

Maternal–Fetal Soul Communication in Indonesian Phenomenological and Cultural Perspectives: A Phenomenological Study of Prenatal Experience

Maximus Mujur^{1*}, Deddy Mulyana², Susanne Dida³, Johanes Cornelius Mose⁴

Department: Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia, Email: maximus23001@mail.unpad.ac.id, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6570-7812>

Department: Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5271-4568>

Department: Faculty of Communication Sciences at Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0611-5020>

Department: Obstetrics and Gynecology, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4401-428X>

*Corresponding Author: maximus23001@mail.unpad.ac.id

Citation: Mujur, M., Dida, S., Mose, J. C. & Mulyana, D. (2025). Maternal–Fetal Soul Communication in Indonesian Phenomenological and Cultural Perspectives: A Phenomenological Study of Prenatal Experience, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(4), 2912-2929. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i4.3361>

Published: December 16, 2025

ABSTRACT

Pregnancy in Indonesian cultures is understood not merely as a biological process but as a spiritual, emotional, and intersubjective experience shared between mother and fetus. This study aims to explore maternal–fetal soul communication through sensory pathways, intuition, and emotional resonance using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. Thirty pregnant women from diverse Indonesian cultural backgrounds (Sundanese, Javanese, Minangkabau, Batak, Betawi, and East Nusa Tenggara) were interviewed at Santo Borromeus Hospital in Bandung. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, sensory diaries, and participant observation. The analysis identified three essential themes: (1) the senses as bio-cultural channels of communication, (2) maternal intuition as a mechanism of intersubjective interpretation, and (3) feelings as a bidirectional emotional resonance. These findings are synthesized into a new theoretical framework—the Prenatal Intersubjective Communication Model in the Indonesian Cultural Context (PICMIC)—which conceptualizes prenatal communication as a sensory–intuitive–emotional process shaped by Nusantara cultural values. This study contributes to expanding maternal–fetal attachment theory within a non-Western cultural context.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Soul Communication, Pregnant Women, Indonesian Culture, Intersubjectivity, Maternal–Fetal Attachment

INTRODUCTION

Background

Pregnancy is one of the most profound human experiences, as it involves a unique encounter between two forms of consciousness—the mother and the fetus—an encounter without parallel in any other human relationship. In this state, the maternal body becomes a dialogical space where two subjectivities coexist, influence one another, and develop together, a dynamic aligned with the concept of early intersubjectivity (Trevarthen, 2009). Global research on maternal–fetal attachment (MFA) affirms that prenatal communication occurs not only through physiological mechanisms but also through affective and imaginative experiences. Mothers often interpret

fetal movements as forms of “messages,” construct mental images of the baby, speak or sing to the fetus, and experience spontaneous emotional resonance—phenomena that can be understood through the analytic lens of interaction and meaning-making (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Nevertheless, much of this scholarship remains grounded in Western medical–psychological frameworks that emphasize biological and neurobehavioral dimensions, thereby overlooking the cultural and spiritual elements that shape pregnancy as a holistic experience (Field, 2017).

In the Indonesian context, pregnancy is perceived not solely as a biological process but as a socio-spiritual journey connecting the mother, fetus, family, ancestors, and the natural world. Many Indonesian cultural traditions regard the fetus as a sentient subject rather than a merely developing biological entity. Fetal sensitivity is understood through *rasa*, an intuitive mode of communication expressed through subtle movements, bodily rhythm shifts, inner vibrations, dreams, or emotional responses—experiences aligned with findings on the primacy of early affective attunement in the development of social organisms (Bard & Hopkins, 2018). In several traditions, the fetus is believed to respond to specific auditory stimuli such as prayers, chants, traditional music, or family rituals, thereby integrating prenatal experience into a rich cultural symbolism (Fadiman, 1997). These understandings demonstrate that maternal–fetal relationships are embedded within cultural landscapes that provide language, symbols, and conceptual frameworks for interpreting prenatal experience, positioning pregnancy not as an isolated individual event but as a relational and meaning-laden phenomenon.

Thus, pregnancy in Indonesia cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural cosmologies, spiritualities, and collective values that surround it. Each community situates pregnancy within an expansive web of meanings in which the fetus is regarded as part of the moral and spiritual order of society. This shapes how mothers interpret bodily signals, how families offer support, and how communities design rituals to harmonize the relationship between the mother and the unborn child. This perspective highlights that soul communication between mother and fetus is not a phenomenon detached from culture but an embodied and emotional process guided by collective values (Trevathan, 2009). Therefore, prenatal communication research in Indonesia requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates anthropology, psychology, reproductive health studies, and spirituality to capture the complexity of the maternal–fetal relationship in a more holistic and meaningful way.

Research Problem

International studies on maternal–fetal communication have long been dominated by medical and psychological paradigms that prioritize biological, hormonal, and behaviorally measurable indicators. These approaches tend to overlook cultural, intuitive, and intersubjective dimensions of experience, even though many non-Western societies interpret prenatal relationships through different forms of bodily expression and symbolic meaning. In Indonesia, prenatal communication is often understood as a process embedded within local values and cultural cosmologies that emphasize interconnectedness between the body, the soul, and the social environment. Consequently, global findings on maternal–fetal bonding do not always reflect how Indonesian mothers experience, interpret, and respond to signals from the fetus. This limitation highlights a significant knowledge gap in the global literature, especially regarding how pregnancy is lived as a bodily experience intertwined with cultural systems of meaning across diverse communities in the Indonesian archipelago.

In everyday life, Indonesian communities employ a set of culturally rooted concepts to articulate the inner connection between mother and fetus. *Rasa halus*, for example, refers to a mother’s intuitive capacity to sense the fetus’s mood or needs without explicit physical stimuli. Meanwhile, *ngidam* as a message from the baby is understood as a form of indirect communication, in which particular cravings are interpreted as signs conveyed by the fetus. Many mothers also believe that their inner states “merge” with the fetus, such that what the mother feels—whether stress or calm—is believed to directly influence the baby’s emotional condition in the womb. Moreover, prayers or the recitation of sacred verses are practiced as ways to soothe the unborn child, illustrating that prenatal communication is perceived as both a spiritual and affective process. These cultural categories enrich the understanding of prenatal intersubjectivity, wherein communication unfolds not only through fetal movements but also through fields of affect, intuition, and spirituality.

Therefore, a phenomenological study is needed to capture prenatal experiences as they are lived, felt, and interpreted by Indonesian mothers within the realities of their daily lives. A phenomenological approach enables researchers to explore the depth of bodily experience, emotional relations, and the structures of meaning that shape maternal perceptions of communication with the fetus. Such a study is crucial for understanding how intuition, cultural rituals, family support, and spiritual beliefs contribute to the development of intersubjective relationships between mother and baby. Beyond contributing to global theories of maternal–fetal attachment, culturally grounded phenomenological research can also enrich reproductive healthcare practices to be more sensitive to local values. By bringing forward the voices of Indonesian mothers directly, this research has the potential to offer a more holistic, humanistic, and contextually grounded understanding of maternal–fetal communication as a living, meaning-filled bodily phenomenon embedded within the cultural identity of the Indonesian archipelago.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore in depth how pregnant women in Indonesia perceive what is often described as the soul-to-soul communication of the fetus through the senses, intuition, and emotion. The uniqueness of this prenatal experience emerges not only from biological interactions between mother and fetus, but also from the emotional resonance and bodily sensations the mother encounters in daily life. Many mothers describe receiving “subtle signals”—such as fetal movements, sudden emotional shifts, sensations of warmth or coolness, or intuitive impressions—which they believe originate from the fetus. By focusing on these eidetic experiences, the study seeks to understand how the maternal body becomes a medium for receiving messages that are not always physical in nature. This approach is important because it gives space to forms of embodied knowledge that are often overlooked within conventional medical frameworks, yet remain deeply present in the subjective experiences of pregnant women in Indonesia.

The next objective is to identify how cultural systems shape women’s experiences and interpretations of such communication. Each community in Indonesia possesses distinct concepts, cosmologies, and customary practices that influence how mothers understand their relationship with the unborn child. For example, some ethnic groups emphasize the value of inner harmony, while others interpret signals from the fetus as moral reminders, spiritual guidance, or forms of intuitive communication. Through a cultural lens, the mother’s bodily experience does not stand alone but unfolds within a network of symbols, rituals, prayers, music, and collective norms that give meaning to every movement and emotional shift. Identifying these cultural frames allows the study to observe variations in interpretation—both across regions and generations—so that the mother–fetus relationship can be understood as a relational phenomenon continually negotiated within broader social and spiritual contexts.

