Algorithmic Refuge: Generative AI and Synthetic Media as Affective Digital Coping Mechanisms

Noel Deseo Santander

Olivarez College-Tagaytay, Inc.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000634

Received: 27 October 2026; Accepted: 01 November 2026; Published: 13 November 2026

ABSTRACT

This research study investigates how individuals purposefully repurpose Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools, synthetic media platforms, and algorithmic recommendation feeds as self-directed instruments for emotional regulation, cognitive restoration, and mediated social presence. Moving beyond traditional Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) paradigms focused on task efficiency or pathologized screen-time metrics, this investigation employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine qualitative narratives gathered via an asynchronous online survey on Google Forms from 20 technical and academic participants. Methodologically, the study clarifies how asynchronous qualitative text entries provide psychological depth, reflective privacy, and unhurried articulation of intimate coping experiences without interviewer demand characteristics. Furthermore, the paper explicitly differentiates general digital technology usage (e.g., passive scrolling, manual gaming) from Generative AI-assisted coping (e.g., adaptive LLM conversational processing, AI-composed ambient soundscapes, synthetically rendered visual loops, and machine-learning feed curation).

The qualitative analysis reveals a reconciled four-pillar framework of algorithmic affect: (1) Synthetic Media & Generative AI Audio as an Affective Reset for Cognitive Slowing, (2) Algorithmic Recommendation Feeds as Digital Safe Spaces (Spatial Sheltering), (3) Technological Flow and Restored Agency in High-Focus AI-Assisted Tasks, and (4) Ambient Digital Environments and Mediated Co-Presence (Relational Co-Presence). These findings demonstrate that users actively co-create digital refuges to protect their emotional boundaries, offering vital empirical insights for designing well-being-centered, calm UI/UX interface architectures.

Keywords: Affective Self-Regulation, Algorithmic Curation, Asynchronous Qualitative Research, Generative AI, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Mediated Co-Presence, Synthetic Media.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research has predominantly evaluated technology through paradigms of utility, task efficiency, and productivity (Norman, 2013; Weiser & Brown, 1997). Classical usability frameworks prioritize minimizing cognitive friction to help users complete work faster and access information more effectively.

However, as algorithmic curation and artificial intelligence become seamlessly embedded into daily routines, the nature of human-technology interaction has undergone a fundamental shift. Today, users engage with digital devices not merely as instruments of labor or passive consumption, but as active, self-directed environments for affective self-regulation, mood management, and psychological coping (Bucher, 2017; Picard, 1997).

Simultaneously, the digital media ecosystem has evolved beyond static content delivery toward dynamic, personalized experiences driven by Generative AI and machine learning recommendation engines.

Users now interact daily with AI-composed ambient audio, synthetically generated visuals, and algorithmic recommendation feeds (e.g., TikTok, YouTube) that adapt in real time to behavioral signals (Bucher, 2018; Lukoff et al., 2021). While these technologies were originally engineered to maximize platform engagement, users frequently repurpose them to manage emotional states, seeking out synthetic audio to decompress from anxiety, using curated video feeds as a buffer against loneliness, or immersing themselves in complex digital tasks (such as coding or gaming) to achieve cognitive focus (DeNora, 2000; Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the ubiquity of these interactions, contemporary academic and public discourse around screen time remains dominated by deficit-based models. Algorithmic media consumption is frequently framed as inherently passive, addictive, or detrimental to mental health (Lukoff et al., 2021). Concurrently, technical literature on Generative AI treats these models primarily as tools for automated labor, content creation efficiency, or code generation.

What remains underdeveloped is a qualitative, phenomenological understanding of algorithmic affect (Bucher, 2017): how individuals intentionally leverage synthetic media and algorithmic interfaces to navigate emotional distress, cultivate cognitive 'breathing room,' and restore psychological balance. By neglecting the lived, subjective experiences of users who actively curate their digital environments for emotional coping, current HCI literature overlooks crucial insights into how digital tools serve as non-clinical affective regulators.

The following are the specific objectives deemed to help answer the research problem: 1) examine how users experience Generative AI media (such as AI-composed music and synthetic audio) as affective tools for stress mitigation, cognitive slowing, and emotional reflection; 2) explore the ways algorithmic recommendation feeds function as digital "safe spaces" for emotional regulation, psychological comfort, and coping during periods of social isolation; 3) investigate how high-engagement digital interactions (such as computer programming and interactive gaming) foster psychological states of "flow" and seamless human-computer synergy; and 4) analyze how ambient digital environments and background streams afford mediated co-presence and low-demand sociality without social exhaustion.

