue." The paradox is that when a chatbot tries to appear empathetic, it becomes even clearer to the consumer that this empathy is merely a simulation, not a genuine feeling. As mentioned earlier, humanistic communication requires authenticity (congruence), something that, by its very nature, a machine operating on pre-programmed algorithms and databases simply cannot fulfill.

The next paradox relates to culture and consumer behavior. Culture shapes the way individuals think, feel, and respond to experiences in social interactions (Hofstede, 2011), including when evaluating chatbot services related to consumer behavior. RFN informant from a Surabaya cultural background, with a "straight to the point" communication style, felt at odds with a chatbot that was convoluted and did not get to the core issue: "As a native of Surabaya, we just want things done quickly – we want it fast." Meanwhile, Javanese culture, which emphasizes politeness and hospitality, led RFN to expect warmer and more personal interactions from chatbots: "We're Javanese; of course, we need politeness in our communication." The paradox is that chatbots are designed to serve all users uniformly for efficiency, while culture and consumer behavior demand contextual and personalized service. Each consumer naturally has a different cultural background that shapes their consumption behavior. A gap is inevitable, and ultimately, dissatisfaction becomes an unavoidable consequence (Parasuraman et al., 1991).

The most fundamental paradox concerns the role of chatbots as substitutes for humans in communication. From the perspective of human-machine communication (HMC), Guzman & Lewis (2020) state that when humans interact with machines, the relational dynamics that emerge involve the construction of meaning shaped by the user's cultural context and life experiences. However, even though chatbots continue to be humanized, all three informants shared the same opinion that chatbots will never be able to replace humans in communication, as expressed by KEAP: "Humans remain superior even though AI chatbots may become increasingly sophisticated. There is a human element that cannot be replaced by chatbots in terms of communication." RFN also added: "Chatbots are more rigid (in communication), already structured. Even if we respond casually, it remains rigid." This is the most serious paradox: the more chatbots are designed to resemble humans, the clearer it becomes to users that there is something fundamentally irreplaceable by machines—namely, 'humanity' itself in communication. The humanization of AI-based chatbots

ultimately only underscores the limits that no technology, no matter how advanced, can overcome.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that revealed chatbots' limitations in handling complex issues and their lack of empathy in interactions (Wardanu et al., 2025; Jupri & Fasa, 2025). However, this study uncovers a deeper truth: that this mismatch is not solely due to technical issues but stems from a fundamental gap between machine logic and the humanistic communication shaped by user culture, a dimension previously unexplored in prior studies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reveals that the humanization of AI-based chatbots on Shopee and Tokopedia has not yet been able to create a truly humanistic communication experience from their users' perspectives. All three informants were consistently aware that they were interacting with a machine, not a human, due to several factors, such as stiff language, structured responses, and the chatbots' inability to understand the context of complex issues. The resulting disappointment stems not only from the chatbots' technical limitations but also from a fundamental gap between the machine logic created by the system and human communication expectations, which are rich in humanistic values such as empathy, friendliness, and relationship-oriented interactions shaped by cultural backgrounds, and which subsequently shape consumer behavior within the Indonesian consumer context.

Culture and consumer behavior have proven to be the primary lens through which users evaluate their interactions with chatbots. Humanistic communication values such as authenticity, empathy, and equality serve as standards that users unconsciously apply when interacting with chatbots. When these standards are not met, a paradox emerges: technology designed to "bring people closer" actually creates a communication gap that feels even more pronounced. Ultimately, all three informants view chatbots merely as tools, not as communication entities on par with humans, and believe that chatbots will never be able to replace humans in communication because there is a human element that no machine, no matter how advanced, can replicate.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of research on human-machine communication within the context of local Indonesian culture by demonstrating that users' interpretations of their interactions with chatbots cannot be separated from the cultural values deeply rooted in their daily lives. Practically, these findings provide recommendations for chatbot developers on e-commerce platforms to not only focus on technical capabilities but also to design more human-centered chatbot communication patterns aligned with users' cultural values. This is crucial because it directly shapes consumer behavior in their daily consumption habits.

This study has several limitations that open up opportunities for further research, including:

1. The limitation regarding the number of informants, which was only three individuals with a homogeneous background—specifically, a Javanese-Surabaya cultural background—means that these findings cannot be broadly

generalized. This opens up opportunities for future studies to expand the scope of informants to include those with more diverse cultural backgrounds.

2. The study focused on the Shopee and Tokopedia platforms, which allows for further research to explore other e-commerce platforms or different sectors, such as banking or healthcare.
3. The phenomenological method used in this study limits the generalizability of the findings, so future studies may combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a more comprehensive picture.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study has several limitations, including the small sample size of only three informants with relatively homogeneous cultural backgrounds, meaning that the findings cannot yet be widely generalized. Additionally, this study focuses solely on the use of AI-based chatbots on the e-commerce platforms Shopee and Tokopedia, and thus does not reflect user experiences in other digital service sectors. The use of a phenomenological approach also means the study places greater emphasis on the informants' subjective experiences, so the results are contextual and cannot yet be used to describe general consumer behavior as a whole.

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