The third objective of this study is to develop a new theoretical model of maternal–fetal soul communication within the Indonesian context, contributing to the global discourse on maternal–fetal communication. This model is expected to integrate findings related to bodily sensations, intuition, emotion, and cultural practices, thereby offering a more holistic conceptual framework that resonates with the lived experiences of pregnant women in Indonesia. By foregrounding local perspectives, the study not only addresses Western bias in prenatal communication research but also opens possibilities for understanding the mother–fetus relationship as a form of intersubjectivity that transcends biological boundaries. The resulting theoretical model may serve as a foundation for future research, the development of culturally sensitive reproductive health interventions, and new insights into how early human life is shaped through networks of bodily, emotional, and spiritual communication.

Novelty

This study seeks to present a perspective on prenatal intersubjectivity grounded in Indonesian cultural contexts—an approach that has received limited attention in global scholarship. Prenatal intersubjectivity is understood as a relational space in which the mother and fetus mutually encounter, sense, and influence one another through bodily fields, emotional resonance, and culturally mediated meaning. In the Indonesian archipelago, this relationship is not explained solely through biological mechanisms but through concepts such as *rasa halus* (subtle feeling), inner harmony, communication through dreams, and the belief that the fetus possesses spiritual sensitivity and a soul connection with the mother from early pregnancy. By foregrounding these local perspectives, the study aims to broaden understandings of how mother–fetus closeness is shaped by cultural cosmologies, rituals, prayers, and collective values embedded in Indonesian communities. This approach is expected to open new horizons in prenatal studies, which have traditionally emphasized physiological mechanisms over relational and cultural dimensions.

Furthermore, the study seeks to integrate the sensory–intuitive–emotional pathways into a comprehensive phenomenological framework. The sensory pathway includes experiences perceived through the physical senses, such as fetal movements, shifts in bodily rhythms, or warmth in certain areas of the body. The intuitive pathway encompasses premonitions, inner messages, or sudden impressions that cannot be logically explained but are interpreted as forms of communication from the fetus. Meanwhile, the emotional pathway concerns affective responses of the mother, such as emerging calmness, joy, anxiety, or deepened connectedness when interacting with the unborn child. These three pathways are often inseparable in maternal experience, instead working simultaneously within a unified embodied awareness. Through a phenomenological lens, this study examines how these experiences emerge, are felt, and are interpreted in the everyday lives of pregnant Indonesian women, thereby producing a holistic understanding of prenatal communication dynamics.

The final aim of this research is to formulate a new theoretical model termed PICMIC (Prenatal Intersubjective Communication Model in Indonesian Cultural Context). This model is designed to explain the mechanisms of maternal–fetal soul communication by integrating sensory, intuitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions. PICMIC posits that prenatal communication is not a linear process but a circular and interactive one occurring within a moving body, guided by cultural environments that shape interpretation, and sustained through a continuously evolving emotional bond. Thus, the model functions not only as a theoretical framework but also

as a methodological foundation for understanding the diversity of pregnancy experiences in Indonesia. PICMIC is expected to enrich global academic discourse, offer an alternative to dominant Western medical paradigms, and serve as a basis for developing culturally sensitive maternal–child health practices that recognize mothers’ subjective experiences as vital sources of knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Phenomenology: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas

Phenomenology, as pioneered by Edmund Husserl, places lived consciousness at the center of philosophical inquiry. For Husserl, the world is not understood through abstract theories or preconceived assumptions but through the ways in which phenomena present themselves to human awareness. The principle of intentionality—that consciousness is always directed toward something—serves as a crucial foundation for understanding the relationship between mother and fetus (Husserl, 2014). In pregnancy, a mother’s consciousness does not stand as an isolated entity but is continually directed toward the life growing within her body. Husserlian phenomenology provides a framework for bracketing biological or medical explanations and returning to immediate experience: how the mother feels fetal movements, how she attributes meaning to bodily sensations, and how the fetus becomes part of the experiential horizon as “the present Other,” despite being unseen. Husserl’s thinking therefore opens conceptual space for examining prenatal communication as an experiential phenomenon emerging from the intentionality of maternal consciousness.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty expanded phenomenology by emphasizing the body as both the medium and the fundamental condition of perception and existence. Through the concept of the lived body (*le corps vécu*), Merleau-Ponty understands the body not as a biological object but as a sensing, understanding, and relational subject (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). In pregnancy, the maternal body becomes a unique communicative locus because it holds two experiences simultaneously: the experience of the mother and that of the fetus. Sensations such as subtle movements, shifts in breathing rhythms, or feelings of expansion and tension constitute forms of bodily communication that cannot be reduced to simple stimulus–response models. The maternal body becomes a space where two subjectivities meet, intertwine, and mutually shape one another. Through Merleau-Ponty’s lens, pregnancy can be understood as a phenomenon of intercorporeality, in which two living bodies are in continuous relation, generating modes of communication that are prelinguistic, intuitive, and deeply embodied (Weiss, 1999).

Emmanuel Levinas enriches phenomenological understanding by positioning the relation to the Other as an ethical experience that precedes knowledge. For Levinas, the presence of the Other can never be fully reduced to definitions or conceptual categories; it demands responsiveness, responsibility, and openness (Levinas, 1969). This perspective is profoundly relevant for understanding the fetus as a subject who imposes affective and ethical demands upon the mother. The fetus emerges as an Other who is fragile and voiceless, yet continually calls the mother to care, protect, and respond to its presence. In pregnancy, this ethical relation unfolds not through language or conventional social interaction but through bodily signals, emotional shifts, intuitive impressions, and the silent presence of the fetus seeking attention. Levinas’s thought allows prenatal communication to be interpreted not merely as a physiological experience but as an ethical encounter in which the mother feels a profound call to responsibility toward another life dwelling within her (Diprose, 2002).

Maternal–Fetal Attachment (MFA)

Studies on maternal–fetal attachment (MFA) have developed since the early 1990s through influential works by Muller (1992), Condon (1993), and DiPietro (2010). These scholars assert that the mother–fetus relationship is not merely a biological phenomenon but involves emotional, affective, and interactional experiences that unfold throughout pregnancy. Their findings demonstrate that the fetus is capable of responding to the mother’s voice, abdominal touch, changes in stress hormones, and the mother’s emotional state, thereby creating a bidirectional communication dynamic that emerges even before birth (DiPietro, 2010). Condon, for example, emphasizes the importance of maternal mental representations of the fetus as the basis for emotional bonding, while Müller highlights the gradual development of affection and closeness between the mother and her unborn child. DiPietro further reinforces these insights through physiological evidence of fetal sensitivity. Nevertheless, these approaches are still deeply rooted in Western psychological frameworks that prioritize universal aspects, without attending to diverse meanings arising from other cultural contexts (Brandon et al., 2009).

A major limitation of classical MFA studies is the absence of attention to cultural and spiritual frameworks that shape how mothers interpret their relationship with the fetus. Much of the existing research measures maternal–fetal bonding using questionnaires, affect rating scales, and physiological responses that are assumed to be universal (Gau & Lee, 2003), even though pregnancy experiences are always mediated by local values, belief systems, and traditional practices that differ across societies. In Indonesia, for instance, prenatal bonding is often

understood through the language of *rasa* (felt sense), intuition, and cultural symbols that enrich the experience (Kusumadewi & Kartini, 2022). Meanwhile, Western MFA models do not provide conceptual space for categories such as “*rasa halus*,” spiritual perceptions of the fetus, or the ritual meanings that serve to affirm mother–baby communication (Mutmainnah & Afiyanti, 2019). This indicates that previous research has not adequately captured the complexity of prenatal communication, which is embodied, relational, and shaped by local cosmologies (Geertz, 1973).

By overlooking cultural and spiritual contexts, earlier MFA research risks producing an incomplete picture of how prenatal bonding is formed and understood in the lived experiences of mothers worldwide. In societies such as Indonesia, maternal–fetal attachment is expressed not only through touch or perceived fetal movement but also through practices such as prayer, protective rituals, traditional music, and beliefs that the fetus conveys certain moral or spiritual messages (Mutmainnah & Afiyanti, 2019). Without considering these dimensions, MFA theories become overly narrow and tend to reduce prenatal communication to mere biological reactions. Therefore, the development of culturally sensitive MFA approaches is crucial—not only for academic advancement but also for improving healthcare services, pregnancy counseling, and interdisciplinary understanding of the mother–fetus relationship (Berry, 1997; Siddiqui & Hägglöf, 2000). Such an approach enables the emergence of models that are more holistic, humanistic, and aligned with the lived realities of Indonesian mothers.