Theoretical and Practical Significance

This study contributes to Affective Computing (Picard, 1997), Media Affordances Theory (Gibson, 1979), and Humane Interface Design (Lukoff et al., 2021). By framing algorithms and Generative AI as interactive affective regulators rather than passive entertainment or labor-saving tools, this research expands our understanding of digital coping.

Practically, the findings offer empirical guidance for user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) designers, system architects, and digital health practitioners seeking to build well-being-centered interfaces that support user agency, calm, and emotional self-regulation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature were found significant by the author in doing this research, especially they provided in identifying and clarifying the research gap.

Evolution of HCI: Usability, Calm Technology, and Affective Computing

Researches in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) predominantly evaluated interactive systems through frameworks of utility, efficiency, and cognitive friction minimization (Norman, 2013; Weiser & Brown, 1997). Classical usability paradigms prioritized helping users execute tasks rapidly and access information with minimal operational hindrance.

However, as computing transitioned from localized productivity software into ambient, algorithmic, and mobile platforms, the nature of human-technology interaction fundamentally expanded.

Users no longer engage with digital hardware and interfaces solely as instruments of labor or information access; rather, they increasingly utilize digital spaces for self-directed emotional regulation, mood management, and psychological coping (Bucher, 2017; Picard, 1997).

Picard's (1997) foundation of affective computing established that system design must account for human emotion, while subsequent digital media scholarship demonstrated that everyday digital practices are deeply intertwined with affective self-care and stress mitigation (Bucher, 2017).

Generative AI, Synthetic Media, and Affective Self-Regulation

The rapid integration of Generative AI and machine learning recommendation engines has introduced novel forms of dynamic, personalized content, including AI-composed ambient music, synthetic visuals, and adaptive media feeds (Bucher, 2018; Lukoff et al., 2021).

While technical literature predominantly examines Generative AI as a tool for automated content creation, code synthesis, or labor productivity, emerging interdisciplinary work highlights its non-clinical psychological utility.

Drawing on music psychology and media usage theories, auditory and sensory media have long been recognized for their capacity to regulate arousal, alleviate anxiety, and facilitate emotional reflection (DeNora, 2000; Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). Generative AI music and synthetic audio extend these affordances by providing low-friction sensory environments that foster cognitive slowing and psychological decompression without demanding high analytical effort (DeNora, 2000).

Re-Examining Screen Time: Deficit Models vs. Algorithmic Affordances

Contemporary clinical and public health literature surrounding digital media consumption remains largely dominated by deficit-based paradigms. Within these models, screen time and algorithmic engagement are frequently conceptualized as inherently passive, addictive, or detrimental to psychological well-being (Lukoff et al., 2021). While risks of digital distraction and compulsive usage are well-documented, this deficit framing often obscures the active, intentional strategies users employ to navigate digital environments.

To conceptualize active digital coping, researchers draw upon Gibson's (1979) Media Affordances Theory and Bucher's (2017) concept of the "algorithmic imaginary". Extending traditional physical affordances into affective computing, "affective affordances" represent structural properties of digital interface, such as personalized recommendations, low-friction interactions, and continuous sensory streams, that afford emotional calming, psychological safety, and mediated presence during social isolation or acute distress (Bucher, 2017; DeNora, 2000; Picard, 1997).

Rather than acting as passive consumers manipulated by engagement loops, users frequently co-create personalized "digital refuges" to establish emotional boundaries and recover psychological equilibrium.

Synthesis and Identified Research Gap

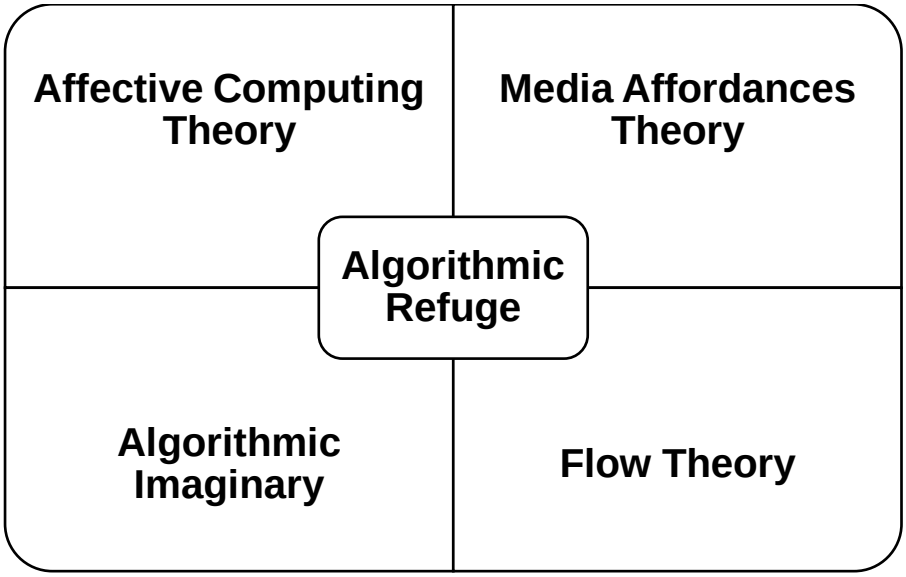
Despite growing interest in affective computing and digital well-being, a critical gap remains in HCI and media psychology literature. Current scholarship lacks a qualitative, phenomenological understanding of algorithmic affect, specifically, how individuals subjectively experience and intentionally leverage Generative AI media, synthetic audio, and curated recommendation feeds to mitigate emotional distress, cultivate cognitive "breathing room," and restore psychological balance.