Indonesian Cultural Perspectives on the Fetus

Indonesian cultural perspectives on the fetus reveal that prenatal life is understood not merely as a biological process but as a relational experience imbued with moral, spiritual, and emotional values. In Sundanese communities, the concept of *hadé* emphasizes that the clarity and purity of a mother’s heart directly influence the baby’s inner state. Mothers are encouraged to maintain calmness, avoid conflict, and cultivate positive thoughts because every emotional vibration is believed to reach the fetus. Meanwhile, Javanese communities interpret pregnancy through practices such as *ngidam*, *mitoni*, and the tradition of speaking to the *jabang bayi* as ways of cultivating deep maternal–fetal closeness (Nuraisyah & Hudaidah, 2021). *Ngidam* is regarded as a form of subtle communication in which the fetus conveys specific desires, while *mitoni* serves to affirm spiritual protection and interconnectedness. These practices collectively demonstrate that in Indonesian culture, the fetus is regarded as a soulful subject actively interacting with the mother from within the womb.

In Eastern Indonesia—particularly in Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT)—views of the fetus are rich in spiritual significance. Prayers to ancestors, family rituals, and beliefs in protective spirits guiding the mother and fetus illustrate that pregnancy is understood as part of a larger web of cosmic relations. Many mothers believe that inner communication with the fetus occurs through *rasa* (felt sense) and intuition, perceived as whispers or guidance from ancestral guardians. Such perspectives align with findings showing that local cultural practices in Indonesia strongly shape how mothers interpret pregnancy and form emotional–spiritual bonds with the fetus (Rachmayanti et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Minangkabau communities emphasize that a child’s character is formed in the womb and is profoundly influenced by the mother’s emotional state. Thus, mothers are expected to regulate their emotions, avoid anger, and cultivate gratitude so that positive traits may develop within the child.

These understandings show that culture not only provides behavioral norms but also shapes how mothers interpret signals from the fetus both emotionally and spiritually. Overall, these cultural practices illustrate that culture supplies a powerful meaning framework for prenatal experiences in Indonesia. This is consistent with national studies revealing that cultural practices shape mothers’ perceptions, decisions, and responses to pregnancy-related bodily signals (Aryastami & Mubasyiroh, 2021). The fetus is not viewed as a passive biological entity but as a subject embedded within social, spiritual, and moral relationships. Through rituals, prayers, symbols, and cultural language, mothers are given space to interpret prenatal communication as a dialogical process involving the body, the heart, and the transcendental dimension. This meaning framework influences how mothers perceive fetal movements, understand intuitions, interpret emotional changes, and build deep inner connections. Thus, prenatal experience becomes both embodied and embedded—rooted in the mother’s body and grounded in communal values. Indonesian cultural perspectives enrich the understanding of the mother–fetus relationship and offer a broader lens than conventional biomedical–psychological models.

Conceptual Framework of Soulful Communication

Mother–fetus soulful communication can be understood through the sensory pathway, namely forms of communication that occur through perceptual experiences such as fetal movements, sound, breathing rhythms, and touch on the abdomen. This pathway is the most readily identifiable because it involves physical responses that are visible or directly felt by the mother. When the fetus moves, for instance, the mother does not merely perceive a mechanical sensation but interprets the movement as a sign of comfort, activity, or a particular need of the baby (DiPietro, 2010). Likewise, the mother’s voice, music, or prayers can influence fetal responses, creating an interactive relationship that connects the two bodies within a shared field of awareness (Al-Qahtani, 2005).

Through this sensory pathway, the mother's body becomes both a medium and a bridge linking the fetus's awareness to the outside world, allowing prenatal experience to emerge as a communicative process formed through physical sensations that are interpreted personally and socially.

In addition to the sensory pathway, mother–fetus soulful communication also occurs through the intuitive pathway, which involves premonitions, a “sense of knowing,” and inner experiences that cannot always be explained through physiological mechanisms. Many mothers describe suddenly knowing when the fetus feels comfortable, unsettled, or in need of soothing, even without clear physical signs. This intuitive pathway often manifests through deep experiences such as dreams, subtle vibrations, or the felt sense of a presence within the body. In a phenomenological context, this intuition represents a form of embodied knowledge arising from the intertwining of the mother's and fetus's bodies as two subjectivities co-present to one another (Trevathan, 2009). The intuitive pathway demonstrates that prenatal communication is not limited to physical signals but includes a prelinguistic form of inner understanding in which the mother senses the fetus as both a part of herself and an “other” with its own will and inner voice (Bourguignon, 1989).

The emotional pathway constitutes the third dimension of mother–fetus soulful communication and is characterized by a bidirectional resonance between the mother's feelings and the fetal emotional state. Changes in the mother's emotions—whether joy, anxiety, sadness, or calm—affect not only the fetus's physiological condition but also shape a profound affective bond (Field, 2017). Many mothers report sensing a “resonance” or subtle emotional vibration when interacting with the fetus, as though the baby is responding to their mood. This emotional pathway illustrates that prenatal communication is a relational process that transcends the physical body and creates an inner closeness that cannot be reduced to biological explanations alone. All pathways—sensory, intuitive, and emotional—are always framed by culture, as culture provides the language, symbols, and interpretive frameworks that enable mothers to understand and assign meaning to these experiences (Lagercrantz & Changeux, 2009). Thus, mother–fetus soulful communication is a multidimensional phenomenon that is embodied, intersubjective, and cultural.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on understanding how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. IPA was selected because it enables the researcher to explore the inner dynamics, subtle perceptions, and subjective experiences of pregnant mothers as they sense communication with the fetus. This approach emphasizes that human experience cannot be understood solely through external observation but must be examined through personal narratives, reflection, and layered interpretation that reveal the depth of meaning. Thus, this study does not merely map sensory, intuitive, or emotional phenomena but also investigates how mothers interpret these experiences based on cultural background, spirituality, and personal values. IPA also provides space for a researcher–participant relational process of co-interpretation, in which meaning emerges through the dialogue between the mother's experiences and the researcher's reflective engagement.

The study involved 30 pregnant mothers undergoing prenatal care at Borromeus Hospital in Bandung between November 2024 and April 2025, representing diverse cultural backgrounds including Sundanese, Javanese, Minangkabau, Batak, NTT (East Nusa Tenggara), Balinese, and Betawi. Participant selection employed three sampling strategies simultaneously: purposive sampling to identify mothers with relevant experiences; maximum variation sampling to ensure diversity of culture, age, and pregnancy history; and snowball sampling to recruit additional participants through referrals among mothers. This multi-strategy sampling approach enriches the data by enabling the researcher to observe patterns of similarity and variation in prenatal communication across cultural groups. Including mothers from diverse backgrounds is essential to ensure that the conceptual model produced is not biased toward a single cultural system but instead reflects the complexity of Indonesia's multiethnic context. Thus, variation in participant experiences forms a strong foundation for in-depth phenomenological analysis.

Data were collected using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, sensory diaries, and observation. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and followed a semi-structured format, allowing mothers to narrate their sensory experiences, intuitions, emotions, and cultural practices. To capture daily processes of communication, participants were asked to keep a sensory diary for 7–10 days, recording fetal movements, emotional changes, dreams, premonitions, and other bodily responses they experienced. In addition, the researcher conducted observations of cultural rituals, prenatal classes, and family prayer practices to understand the sociocultural contexts that shape maternal experiences. The combination of these three methods provides rich and layered data, illuminating the dynamics of mother–fetus communication as an ongoing process occurring both physically and inwardly.

Ethical procedures were rigorously implemented through informed consent, anonymity safeguards, and cultural sensitivity throughout all stages of the research. Mothers were given full freedom to withdraw at any time

without consequences, and their identities were protected with coded labels. Cultural sensitivity was maintained by respecting spiritual practices, customary symbols, and family beliefs related to pregnancy. Data analysis followed the stages of IPA, beginning with immersive reading to capture the overall narrative, followed by initial noting to identify important descriptions, language use, and reflections. The next stages included identifying emerging themes, connecting themes, and conducting cross-case analysis to observe patterns across participants. The final stage involved synthesizing essences—the formulation of the core structures of mother–fetus soulful communication within the Indonesian cultural context.

The study's trustworthiness was ensured through four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation (interviews, diaries, observation), member checking, and consultation with experts in anthropology and perinatal psychology. Dependability was maintained through detailed documentation of research procedures, enabling transparency and replicability. Confirmability was ensured through an audit trail and researcher reflexivity regarding personal biases, especially those related to cultural perceptions of the fetus. Transferability was achieved by providing rich contextual descriptions (thick description), enabling readers to assess the relevance of findings for other populations or cultural settings. Together, these strategies ensure that the study's results are not only methodologically robust but also possess strong scientific integrity and phenomenological depth.