By shifting focus away from purely deficit-based screen-time metrics toward the lived, subjective experiences of users, research can better inform humane UI/UX design architectures that support agency, calm, and emotional self-regulation (Lukoff et al., 2021; Weiser & Brown, 1997).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in four interconnected theoretical domains that reframe digital interfaces from instruments of labor into self-directed spaces for emotional regulation:

Figure 1. Algorithmic Refuge Theoretical Underpinnings



Affective Computing Theory (Picard, 1997): Picard established that computing systems must account for, respond to, and influence human emotion. This study applies Affective Computing to explain how users purposefully interact with Generative AI audio, synthetic media, and recommendation algorithms as non-clinical mechanisms for mood management, anxiety reduction, and cognitive recovery.

Media Affordances Theory (Gibson, 1979): Originally developed to describe physical environmental properties, affordance theory was extended to digital media to explain how interface features enable specific user behaviors. This research applies the concept of affective affordances, structural digital properties (such as low-friction AI music streams, personalized recommendation loops, and responsive interaction) that afford emotional safety, calm, and psychological grounding during distress.

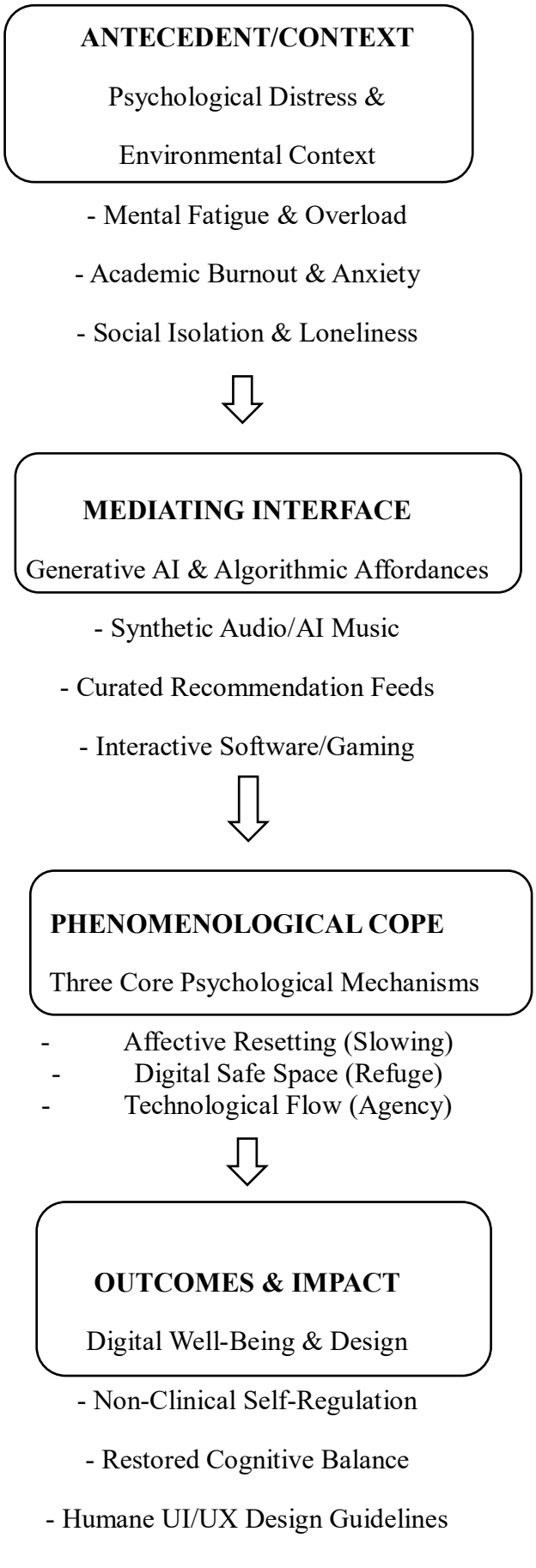
The Algorithmic Imaginary (Bucher, 2017, 2018): Bucher conceptualizes the "algorithmic imaginary" as the way users perceive, feel, and construct mental models of how algorithms operate. This framework helps explain how users develop active coping strategies by anticipating algorithmic behavior, thereby co-creating "digital refuges" within personalized feeds to buffer against loneliness and burnout.

Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990): Csikszentmihalyi defined "flow" as an optimal state of intrinsic motivation and deep cognitive absorption where challenge and skill are harmoniously balanced. Applied to human-computer interaction, Flow Theory explains how active engagement with high-focus tasks (such as software development and gaming) fosters seamless human-machine synergy, providing agency and psychological detachment from external stressors.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework illustrates the phenomenological process through which users actively leverage digital platforms as affective tools for emotional coping and cognitive restoration:

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Generative AI and Algorithmic Media as Affective Self-Regulation Interfaces



Antecedent / Context (Psychological Distress): The user enters the interaction experiencing heightened states of psychological distress, such as cognitive overload, mental fatigue, academic anxiety, or social isolation (Lukoff et al., 2021; Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). Contrary to deficit models that view screen engagement purely as compulsive distraction, these psychological states serve as the catalyst for intentional media selection (Bucher, 2017).

Mediating Interface (Algorithmic & AI Affordances): The individual purposefully turns to interactive digital systems, including Generative AI audio platforms, algorithmically curated social recommendation feeds, or specialized software environments (Bucher, 2018; Gibson, 1979). These interfaces offer structural affective affordances, low-friction navigation, personalized content loops, and real-time sensory adaptation, that facilitate non-demanding engagement (DeNora, 2000; Gibson, 1979).

Phenomenological Coping Mechanisms: Through sustained human-computer interaction, the user processes distress through three primary psychological pathways (Smith et al., 2021):

- Affective Resetting: Low-friction AI-generated music creates a psychological buffer zone that promotes cognitive slowing and emotional reflection (DeNora, 2000; Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007).
- Digital Safe Space: Curated recommendation algorithms afford mediated presence and psychological comfort, buffering against loneliness during social isolation (Bucher, 2017; Picard, 1997).
- Technological Flow: Goal-oriented digital tasks (such as programming or gaming) foster optimal cognitive immersion and human-machine synergy, restoring personal agency (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Outcomes and System Impact: The immediate outcome is non-clinical affective self-regulation and restored cognitive balance (Picard, 1997; Weiser & Brown, 1997). Long-term, these empirical insights inform well-being-centered UI/UX design architectures that prioritize humane interface boundaries, intentional friction, and user agency over hyper-engagement metrics (Lukoff et al., 2021; Norman, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design & IPA Justification

This study adopted a qualitative research design rooted in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). While traditional IPA studies rely on face-to-face semi-structured interviews, this investigation deployed asynchronous qualitative online surveys via Google Forms. In qualitative methodology, asynchronous written surveys are increasingly recognized as a valid data collection modality for IPA when investigating intimate personal experiences, digital behaviors, or sensitive emotional regulation strategies (Braun et al., 2021; Gibson & Brown, 2009; Reavey, 2021). Asynchronous written reflection provides participants with time and space to engage in deep introspection, enabling them to articulate complex affective states without real-time social performance pressure or interviewer demand characteristics. Participants provided detailed written accounts averaging 300–600 words per narrative section, producing a rich idiographic dataset suitable for multi-case IPA analysis.

Participant Context and Sampling

Twenty participants were selected using purposive, criterion-based sampling (Smith et al., 2021). To identify individuals with rich, first-hand experience using digital interfaces, AI tools, or algorithmic feeds for personal mood management, stress relief, or focused work, the researcher adhered to the inclusion criteria: adult users who actively engage with Generative AI tools (e.g., AI music generators, ambient audio applications), consume curated media feeds daily, or participate in high-focus digital activities (e.g., software development, gaming), across all genders, age 18 to 65 years old, with different socio-religious background. The sample size of twenty individuals is in alignment with IPA guidelines which emphasize idiographic depth over statistical generalization (Smith et al., 2021). The breakdown of participants is as follows: Teaching faculty (n = 5), systems support specialists (n = 3), IT analysts (n = 4), cybersecurity

consultants (n = 1), virtual assistants (n = 3), and college students (n = 4). The research utilized a compact cohort of participants to ensure detailed, cross-case analysis of individual narrative accounts (see Table 1).