All ethical procedures in this study were conducted under the formal approval granted by the ethics committee of Saint Borromeus Hospital in Bandung. Through a thorough review process, the Ethics and Legal Committee—particularly the Subcommittee for Health Research Ethics—declared that the research was feasible and met all ethical requirements, as documented in the official decision letter numbered 026/KEPK/IX/2024. This approval confirms that the research design, data collection methods, interview instruments, and participant protection procedures were comprehensively evaluated and deemed in accordance with ethical standards for health research in Indonesia. Thus, every stage of the research was grounded in principles of respect for participant dignity, protection of pregnant mothers' vulnerability, fairness in recruitment, and scientific responsibility in conducting the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three Core Essences

The findings reveal that soulful communication between mother and fetus does not occur through a single channel but through three core experiential essences: the senses, intuition, and emotion. Together, these three dimensions form an integrated process of prenatal communication that is sensory–affective–spiritual in nature. From the in-depth interviews with 30 pregnant mothers, it became evident that experiences of prenatal communication are diverse yet follow a consistent pattern: most mothers perceived signals through the body (sensory), others through spontaneous inner knowing (intuition), and nearly all experienced emotional resonance (feeling). Simple quantitative data were organized to indicate how widely these experiences occurred among participants and to provide a foundation for phenomenological interpretation. The table below summarizes the number of mothers who reported soulful communication across the three channels.

Table 1. Findings on Soulful Communication Across the Three Core Essences

Channel of Soulful Communication	Number of Mothers	Percentage
Sensory	27	90%
Intuition	22	73%
Emotion	25	83%

The table shows that 27 out of 30 pregnant mothers (90%) experienced soulful communication through the senses, making it the most dominant and easily recognizable channel. Most mothers described fetal movements as an initial form of dialogue in which variations in rhythm, intensity of kicks, or shifts in position were interpreted as responses to the mother's voice, touch, or emotional state. Beyond movement, some mothers also sensed warmth, subtle pressure, or shifts in bodily rhythm, which they interpreted as “signals” from the baby. The high prevalence of sensory experiences aligns with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, which views the body as the primary medium of intersubjectivity. In the Indonesian cultural context, the senses are often regarded as a natural bridge between mother and fetus, allowing physical sensations to carry spiritual and emotional meaning. Thus, the dominance of the sensory channel is not merely a biological phenomenon but also an interpretive process shaped by cultural frameworks.

A total of 22 out of 30 mothers (73%) reported experiencing soulful communication through intuition—often described as a sudden “inner knowing.” This number indicates that intuition is an important channel, even though it is not always easy to articulate rationally. Intuition appeared when mothers felt they understood the

baby's condition without needing clear physical cues, such as sensing that the baby was calm, restless, seeking rest, or needing touch. This phenomenon is strongly embedded in Indonesian cultural traditions, which interpret maternal intuition as a form of inner wisdom that deepens during pregnancy. The high percentage suggests that prenatal communication extends beyond the biological realm into implicit and spiritual knowledge. Intuition serves as a translator when the senses do not provide sufficient information, shaping a deeper and more personal pattern of communication.

Meanwhile, 25 out of 30 mothers (83%) reported experiencing communication through emotion, expressed as a two-way emotional resonance between mother and fetus. This high percentage reinforces the idea that affective dynamics are a key component of the prenatal relationship. Mothers described how their emotions often aligned with the baby's state: when the mother was calm, the baby felt more relaxed; when the mother felt anxious, the baby became more active or changed its rhythm. Some mothers also felt an urge to soothe the fetus through prayer, touch, or meditation when they "sensed" restlessness from within the womb. This emotional resonance creates an impression that soulful communication flows not only from fetus to mother but is reciprocal. In many cultures across the Indonesian archipelago, this phenomenon is understood as a "shared feeling," in which emotional attunement becomes the central meaning of the mother–fetus relationship long before birth.

Phenomenological Table

This section presents the phenomenological findings summarized in a table to illustrate how pregnant women's experiences are mapped into meaning units, themes, and essences. Through the process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), each fragment of sensory, intuitive, emotional, and spiritual experience was analyzed to produce core meanings that reveal the patterns of maternal–fetal soul communication. This table is not merely a data summary; it represents the phenomenological reduction process that connects individual experiences to deeper structures of meaning. By examining this table, readers can understand how concrete experiences such as fetal movements, intuitive hunches, or responses to prayer are linked to emotional, spiritual, cultural, and intuitive themes that ultimately shape three core essences of communication: the senses, intuition, and feeling.

Table 2. Phenomenological Meaning-Making of Prenatal Communication: From Meaning Units to Essences

Meaning Units	Themes	Essences
Fetal movement following the mother's emotion	Emotional synchrony	Two-way resonance
Gentle movement during prayer	Spiritual response	The senses as a channel
Intuitive hunch without stimulus	Intuitive knowing	Intuition as interpreter
Response to cultural music	Cultural resonance	Sensory-cultural
Belly tightening when angry	Embodied emotion	Bodily resonance

Table 2 illustrates how pregnant women's concrete experiences are interpreted into deeper structures of meaning. In the first row, "fetal movement following the mother's emotion" is mapped as *emotional synchrony*, which reflects an emotional alignment between two states of consciousness. The essence of this process is *two-way resonance*, where the mother's emotions and the fetus's responses mutually influence each other. Meanwhile, "gentle movement during prayer" is categorized as a *spiritual response* and yields the essence "the senses as a channel," emphasizing that the mother's body becomes a medium for perceiving subtle fetal responses within a spiritual context. These findings underscore that prenatal communication is not limited to physiological processes but unfolds within affective and spiritual realms deeply rooted in Indonesian culture. Thus, this table provides an initial depiction of how bodily sensations, emotional experiences, and spiritual practices shape the structure of soul communication between mother and fetus.

The next rows highlight the intuitive and cultural dimensions of prenatal experience. The meaning unit "intuitive hunch without stimulus" is interpreted as *intuitive knowing*, referring to a mother's ability to sense the condition of her fetus without explicit physical cues. The essence "intuition as interpreter" situates intuition as a crucial component of soul communication that cannot be fully explained by biological mechanisms alone. Meanwhile, "response to cultural music" appears as *cultural resonance*, showing that the fetus responds not only to sound or rhythm but to frequencies culturally familiar to the mother. The essence "sensory-cultural" emphasizes that sensory communication is inseparable from cultural framing. Together, these rows broaden the understanding that prenatal communication encompasses nonverbal domains shaped by inner knowledge as well as the cultural environments surrounding mothers.

The final row, "belly tightening when angry," illustrates a form of *embodied emotion*—a situation in which the mother's emotional state manifests directly through bodily responses. The essence "bodily resonance" shows that

the mother's body functions as an immersive dialogic space connecting psychological conditions with fetal sensitivity. This phenomenon reinforces Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological view of the body not merely as a biological object but as a subject that experiences and communicates meaning. In the context of pregnancy, the tightening of the abdomen during maternal anger is understood not simply as a physiological reaction but as a communicative signal indicating the fetus's attunement to the mother's affective state. Overall, this table demonstrates that maternal–fetal soul communication is formed through the interplay of three domains—sensory, intuitive, and emotional—each operating within cultural frameworks that provide meaning, giving prenatal experiences in Indonesia their distinctive spiritual and social depth.

Sensory Communication

Sensory communication emerges as the earliest and most readily recognizable form of interaction for pregnant women because it involves physical signals that can be directly perceived through the body. Fetal movements—whether strong kicks, gentle flutters, shifts in position, or rhythmic pulses—are often understood by mothers as a form of “response” or “greeting” from within the womb. Many mothers describe the fetus as appearing to respond when they stroke their belly, change their sleeping position, or experience particular emotional states. Each variation of movement is not merely a biological phenomenon but a communicative symbol interpreted through the mother's embodied experience. From a phenomenological perspective, the mother's body becomes the primary medium through which these messages appear, so each physical sensation is processed not just as a stimulus but as a relational meaning. Consequently, sensory communication constitutes an early intersubjective experience that connects two consciousnesses through the language of movement.

Beyond movement, fetal response to touch becomes a highly significant form of sensory communication in the prenatal experience. Many mothers report that when they touch or gently rub their belly in a particular rhythm, the fetus responds with what is felt as a soft push, a swirling motion, or a sudden stillness. Maternal touch is perceived as an emotional stimulus that evokes a sense of safety for the fetus, and conversely, fetal responses are understood as forms of recognition or acceptance of the mother's presence. In Indonesian cultural contexts, touch is often considered an expression of affection that strengthens the spiritual and emotional bond, so each sensory response carries affective and spiritual value. Communication through touch reveals that the body is not merely a conduit of stimuli but a subtle dialogic space where mother and fetus attune their rhythms of connection.

Fetal responses to sound form another key element of sensory communication, one that is deeply influenced by cultural context. Many mothers report that the fetus becomes more active or calmer when hearing prayers, recitations of sacred verses, or traditional music such as Javanese gamelan, Sundanese tembang, or the NTT sasando. These sounds are interpreted as stimuli that carry particular emotional atmospheres, and fetal responses are perceived as forms of resonance with cultural and spiritual vibrations. In several traditions, playing music or prayers during pregnancy is believed to “greet” the baby's soul, strengthening emotional bonds and creating a sense of peace within the womb. This phenomenon demonstrates that sensory communication is not purely biological but also cultural: the fetus responds not only to sound itself but to the meaning that the sound holds for the mother. Thus, sound becomes a medium of dialogue bridging sensory experiences with the cultural values that shape them.

Intuitive Communication

Intuitive communication emerges as one of the most difficult forms of prenatal experience to explain rationally, yet it is among the most powerfully felt by mothers. Many mothers state that they can sense the condition of the fetus without any physical stimulus—no movement, no sound, and no noticeable bodily change. This intuition appears as a deep “sense of knowing” that arises spontaneously, such as knowing that the fetus is tired, in need of rest, or feeling uncomfortable. This phenomenon reflects a form of inner connection that does not rely on the senses, but instead on the emotional and affective closeness that continues to develop throughout pregnancy. From a phenomenological perspective, this intuition can be understood as a subtle intersubjectivity between two consciousnesses that are interconnected through the mother's body as their shared space. Thus, intuitive communication illustrates that the maternal–fetal relationship extends beyond sensory responses: there exists a layer of inner knowing that cannot be fully explained by biological mechanisms.

One of the most common expressions of intuitive communication is when mothers “feel” that the fetus desires something, such as a specific food or a shift in emotional atmosphere. Many mothers recount that cravings for certain foods do not always originate from themselves but are felt as impulses coming from the fetus. In Javanese and Sundanese cultures, this phenomenon is often linked to *ngidam*, which is understood as the fetus communicating through the mother's desires. This intuition is frequently accompanied by a strong sense of certainty, even in the absence of any physical evidence. These desires become manifestations of subtle communication between mother and baby—an outcome of deepening emotional and spiritual connectedness.

Within the Indonesian cultural framework, intuition is regarded as a legitimate and valid inner language, giving these experiences social legitimacy and broader meaning.

Another form of intuitive communication is the mother's ability to sense the fetus's overall emotional state—whether it is calm, restless, or in need of comfort. Some mothers even describe this intuition as an inner conversation, where they can “hear” subtle messages from the fetus in the form of feelings, premonitions, or internal voices. These experiences demonstrate that intuition functions as an interpretative mechanism when sensory stimuli are absent or insufficient. Culturally, maternal intuition is often viewed as a spiritual gift that emerges during pregnancy, showing that the mother's body and soul become more attuned to the presence of the fetus. This intuitive communication also strengthens the emotional bond, as mothers feel they are engaged in an inner dialogue with another soul within them. Thus, intuition becomes not only a communicative tool but also an affective bridge that deepens the prenatal relationship in a holistic manner.

Emotional Resonance

Emotional resonance describes how the emotions of the mother and fetus influence one another within a deeply intimate relational space. Many mothers report that when they feel sadness, anxiety, or stress, the fetus responds with increased activity or, in some cases, becomes unusually calm. These responses are then interpreted as signs of the fetus's sensitivity to the mother's emotional world. This phenomenon shows that pregnancy is not merely a biological state but also an affective condition in which emotions function as a medium of two-way communication. Mothers also frequently feel that their mood shifts in response to the fetus's condition—for example, suddenly feeling peaceful when the fetus moves gently, or becoming concerned when movements decrease. This emotional synergy indicates that the two beings share the same experiential space, forming a unique intersubjective pattern between the mother's body and the fetus's emerging awareness.

Many mothers describe this experience of emotional resonance as a state of “oneness” or “one shared heart” with the fetus. They feel that the fetus not only follows their emotional flow but also exerts a reciprocal influence that spontaneously alters the mother's feelings. For instance, when the mother is angry or restless, sudden fetal movements may appear as if to remind her to calm down. Conversely, when the mother feels pride, joy, or gratitude, the fetus often responds with rhythmic movements that evoke a sense of warmth. In Indonesian cultural contexts, this experience is often understood as a sign of deep spiritual connectedness and is even considered evidence that the fetus has begun learning about the emotional world through the mother's body. This resonance is not interpreted as a one-directional relationship from mother to fetus, but as a reciprocal process that strengthens attachment and affirms the fetus as an emotional subject.

Emotional resonance also enriches the understanding of how mothers interpret the presence of the fetus in daily life. Many describe that their emotions no longer belong solely to themselves, as every feeling now reverberates across two bodies at once. This awareness encourages mothers to become more reflective about their emotions and how they regulate them, believing that every internal vibration reaches the fetus. This reveals that prenatal emotional connection is not only spontaneous but also reflective: mothers actively adjust their emotional states to ensure that what they feel conveys a positive influence to the fetus. This phenomenon confirms that pregnancy constitutes an intersubjective space in which the mother and fetus inhabit the same affective field, with emotion serving as the most honest and immediate form of communication. Thus, emotional resonance forms an early foundation for the relational bond that will continue to unfold after birth.

Cross-Cultural Findings

The phenomenon of prenatal communication experienced by pregnant mothers cannot be separated from the cultural frameworks in which they have grown and lived their daily lives. Each culture provides its own symbolic language, values, and forms of sensitivity that mothers use to interpret fetal responses—whether through the senses, intuition, or emotional resonance. These cross-cultural findings reveal that soulful communication between mother and fetus is not a flat universal process but one that is always embedded within cultural meaning. Therefore, this phenomenological study seeks to capture such diversity while demonstrating how sensory, intuitive, and emotional experiences acquire distinct forms and meanings in each ethnic community. Before moving into deeper analysis, Table 3 presents the distribution of participants and the dominant patterns of prenatal communication within each cultural group.

Table 3. Cross-Cultural Patterns of Prenatal Communication

Ethnic Group / Community	Number of Participants (n)	Dominant Patterns of Prenatal Communication
Sunda	6	Calmness as the language of the soul; stillness and serenity are understood as the fetus “speaking” through the mother's body.

Jawa	7	Symbolism and ritual; prayers, weton, mitoni, and bodily signs are interpreted as messages from the fetus.
Minang	5	Morality; fetal movement and sensations are seen as ethical reminders related to the mother's behavior and family harmony.
NTT	8	Ancestral connection; the fetus is believed to receive protection and messages from family spirits and guardians.
Betawi	2	Touch and family voices; strokes, greetings, rhymes, and songs form strong sensory dialogue.
Batak	2	Genealogical messages; fetal responses are linked to clan identity, ritual prayers, or ancestral blessings.

Table 3 shows the distribution of participants from six cultural groups, illustrating that prenatal communication experiences are closely tied to the value systems within each community. For the Sunda group (6 participants), communication most frequently appears through “bodily calmness”—the fetus’s stillness when the mother is serene is understood as a sign of harmony and gentle inner communication. The Javanese group (7 participants) shows a strong tendency toward symbolism and ritual, where fetal movements during mitoni, specific prayers, or spiritual moments are interpreted as messages concerning balance or the fetus’s condition. Meanwhile, the Minangkabau group (5 participants) exhibits patterns that emphasize moral–ethical dimensions; fetal movements are perceived as moral reminders when mothers experience emotional imbalance, such as anger or anxiety. These early findings underscore how mothers’ sensory and symbolic experiences are shaped by their cultural backgrounds.

The largest group is NTT (8 participants), displaying prenatal communication deeply rooted in spirituality and transgenerational relationships. Mothers reported that the fetus often responds during traditional prayers or when the names of specific ancestors are mentioned, interpreted as a form of connection between the baby, the mother, and the family’s protective spirits. In the Betawi group (2 participants), communication patterns are strongly based on sensory interaction and familial closeness; the husband’s touch, affectionate greetings from parents, and traditional rhymes or songs create a warm emotional dialogue with the fetus. Meanwhile, the Batak group (2 participants) shows distinct genealogical patterns, where fetal responses are associated with clan identity. The fetus is believed to respond when the family clan name is mentioned or during ritual prayers and ancestral blessings, framing the prenatal experience within lineage and ancestral spiritual power.