Table 1. Professional Profile of the Participants

Occupational Role / Participant ID	Count (n)	Percentage (%)	Generative AI & Media Tools Used	Primary Coping Function
Teaching Faculty (F1–F5)	5	25%	ChatGPT, YouTube Ambient AI Streams	Grading fatigue, emotional boundary protection, lecture prep
IT Analysts (I6–I9)	4	20%	GitHub Copilot, Claude, Brain.fm, Midjourney	Incident recovery, cognitive flow, code debugging
College Students (S10–S13)	4	20%	ChatGPT, Suno AI, Spotify AI DJ, Mobile Apps	Board exam stress, study focus, cognitive slowing
Systems Support Specialists (P14–P16)	3	15%	ChatGPT, Brain.fm, YouTube Streams	System troubleshooting, burnout reset, mental quietude
Virtual Assistants (V17–V19)	3	15%	SUNO AI Audio, TikTok Feed, Live Study Streams	Remote isolation mitigation, mediated co-presence
Cybersecurity Consultants (C20)	1	5%	Ambient Audio Streams, Claude, GitHub Copilot	Late-night shift monitoring, stress reduction

Table 1 outlines the demographic and professional profile of study participants, including the specific Generative AI and synthetic media tools utilized for affective coping across the cohort.

Research Instrumentation and Qualitative Protocol

Ensuring idiographic depth while allowing participants the flexibility to explore unanticipated affective experiences, the protocol was structured around three core thematic domains:

- **Sensory & Emotional Triggers:** Questions explored the specific digital media types (e.g., AI-composed ambient music, synthetic audio streams, curated video feeds) selected during moments of heightened anxiety, cognitive overload, or stress (e.g., "Can you describe a specific time when you turned to AI-generated music or an algorithmic feed to change how you were feeling?")

- **Contextual & Spatial Dynamics:** Questions examined the physical and virtual environments where participants turned to their screens to establish psychological buffers or "quiet spaces". (e.g., "Where are you typically located when you use these platforms for comfort, and how does the interface create a sense of safety?")

- **Immersion, Flow, & Agency**: Prompts investigated experiences of deep cognitive engagement during active software tasks, such as programming or interactive gaming. (e.g., "What does it feel like when you are fully absorbed or 'in tune' with a task like coding or gaming?")

Establishing content validity and ensuring question clarity, the interview guide underwent expert review by qualitative researchers specializing in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and digital media psychology. A pilot interview was conducted with one participant meeting the inclusion criteria to refine prompt phrasing, evaluate question sequencing, and gauge response depth. Feedback from the pilot interview led to minor adjustments in the phrasing of reflection prompts to encourage deeper narrative articulation of subjective internal states.

In alignment with IPA epistemological principles, the researcher is recognized as an active interpretative instrument who engages in a "double hermeneutic", where the researcher makes sense of the participant making sense of their lived experience. To maintain methodological rigor and confirmability, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis to bracket prior theoretical assumptions regarding digital media usage and reduce researcher bias.

Data Collection

All qualitative data were gathered asynchronously via Google Forms as written text submissions. To ensure procedural consistency and data fidelity, no audio or video recordings were conducted, and data analysis was performed directly on raw text exports, eliminating transcription discrepancies.

Data Analysis

Data analysis strictly followed the multi-stage interpretative framework established for IPA (Smith et al., 2021):

- Immersion and Initial Reading: The researchers engaged in repeated readings of each transcript alongside audio recordings to develop a holistic sense of the participant's voice and lived experience.
- Exploratory Annotation: Line-by-line coding was conducted to capture descriptive content, linguistic features, and conceptual interpretations.
- Developing Emergent Themes: Annotations were synthesized into primary thematic clusters representing core psychological mechanisms.
- Cross-Case Mapping: Themes across individual transcripts were compared to identify convergent patterns and divergent nuances.
- Methodological Rigor & Reflexivity: Trustworthiness was maintained through audit trails of coding decisions, member-checking, and researcher reflexivity (Smith et al., 2021).

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in strict accordance with qualitative research ethics protocols and was reviewed and approved by the institutional research body at Olivarez College-Tagaytay. Ethics approval was secured prior to data collection from the participants. Electronic informed consent was obtained via the opening section of the Google Form. Participation was entirely voluntary, with guaranteed rights to withdraw at any time. All response datasets were anonymized upon export by replacing personal names with pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1 through Participant 20) and removing specific institutional or company identifiers.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of 20 participant narratives revealed four superordinate themes illustrating how individuals systematically repurpose synthetic media and algorithmic interfaces to achieve emotional stability, cognitive rest, and low-demand social connection.

Synthetic Media & Generative AI Audio as an Affective Reset for Cognitive Slowing

Participants described encounters with Generative AI tools and AI-composed audio not as technical novelty, but as self-directed interventions to slow down cognitive processing and recover from mental fatigue. Rather

than demanding active analytical processing, synthetic media provided a low-friction sensory environment that facilitated inner quietude.