Viewed as a whole, the table shows that these six cultural groups—30 participants in total—possess unique and complementary patterns that illuminate the phenomenon of mother–fetus soulful communication. Sunda offers a gentle, contemplative communication model; Java presents a symbolic–ritualistic one; Minangkabau highlights moral–ethical dimensions; NTT emphasizes transgenerational ties and ancestral interaction; Betawi demonstrates a family-centered sensory dialogue; while Batak presents a genealogical communication model centered on clan identity and ancestral heritage. This diversity shows that prenatal communication is an intersubjective phenomenon shaped by cultural values, belief systems, family relationships, and the cultural interpretation of the body. Thus, culture is not merely a supporting context but the foundation framing how mothers interpret the sounds, movements, intuitions, and emotional resonances arising from their unborn children.

DISCUSSION

The integration of phenomenological theory with the cultural framework of the Indonesian archipelago demonstrates that prenatal experience in Indonesia cannot be reduced solely to a biological or psychological process; rather, it is an embodied event rich with meaning (Duden, 1993). Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body as a “lived body” helps explain how the mother’s body becomes both the medium and the space of communication between two subjects—the mother and the fetus. In this context, the body is no longer understood merely as a biological entity but as the site where messages, movements, sensations, and intuitions emerge and are actively interpreted by the mother. Levinas, in turn, provides an important ethical foundation by framing the fetus as “the Other,” whose presence calls forth the mother’s affective responsibility. When these phenomenological concepts are integrated with Indonesian cultures—rich in symbols, rituals, and spirituality—prenatal communication appears as a phenomenon of double subjectivity, in which two consciousnesses mutually influence, resonate with, and grow alongside one another (Ahmed, 2009).

The cultures of the Indonesian archipelago provide the language, symbols, and interpretive frameworks that enrich the phenomenological understanding of maternal–fetal communication. In many local communities, fetal movements are not merely physiological responses; they are often understood as expressions of emotion, moral signs, or spiritual messages (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). This illustrates that the mother’s body—as described by

Merleau-Ponty—is never present in isolation; it is always situated within a web of cultural meaning (Shweder, 1991). For example, in Javanese culture, fetal movement during *mitoni* rituals is interpreted as a symbolic affirmation that the baby is well (Ahmadi & Kurniawati, 2022). Among Sundanese mothers, maternal calmness is believed to directly influence the baby's calmness. In NTT, fetal movement during traditional prayers is interpreted as a sign of connection with ancestors. These examples reinforce the thesis that phenomenological experience can only be fully understood when integrated with the cultural world in which mother and fetus live.

When these findings are compared to Maternal–Fetal Attachment (MFA) theory in Western scholarship, significant conceptual differences emerge. MFA tends to situate prenatal communication within a linear stimulus–response framework: the fetus moves, the mother touches; the mother speaks, the fetus responds; the mother feels an emotion, the fetus is affected (Harwood et al., 1995). While this approach is valuable, it is limited because it does not account for the intuitive, spiritual, and symbolic dimensions that are highly salient in the Indonesian context. In the narratives of mothers in this study, the fetus does not merely respond but is also believed to “send messages”—such as a sense of wanting to rest, discomfort, or particular emotional needs. The fetus is positioned as an active subject in communication rather than a passive object (Kleinman, 1988). Thus, Indonesian prenatal communication aligns more closely with an intersubjective paradigm than with a simple bonding framework. This indicates that Western theories need to be expanded to accommodate cultural diversity.

Furthermore, Western theory tends to prioritize neurological and physiological evidence, whereas Indonesian communities acknowledge metaphysical and intuitive elements as legitimate aspects of prenatal experience (Super & Harkness, 1986). Many mothers in this study describe experiences of knowing without sensing—knowing the fetus's state without any sensory stimulation. For instance, a mother “knows” that her baby is tired or wants to hear a specific song from her homeland. Experiences of this kind cannot be explained through MFA, which only recognizes physical stimuli. This reveals a theoretical gap that can be filled through cultural perspectives. Additionally, Indonesian societies possess strong spiritual heritage, where fetal communication through prayers, rituals, or ancestral presence becomes part of prenatal dynamics (McLean, 2008). Such comparisons highlight the need for a more holistic model of prenatal communication—one that does not separate body, mind, emotion, and culture into distinct entities.

The PICMIC model (Prenatal Intersubjective Communication Model in Indonesian Cultural Context) emerges as the primary theoretical contribution of this study. It positions maternal–fetal communication as an intersubjective process carried out through nine interconnected components. First, Sensoric Input encompasses movement, sound, and touch as foundational channels enabling early connection. Second, Maternal Embodiment emphasizes the mother's body as a perceptual medium, referring to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body (Serlin, 2013). Third, Intuitive Interpretation addresses how mothers interpret non-sensory impressions or messages from the fetus. Fourth, Emotional Resonance captures the inner synchronization between the two subjects. Fifth, Cultural–Spiritual Framing highlights how prayers, rituals, and cultural values frame the entire experience. Subsequent components include Maternal Response, Fetal Response, and ultimately the Relational Loop, a cyclical dialogue that strengthens the prenatal bond.

As a prenatal intersubjectivity model rooted in Indonesian culture, PICMIC offers a conceptual framework that bridges phenomenology, developmental psychology, and cultural anthropology. The model demonstrates that maternal–fetal communication is not unidirectional but reciprocal, evolving through repeated interactions over time. The Relational Loop—the core of the model—illustrates the rhythm of this two-way dialogue, in which the mother responds to specific movements or intuitions, and the fetus responds again through variations in movement, stillness, or perceived heart rhythm. The model supports understanding at both micro levels (daily bodily changes) and macro levels (the influence of cultural rituals). Thus, PICMIC provides a new perspective that is culturally sensitive, contextually grounded, and capable of transcending the limitations of Western MFA models. It can serve as a foundation for culturally based prenatal interventions and further research on maternal–fetal soulful communication.

PICMIC Diagram

The PICMIC diagram illustrates how maternal–fetal communication begins with very basic sensory stimuli, such as movement, sound, touch, or bodily tension perceived by the mother. These stimuli are not merely biological sensations; they are the initial signals that open the pathway to a deeper perceptual process. When the mother’s body receives these signals, it processes them through what Merleau-Ponty refers to as embodiment, the experience of the body as the center of living perception. At this stage, the mother does not simply “feel” in a physical sense but experiences her body as a meaningful space of encounter with the fetus. This bodily perception functions as the first filter that shapes how the mother reads, interprets, and responds to messages from the fetus. Thus, the initial step in PICMIC asserts that prenatal communication is not a mechanical or reflexive exchange but a sensory–existential event emerging from the mother’s living, receptive, and interpretive body.

The process then moves to the stage of intuitive interpretation—the mother’s capacity to grasp meaning from signals that cannot always be rationally or sensorially explained. Many mothers describe this intuition as a form of “inner knowing” about the fetus’s condition or desires, such as sensing when the fetus is tired, wants to rest, or needs calm. This intuition triggers emotional resonance, a synchronization of feelings between mother and fetus. Such resonance may emerge as shared calmness or shared restlessness. At this point, the resonant emotion becomes further enriched by cultural and spiritual interpretations. In the Indonesian context, culture provides the language, symbols, and interpretive frameworks that give shape to meaning: fetal movement during prayer is understood as a spiritual response, bodily calm is seen as inner harmony, and maternal intuition is interpreted as an ancestral message or moral sign. Thus, this stage highlights that intuition and emotion never appear independent of cultural framing.

The next stage in the PICMIC model involves the mother’s responsive action and the subsequent response of the fetus, forming a relational loop—a repeating cycle of communication. When the mother responds to a signal through touch, speech, emotional shifts, or specific actions (such as praying, adjusting her sleeping position, or calming herself), the fetus offers a new response in the form of changes in movement, rhythm, or stillness. This response is then reinterpreted by the mother, and the process repeats, forming an increasingly complex dialogue. Here, PICMIC emphasizes that maternal–fetal communication is not a one-way process but an intersubjective interaction—two subjects mutually influencing and shaping a shared experience. The model also shows that prenatal communication in Indonesia is sensory–intuitive–emotional and always situated within a living cultural

framework. Through the presence of this loop, the mother–fetus relationship develops into a dynamic relational process—rich, meaningful, and unfolding from the earliest stages of prenatal life.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that communication between mother and fetus is far more complex than the representations commonly found in Western literature, which tend to emphasize biological or neurophysiological processes alone. In Indonesia, prenatal communication is not limited to bodily responses to physical stimuli such as fetal movement, hormonal changes, or other physiological signals. Instead, mothers interpret the entire pregnancy as a relational experience involving the body, intuition, emotion, cultural memory, and spiritual belief. This complexity positions the mother–fetus relationship as a holistic bond that unfolds not only through biological mechanisms but through subtle sensory exchanges, emotional attunement, and symbolic interpretations shaped by family and community contexts. Thus, this study situates both mother and fetus as two interconnected subjects engaged in continuous intersubjective dynamics throughout pregnancy.

This research reveals that maternal–fetal communication operates through three primary dimensions: sensory perception, intuition, and emotional resonance. Sensory perception functions when the mother detects signals in the form of movement, pressure, rhythm, or changes in the fetus’s activity patterns; these sensations are then translated by the maternal body into perceptual experiences. However, communication does not end there—intuition plays a major role in interpreting the meaning of these signals, especially when no clear physical explanation is available. Intuition becomes a medium that connects the mother’s internal understanding with the fetus’s presence as a subject. After this, emotional resonance emerges as a form of affective alignment in which the mother’s emotions influence the fetus and the fetus’s responses strengthen the mother’s interpretations. These interconnected pathways show that prenatal communication is a multidimensional process that unifies body, mind, and emotion simultaneously.

Beyond the biological and emotional dimensions, this study emphasizes that Indonesian culture functions as a symbolic framework that enriches and directs maternal–fetal communication. Rituals, ancestral narratives, spiritual practices, and family values provide the language, structure, and meaning through which mothers interpret their relationship with the fetus. Within this context, the PICMIC model—encompassing sensory stimuli, embodied perception, intuition, emotional resonance, cultural–spiritual interpretation, maternal response, and fetal response—is proposed as a new theoretical framework that is more suitable for understanding this phenomenon in Southeast Asia. The model demonstrates that prenatal communication is a cyclical, intersubjective process shaped by sensory, intuitive, emotional, and cultural interactions. These findings offer significant contributions to midwifery practice, developmental psychology, health communication, and medical anthropology, while opening new avenues for research on maternal–fetal relational dynamics in culturally rich societies such as Indonesia.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the PICMIC model offers an important contribution to expanding the concept of prenatal attachment, which has long been dominated by Western perspectives. Classical theories of prenatal attachment emphasize the mother’s emotional bond with the fetus as an internal psychological process, often measured through scales of affection, closeness, and mental representation. PICMIC extends this framework by demonstrating that the maternal–fetal bond is not merely psychological but also embodied, sensory, and intuitive. In the Indonesian context, prenatal bonding is not understood as an abstract emotional state, but as a concrete bodily experience—where every fetal movement, shift in rhythm, or subtle sensation is interpreted as a form of communication. Thus, PICMIC adds a phenomenological dimension that highlights pregnancy as an intersubjective process occurring through the mother’s lived bodily awareness and the fetus’s presence as an active subject.

In addition to its phenomenological expansion, PICMIC integrates cultural frameworks as a key element in the formation of prenatal bonds. Conventional prenatal attachment theories tend to overlook how culture provides the language, symbols, and rituals through which mothers make meaning of the fetus’s presence. PICMIC positions culture not as an auxiliary variable but as a conceptual structure operating at every stage of communication—from sensory perception to the interpretation of fetal responses. In many Indonesian cultures, the fetus is regarded as a spiritual and moral entity already engaged in social relations. These beliefs shape how mothers interpret intuition, respond to fetal signals, and build emotional closeness. In this way, PICMIC enriches prenatal attachment theory by incorporating symbolic, spiritual, and narrative dimensions that previously received limited attention.

PICMIC's theoretical contribution can also be seen in its formulation of a new paradigm that conceptualizes prenatal communication as a multisystemic, cyclical process (loop communication). Earlier prenatal attachment theories have tended to emphasize a one-directional focus—namely, how the mother constructs representations of the fetus. PICMIC challenges this view by asserting that the fetus also provides responses interpreted by the mother as part of an intersubjective dialogue. By integrating sensory stimuli, intuition, emotional resonance, and cultural interpretation, PICMIC generates a more holistic theoretical framework that explains how meaning is dynamically constructed between two subjects: the mother and the fetus. This model opens opportunities for new theoretical formulations in Southeast Asian developmental psychology and provides a conceptual foundation for further research on prenatal communication, embodiment, and the role of culture in shaping early human relationality.

Practical Implications

Practically, the findings of PICMIC offer a new approach for healthcare providers in assessing fetal well-being by incorporating the mother's sensory and intuitive experiences as an early source of clinical data. Until now, fetal assessment has relied heavily on biomedical indicators such as heart rate, measurable movements, or ultrasound results. However, this study shows that mothers possess a heightened sensitivity to micro-changes in movement rhythm, the fetus's emotional tone, and intuitive impressions regarding the fetus's comfort or discomfort. Healthcare providers can utilize these subjective reports as "early signals," especially in situations where medical examinations are not yet available or show no abnormalities, while the mother senses that something feels different. Maternal sensory-intuitive experiences can serve as a complementary screening tool that enriches medical assessments and enhances clinical vigilance.

This approach also helps strengthen communication between healthcare providers and pregnant women. By acknowledging the validity of embodied experiences and maternal intuition, healthcare providers can build a more empathetic and collaborative relationship. Many mothers in Indonesian cultural contexts feel that their perceptions of the fetus are often not considered medically relevant. PICMIC emphasizes that maternal perceptions can in fact be a valuable source of information, enabling healthcare providers to systematically inquire about perceived movement patterns, shifts in the fetus's mood, or recurring intuitions. When these subjective experiences are integrated with objective examinations, the result is a more comprehensive and personalized assessment. This approach not only improves the quality of care but also provides space for mothers to feel more heard and respected.

At the field-practice level, this model is particularly relevant for regions with limited access to healthcare services, such as remote areas in Indonesia. In these settings, healthcare providers often rely on maternal reports to detect potential pregnancy problems. PICMIC helps offer a systematic framework for identifying the aspects that need attention, including the intensity of movements, changes in the fetus's sleep patterns, responses to prayer or sound, and the mother's intuition regarding fetal comfort. By using this experience-based approach, healthcare providers can intervene more quickly, such as through early referral or additional monitoring. Furthermore, recognizing maternal intuition can increase mothers' confidence and strengthen positive emotional bonding, which ultimately contributes to fetal well-being. Thus, PICMIC provides significant practical benefits in supporting maternal care that is more humanistic, responsive, and integrative between medical aspects and maternal experience.

CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study affirm that local rituals play a significant role in creating psychological and physiological calm for both mother and fetus. Practices such as *mitoni* in Javanese communities, the recitation of *murotal* among Muslim families, and traditional prayers in NTT serve as contemplative spaces that help stabilize the mother's emotions. When the mother enters a state of calm, the body produces more regulated breathing rhythms and heart rates, which are perceived by the fetus through sensory pathways. Thus, rituals are not merely traditions but supportive mechanisms that generate a sense of safety. The rhythm of chanting or prayer, the sensation of water in ceremonial bathing, and other ritual elements function as stimuli that strengthen mother-fetus bonding. The sense of tranquility that arises is not only emotional but also embodied, directly linked to fetal well-being.

Furthermore, these rituals serve as cultural mediums that guide how mothers interpret their pregnancy experiences. In *mitoni*, for instance, symbols such as ceremonial bathing (*siraman*) or the use of *jarik* cloth are not decorative elements but representations of values related to protection, purity, and hope. Such symbolism constructs an inner space that feels more directed and meaningful, allowing mothers to perceive their lives and the presence of the fetus as situated within a coherent cultural narrative. In Muslim communities, *murotal* is

understood as a soothing sound, and fetal movements in response to the recitation are interpreted as signs of spiritual connectedness. Meanwhile, in NTT cultures, traditional prayers reinforce the awareness that the fetus is part of ancestral lineage. All these elements enrich the processes of sensory and intuitive interpretation, making pregnancy not merely a biological experience but one deeply imbued with cultural meaning.