Cognitive Slowing and Creating 'Quiet Spaces'. Participants highlighted how AI-generated ambient audio and music served as affective catalysts, helping them break away from daily cognitive overload. One participant articulated this intentional use of synthetic media: "I found inspiration in listening to music created with AI in YouTube and TikTok… may kakaibang dulot sa pag-iisip ko..... The music I listened to from YouTube and TikTok helped me slow down and become more reflective, almost like it created a quiet space inside my day"(S10). This account illustrates that the value of AI-generated media lies in its ability to establish a psychological buffer zone, a 'quiet space', wherein the user can temporarily disengage from external stressors and recalibrate their emotional baseline.

Shaping Inner Attention and Affective Grounding. Beyond momentary relaxation, synthetic media functioned as a mechanism for reorienting focus toward personal reflection and emotional grounding. Participants observed that the medium altered their internal cognitive posture:

"It wasn't the technology itself that felt holy, it was how it shaped my inner attention. The music helped me slow down and become more reflective (V19)... natatahimik ako kahit sandali lang (F1)… so the screen stopped feeling like distraction and started feeling like a doorway" (V17).

Another participant reinforced this experience of cognitive resetting through audio media: "Listening to music in general helps me reset my thinking and clears my mind, masarap sa pakiramdam" (C20). In these experiences, the digital interface transitions from a source of cognitive fragmentation into a 'doorway' for reflective self-regulation. The affective capacity of synthetic media allowed users to shift from passive consumption to intentional mindfulness.

Algorithmic Recommendation Feeds as Digital Safe Spaces

When encountering psychological distress, loneliness, or heavy workload demands, participants turned to computer interfaces and algorithmically curated feeds as non-judgmental refuges that afforded emotional stability and mediated social connection.

Mediated Presence During Isolation. During periods of interpersonal disconnection or vulnerability, the hardware interface and curated network served as an emotional anchor. As one participant reflected:

"There was a time when I felt really alone and couldn't open up to anyone. I spent a lot of time on my computer, and somehow that became my safe space. Talking to Gemini or Google apps online and just having someone there made me feel less alone..." (S13).

Here, the digital environment functions as a sanctuary ('safe space') providing mediated presence when face-to-face social support is absent or difficult to access. A participant also mentioned: "hindi ko alintana ang oras kapag may kausap ako sa online...nakakatuwang may nanakausap gamit lang ang aking cellphone…madali kong sabihin ang gusto ko"(S11).

Mediated Decompression and Academic Burnout Relief. Participants routinely turned to digital platforms to navigate periods of burnout, severe academic pressure, or emotional crises. One narrative detailed using technology during acute depressive distress:

"As I was going through a phase of my depression, I had felt that I have nothing to hold on to for life. Technology was one of the ways I was saved whether it was to connect to those who I trusted to clear my mind through messenger" (S12).

Similarly, another participant detailed how digital tools provided psychological scaffolding during intense, isolating board exam preparation:

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue X October 2026

"Technology felt sacred to me when I was busy reviewing for my board exams to the point that I couldn't go out. I reviewed 10 hours a day and couldn't even go out to visit a church when my exam day was near... so every night after my review session, I use my iPad to search for my patron Saints' prayers to pray and YouTube to meditate, and it felt like my iPad and internet were sacred because they helped me still tap into my spirituality"(F2).

A third participant described how mobile scripture applications provided immediate emotional relief during stressful moments:

"One time during college days, my cellphone felt meaningful to me during a difficult season in my life. I was feeling stressed and anxious, and I opened my Bible app to read a daily verse. The verse spoke exactly to what I was going through, and I felt comforted... In that moment, my phone felt more than just a gadget, it became a tool used to lift up my spirit and strengthen my faith"(P14).

Whether clearing the mind during intense exam preparation, overcoming depressive isolation, or seeking immediate comfort via mobile applications, digital devices provided essential psychological scaffolding that sustained emotional resilience.

Technological Flow and Restored Agency in High-Focus AI-Assisted Tasks

In addition to passive media consumption, active engagement with interactive digital environments such as computer programming and interactive gaming, fostered states of deep cognitive immersion, personal agency, and psychological 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Seamless Human-Machine Synergy in Coding and Gaming. When participating in structured, goal-oriented technological tasks, participants reported experiencing an effortless alignment between human intent and software responsiveness: "Probably when I play games or when I code, it is when I feel especially connected with technology... the closest I can say is being in tune with technology while playing or coding, where it feels seamless and effortless" (I7). Another participant highlighted how software creation provided an immediate sense of purpose and cognitive agency: "Probably when I code or do schoolwork, using technology at that time makes me feel like I am actually doing something"(I6) This state of 'being in tune' reflects optimal human-computer synergy, where software friction dissolves, allowing the user to experience deep focus, mastery, and cognitive fulfillment. A participant admitted that "para na kaming magkaibigan, kasama ko lagi, natutulungan ako sa paggawa ko ng mga research requirements sa school ko" (I9).