Practically, these findings provide important implications for healthcare providers and midwifery educators to consider cultural dimensions as part of prenatal support. When healthcare providers acknowledge and create space for local rituals, mothers feel safer, more validated, and better able to manage anxiety. The fetus's calm, rhythmic, and adaptive responses under these conditions demonstrate that maternal emotional stability—shaped by cultural rituals—has tangible effects on fetal well-being. Culturally sensitive approaches also strengthen trust between mothers and healthcare providers, as maternal experiences are recognized not only as biological processes but as integral aspects of identity and spirituality. Thus, local rituals are not supplementary practices but integral components in supporting mother–fetus sensory–emotional communication and holistic prenatal health.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study open substantial opportunities to expand the exploration of maternal–fetal communication through quantitative approaches. One promising direction for future research is the empirical examination of the relationship between maternal emotional resonance and fetal physiological regulation. Subsequent studies may employ biometric indicators such as fetal heart rate (FHR), fetal heart rate variability (FHRV), fetal movement patterns, or fetal responses to sound and touch under specific emotional conditions. By connecting qualitative data on mothers' feelings, intuition, and emotional resonance with physiological measurements, quantitative research can provide stronger empirical evidence for how maternal inner states influence fetal regulatory functioning. This approach not only complements phenomenological findings but also establishes a more robust scientific foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of prenatal communication.

Additionally, quantitative research can be designed to examine the contribution of cultural factors to variations in fetal sensory and physiological responses. For example, do certain prayers or traditional musical forms consistently produce calming patterns in the fetus? Do cultural rituals have measurable effects on maternal emotional stability? Such studies may adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs to compare groups of mothers from different cultural backgrounds. Statistical analysis can then determine whether cultural differences are reflected not only in subjective meaning-making but also in fetal physiological regulation. Research of this kind would be highly valuable for developing culturally grounded prenatal interventions that are measurable and applicable within maternal and child healthcare systems.

Furthermore, future studies may develop specialized instruments for assessing sensory–intuitive–emotional communication between mothers and their fetuses, such as an Indonesian culturally based prenatal resonance scale. Such an instrument could integrate items on intuition, bodily sensitivity, emotional experiences, and cultural meaning, enabling systematic evaluation across larger populations. Once validated psychometrically, the scale could be used to quantitatively test the PICMIC model and examine the strength of relationships among its variables through statistical analysis. Mixed-methods designs are also highly relevant, as they combine phenomenological depth with numerical precision, offering a more comprehensive understanding of maternal–fetal communication. In this way, future research has the potential to strengthen Indonesia's contribution to global prenatal studies while enriching the fields of midwifery, developmental psychology, and medical anthropology.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, J. M., & Heritage, J. (1984). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bard, K. A., & Hopkins, W. D. (2018). Early socioemotional intervention mediates long-term effects of atypical rearing on structural covariation in gray matter in adult chimpanzees. *Psychological Science*, 29(4), 594–603. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617740685>
- Fadiman, A. (1997). *The spirit catches you and you fall down*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Field, T. (2017). Prenatal depression risk factors, developmental effects and interventions: A review. *Journal of Pregnancy and Child Health*, 4(1), 301. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2376-127X.1000301>
- Trevarthen, C. (2009). The intersubjective psychobiology of human meaning: Learning of culture depends on interest for cooperative practical work and affection for the joyful art of good company. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 19(5), 507–518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481880903231894>

- Diprose, R. (2002). Corporeal generosity: On giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas. State University of New York Press.
- Husserl, E. (2014). Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology (W. R. Boyce Gibson, Trans.). Routledge. (Karya asli diterbitkan 1913)
- Levinas, E. (1969). Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority (A. Lingis, Trans.). Duquesne University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). Phenomenology of perception (D. A. Landes, Trans.). Routledge.
- Weiss, G. (1999). Body images: Embodiment as intercorporeality. Routledge.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Brandon, A. R., Pitts, S., Denton, W. H., Stringer, C. A., & Evans, H. M. (2009). A history of the theory of prenatal attachment. *Journal of Prenatal & Perinatal Psychology and Health*, 23(4), 201–222.
- Condon, J. T. (1993). The assessment of antenatal emotional attachment: Development of a questionnaire instrument. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 66(2), 167–183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8341.1993.tb01739.x>
- DiPietro, J. A. (2010). Psychological and psychophysiological considerations regarding the maternal–fetal relationship. *Infant and Child Development*, 19(1), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.651>
- Gau, M.-L., & Lee, T.-Y. (2003). Construct validity of the prenatal attachment inventory: A confirmatory factor analysis approach. *Journal of Nursing Research*, 11(3), 177–187. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.jnr.0000347634.18218.2f>
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- Kusumadewi, B. N., & Kartini, M. (2022). Aspek budaya selama kehamilan pada masyarakat suku Jawa. *Jurnal Kesehatan*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.46815/jk.v11i2.109>
- Muller, M. E. (1992). A critical review of prenatal attachment research. *Scholarly Inquiry for Nursing Practice*, 6(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503159208411570>
- Mutmainnah, M., & Afianti, Y. (2019). The experiences of spirituality during pregnancy and childbirth in Indonesian Muslim women. *Enfermería Clínica*, 29(Suppl 2). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enfcli.2019.04.074>
- Siddiqui, A., & Hägglöf, B. (2000). Does maternal prenatal attachment predict postnatal mother–infant interaction? *Early Human Development*, 59(1), 13–25. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-3782\(00\)00076-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-3782(00)00076-1)
- Rachmayanti, R. D., Diana, R., Anwar, F., Khomsan, A., Riyadi, H., Christianti, D. F., Kusuma, R., Siswantara, P., Muthmainnah, M., Bayumi, F. Q. A., & Riswari, A. A. (2023). Culture, traditional beliefs and practices during pregnancy among the Madurese tribe in Indonesia. *British Journal of Midwifery*, 31(3), 148–156. <https://doi.org/10.12968/bjom.2023.31.3.148>
- Nuraisyah, F., & Hudaidah, H. (2021). Mitoni sebagai tradisi budaya dalam masyarakat Jawa. *Historia Madania: Jurnal Ilmu Sejarah*, 5(2), 170–180. <https://doi.org/10.15575/hm.v5i2.15080>
- Aryastami, N. K., & Mubasyiroh, R. (2021). Traditional practices influencing the use of maternal health care services in Indonesia. *PLoS ONE*, 16(9), e0257032. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257032>
- Field, T. (2017). Prenatal depression risk factors, developmental effects and interventions: A review. *Journal of Pregnancy and Child Health*, 4(1), 301. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2376-127X.1000301>
- Al-Qahtani, N. H. (2005). Foetal response to music and voice. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 45(5), 414–417. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1479-828X.2005.00458.x>
- Trevarthen, C. (2009). The intersubjective psychobiology of human meaning: Learning of culture depends on interest for cooperative practical work and affection for the joyful art of good company. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 19(5), 507–518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481880903231894>
- Lagercrantz, H., & Changeux, J.-P. (2009). The emergence of human consciousness: From fetal to neonatal life. *Pediatric Research*, 65(3), 255–260. <https://doi.org/10.1203/PDR.0b013e3181973b0d>
- DiPietro, J. A. (2010). Psychological and psychophysiological considerations regarding the maternal–fetal relationship. *Infant and Child Development*, 19(1), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.651>
- Bourguignon, E. (1989). Multiple levels of meaning in maternal–fetal communication. *Ethos*, 17(2), 195–214.
- Kisilevsky, B. S., Pang, L., & Hains, S. M. (2000). Maturation of human fetal responses to airborne sound in low- and high-risk fetuses. *Early Human Development*, 58(3), 179–195. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-3782\(00\)00075-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-3782(00)00075-x)
- Duden, B. (1993). *Disembodying women: Perspectives on pregnancy and the unborn*. Harvard University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2009). Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 17(4). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550903165787>
- Serlin, I. A. (2013). Maxine Sheets-Johnstone: The primacy of movement—Expanded second edition (Advances in Consciousness Research). *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 35(2). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10465-013-9164-z>
- Kleinman, A. (1988). *The illness narratives: Suffering, healing, and the human condition*. Basic Books.

- Shweder, R. A. (1991). *Thinking through cultures: Expeditions in cultural psychology*. Harvard University Press.
- McLean, K. C. (2008). The emergence of narrative identity. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(4), 1685–1702. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00124.x>
- Harwood, R. L., Miller, J. G., & Irizarry, N. L. (1995). *Culture and attachment: Perceptions of the child in context*. Guilford Press.
- Koentjaraningrat. (2009). *Pengantar antropologi*. Rineka Cipta.
- Ahmadi, F. A., & Kurniawati, N. Q. (2022). Islam Jawa dan ritual slametan dalam perspektif antropologi. *An-Nas*, 6(1), 51–62. <https://doi.org/10.36840/annas.v6i1.502>
- Super, C. M., & Harkness, S. (1986). The developmental niche: A conceptualization at the interface of child and culture. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 9(4), 545–569. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016502548600900409>