Designing for Digital Restraint, Consumerism Mitigation, and Reflective Nudging. Recognizing the potential for algorithmic overload and digital distraction, participants advocated for interface designs that actively support digital self-control, reflection, and mindful consumption:

"Teach people to slow down before buying, scrolling, or wasting, using technology to prompt reflection (e.g., 'Do I really need this?' 'What impact will this have?'). Encourage 'use it, don't let it use you': set boundaries (notifications off, limits on autoplay), choose meaningful content, and treat attention as a resource" (P15).

Participants also highlighted the tension between digital convenience and algorithmic consumerism (e.g., e-commerce and social media feeds):"One challenge is distraction. It's easy to spend too much time online (Shopee, Lazada, Tiktok) or be influenced by what we call consumerism, which can lead to buying unnecessary things... I try to use technology with self-control..." (F3). A third participant noted the necessity of balancing digital connection with real-world reflection:

"Technology helps me find peace and connection, but it can also make me feel disconnected from the real world if I overuse it. There are times when I get too hooked on it... but those moments also remind me that I should make time to continue learning and growing in life" (I8).

These perspectives highlight user demand for 'humane design' features such as reflective nudges, notification boundaries, and intentional friction, that protect human attention and promote digital well-being.

Ambient Digital Environments and Mediated Co-Presence

The fourth emergent theme reveals how participants utilize background streams, live ambient feeds, and continuous digital audio to experience a sense of social presence without the cognitive or emotional burden of direct interpersonal interaction. This ‘low-demand sociality’ was particularly prevalent among remote working professionals and late-night studying students. A remote virtual assistant shared:

“Working remotely from home for 10 hours can feel deeply isolating, but I don’t always have the energy for real phone calls or social outings. I keep live ‘study with me’ or ambient work streams open on my secondary monitor. Seeing someone else quietly working in the background makes me feel accompanied. It gives me a feeling of presence and shared space without needing to talk or perform socially”(V18).

A cybersecurity consultant corroborated this relational affordance:

“During late-night system monitoring shifts, the silence can amplify stress. Having an ambient audio stream running in the background provides a subtle, humanizing presence. It acts like a quiet companion in the room, buffering loneliness while allowing me to maintain total focus on my work” (C20).

A student participant mentioned: “kahit hindi ako lumabas ng bahay at puntahan ang mga kaibigan ko, sapat na matawagan ko sila at maglaro kami online” (S10).

DISCUSSION

Algorithmic Affordances for Affective Regulation

The empirical findings of this study contribute to the theoretical evolution of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) by extending Gibson’s (1979) Media Affordances Theory into the realm of affective computing (Picard, 1997). Traditional affordance models focus primarily on physical or cognitive actions (e.g., clicking, dragging, navigating). Our qualitative results demonstrate that AI recommendation systems and synthetic media provide affective affordances, structural properties of digital environments that afford emotional calming, mood resetting, and psychological safety (Bucher, 2017; DeNora, 2000). Furthermore, our findings validate Bucher’s (2017) concept of the 'algorithmic imaginary,' showing that user perceptions of algorithmic behavior directly shape their emotional coping strategies. Rather than passively absorbing recommendations, users develop sophisticated mental models that allow them to co-create 'digital sanctuaries' within personalized feeds.

Differentiating Generative AI Coping from General Digital Technology Usage

A critical conceptual distinction must be drawn between general digital technology usage and Generative AI-assisted affective coping. While general technology engagement (such as passive social media browsing, uncurated video watching, or casual gaming) often lacks intentionality, Generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Suno AI, Endel, GitHub Copilot) provide interactive, co-creative, and hyper-personalized affordances. Participants deployed AI tools not merely to pass time, but as dynamic, real-time cognitive and emotional co-regulators—generating adaptive soundscapes, structuring chaotic thoughts, or offloading routine cognitive friction during high-stress operational moments.

Re-Framing Digital Health

Contemporary clinical and public health literature frequently relies on a simplified 'screen time' deficit paradigm, treating digital technology usage primarily as a risk factor for addiction, isolation, or attention fragmentation (Lukoff et al., 2021). Our qualitative data offer a crucial counter-narrative: users actively repurpose technology as an affective refuge during acute distress or loneliness. When traditional social or

physical support systems are unavailable, digital interfaces afford mediated presence and non-judgmental space. Recognizing technology as an affective tool does not minimize the genuine risks of digital addiction or algorithmic manipulation. Instead, it advocates for a more nuanced framework in media psychology, one that distinguishes between mindless compulsive scrolling and intentional affective self-regulation (Lukoff et al., 2021; Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007).

Practical UI/UX Design Guidelines for Well-Being Centered Interfaces

Based on participant insights and the empirical themes, the research proponent proposes four concrete design principles for humane digital architectures:

Reflective Pause Prompts ('Intentional Friction'): Incorporate micro-interventions like subtle prompts asking, 'How are you feeling right now?' or 'Would you like a 2-minute breath break? before infinite scrolling loops begin.

Ambient & Low-Friction Modes for Generative AI: Provide dedicated 'calm modes' in generative media tools that generate non-demanding, non-verbal ambient audio and visual streams tailored specifically for cognitive decompression (Weiser & Brown, 1997).

Transparent Algorithmic Control & Boundaries: Empower users with explicit controls to adjust algorithmic recommendation parameters such as filter out high-arousal content or show soothing streams to support emotional self-regulation.

Protection of Attention & Boundaries: Implement automated boundary-setting features like session wrap-up indicators that treat user attention as a finite, precious resource rather than a metric to be exploited (Lukoff et al., 2021).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations and Directions for Future Research Several limitations should be noted. First, the use of asynchronous qualitative online surveys, while offering reflective privacy, precludes real-time verbal probing and conversational follow-up characteristic of live interviews. Second, the sample was drawn purposefully from technical and academic cohorts in the Philippines, which may reflect higher baseline digital literacy.

Third, reliance on self-reported qualitative text means physiological arousal resets were perceived rather than bio-measured. Future research should combine qualitative narratives with biometric sensors (e.g., heart rate variability, galvanic skin response) and longitudinal digital phenotyping.

CONCLUSION

Beyond productivity metrics and alarmist screen-time discourses lies a quiet human reality: in an increasingly overstimulated world, individuals are subverting the hyper-engagement mechanisms of modern software to carve out spaces for emotional survival. Through the lived experiences of 20 faculty members, IT specialists, students, and remote workers, this phenomenological inquiry reveals that Generative AI and algorithmic feeds are not merely engines of labor or passive consumption.

Instead, users co-create them into personalized digital refuges, leveraging non-repeating synthetic audio to quiet racing minds, turning curated feeds into spatial sanctuaries from daily friction, immersing in AI-assisted tasks to reclaim a sense of agency, and keeping ambient streams active to feel accompanied in remote isolation.

Recognizing these four pillars of algorithmic affect challenges software architects and media theorists to rethink interface design. Rather than engineering platforms to capture raw attention through relentless notification loops and ad-monetization algorithms, technology must evolve toward humane, well-being-

centered design architectures rooted in Calm Technology. When software honors human cognitive limits and emotional boundaries, algorithms cease to be sources of fatigue and become genuine instruments of psychological restoration, sanctuary, and rest.

REFERENCES

1. Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., & Subrahmanyam, C. (2021). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 24(6), 641–654.
2. Bucher, T. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. Information, Communication & Society, 20(1), 30–44. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086
3. Bucher, T. (2018). If...then: Algorithmic power and politics. Oxford University Press.
4. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. Harper & Row.
5. DeNora, T. (2000). Music in everyday life. Cambridge University Press.
6. Gibson, W., & Brown, A. (2009). Working with qualitative data. SAGE Publications.
7. Gibson, J. J. (1979). The ecological approach to visual perception. Houghton Mifflin.
8. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. SAGE Publications.
9. Lukoff, K., Lyngs, U., Zade, H., Liao, J. V., Choi, C., Fan, K., Munson, S. A., & Hiniker, A. (2021). How the design of YouTube influences user sense of agency. In Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 1–17). Association for Computing Machinery. doi:10.1145/3411764.3445467
10. Murray, C. D., & Wilde, D. J. (2018). Qualitative survey methods in IPA research. Qualitative
11. Research in Psychology, 15(4), 421–438.
12. Norman, D. A. (2013). The design of everyday things (Rev. and expanded ed.). Basic Books.
13. Picard, R. W. (1997). Affective computing. MIT Press.
14. Reavey, P. (Ed.). (2021). A handbook of visual and creative methods in psychology: Using images in qualitative research (2nd ed.). Routledge.
15. Saarikallio, S., & Erkkilä, J. (2007). The role of music in adolescents' mood regulation. Psychology of Music, 35(1), 88–109. doi:10.1177/0305735607068889
16. Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2021). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
17. Weiser, M., & Brown, J. S. (1997). The coming age of calm technology. In P. J. Denning & R. M. Metcalfe (Eds.), Beyond calculation: The next fifty years of computing (pp. 75–85). Springer.