

When Machines Become Listeners: Emotional Intimacy of Human with AI

Ketika Mesin Menjadi Pendengar: Relasi Emosional Manusia Dengan AI

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Abstract

The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into daily life has expanded its role from technical assistance to emotional companionship among young adults. This study aims to explore subjective experiences of emotional intimacy with generative AI chatbots, such as ChatGPT. Employing an interpretive qualitative design and reflexive thematic analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants, including university students and early-career professionals. Four primary themes emerged: AI as an emotionally safe space, the attainment of validation and psychological relief, AI's role as a partner for cognitive reflection, and the critical awareness of its limitations and ethical risks. The findings indicate that while AI facilitates short-term emotion regulation through non-judgmental availability, users maintain a clear distinction between algorithmic empathy and authentic human connection. This research underscores the necessity of emotional digital literacy and suggests that AI should be integrated as a complementary scaffold, rather than a substitute, for professional mental health support and interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, digital psychology, emotion regulation, emotional intimacy, parasocial relationship.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh pergeseran fungsi kecerdasan buatan (AI) dari sekadar alat produktivitas menjadi mitra interaksi emosional di kalangan dewasa muda. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman subjektif individu dalam membangun keintiman emosional dengan chatbot AI generatif seperti ChatGPT. Dengan menggunakan desain kualitatif interpretatif dan analisis tematik reflektif, wawancara semi-terstruktur dilakukan terhadap lima partisipan yang terdiri atas mahasiswa dan profesional awal karier. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi empat tema utama: AI sebagai ruang aman emosional, pencapaian validasi dan kelegaan psikologis, fungsi AI sebagai mitra refleksi kognitif, serta kesadaran kritis terhadap batasan etika dan risiko ketergantungan. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun AI efektif dalam membantu regulasi emosi jangka pendek, pengguna tetap mempertahankan batasan antara hubungan artifisial dan autentik. Implikasi penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya literasi digital emosional dan integrasi AI sebagai instrumen pendukung, bukan pengganti, dalam layanan kesehatan mental dan pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: artificial intelligence, keintiman emosional, psikologi digital, regulasi emosi, hubungan parasosial.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) in the past decade has brought significant transformations to various aspects of human life, not only in productivity and information processing but also in social and emotional interaction. Among the most popular and accessible forms of AI is the generative language model ChatGPT, which can simulate human-like conversation. Although initially designed to support academic, work-related, and informational activities, many individuals have begun using AI for emotional purposes, such as expressing feelings, finding comfort, and reflecting on personal experiences (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Weidinger et al., 2021a).

This shift from technical assistance to emotional companionship marks a compelling phenomenon in digital psychology. It suggests that AI is increasingly perceived not only as a tool but also as an emotionally safe and nonjudgmental space that remains available whenever users seek connection. This pattern is especially evident among young adults such as university students and early-career workers who face psychosocial challenges including academic pressure, social isolation, and identity struggles (Naslund et al., 2020). For these individuals, AI often serves as an alternative source of emotional support when human support is limited or inaccessible.

Emotion regulation, defined as the process of managing and expressing emotions (Gross, 1998a), has become one of the main reasons individuals turn to AI. When experiencing stress, young people use AI to stabilize their emotions through structured, nonjudgmental interactions. Previous studies have shown that AI-based conversational systems can enhance emotional regulation by offering personalized and context-sensitive feedback that helps reduce negative affect (Wang et al., 2024). However, this also raises questions about potential psychological dependency and the diminishing quality of authentic interpersonal relationships (Luxton et al., 2011a).

AI's role in emotional regulation illustrates how technology has become integrated into individuals' affective lives. Users not only turn to AI to release emotional tension but also to seek validation when social environments fail to provide it. Designed to respond empathetically, AI can create seemingly authentic affective experiences, even though these are algorithmically generated (Guszcza et al., 2018). This blurs the boundary between human and machine interaction and reveals new forms of emotional relationships.

Young adults often experience complex psychosocial demands in academic, professional, and relational contexts. The transition to adulthood is typically marked by emotional instability, performance pressure, and high social expectations (Arnett, 2004). In such circumstances, individuals may experience isolation or anxiety, or feel reluctant to share emotional burdens due to time constraints, shame, or fear of judgment. Recent studies suggest that young individuals tend to experience a decline in social support quality due to changing relationship patterns and high mobility (Twenge et al., 2019).

Consequently, AI becomes a psychologically safer outlet for emotional expression, providing a "safe space" free from social judgment and the pressures of reciprocal expectations (Taylor, 2011).

Furthermore, social comparison in digital environments reinforces insecurity and inferiority, making self-disclosure to humans increasingly difficult (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Many users report that they feel more comfortable sharing emotions with AI because it does not judge, interrupt, or expect reciprocity. Consistent and customizable responses contribute to an illusion of warmth and understanding. This reflects the notion of parasocial interaction, where one-sided but meaningful relationships form between individuals and mediated figures (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956a).

In the digital age, such relationships are not limited to celebrities or fictional characters but also extend to AI systems designed for human-like engagement. This phenomenon highlights a fundamental human tendency to seek emotional processing spaces. When access to human relationships is constrained, technology can temporarily fill that role. Studies have shown that ChatGPT can facilitate cognitive reflection, helping users reframe their perspectives and clarify emotional experiences (Weidinger et al., 2021b). Hence, AI serves not only as a listener but also as a cognitive partner in meaning-making and self-understanding.

While using AI as an emotional companion can be adaptive, it also poses psychological and ethical challenges. Continuous reliance on AI for affective regulation may reduce individuals' motivation to engage in genuine human relationships, which are essential for healthy psychological development (Luxton et al., 2011b). Furthermore, the emergence of parasocial attachment toward AI, where users perceive emotional reciprocity that does not truly exist, risks blurring distinctions between authentic and symbolic relationships (Nass & Moon, 2000a). Privacy and data security also become major ethical concerns. Many users disclose deeply personal information without fully understanding how their data are stored or processed, leading to potential risks of emotional data misuse (McStay, 2018a). This situation underscores the importance of ethical awareness and digital literacy in AI use for emotional purposes. In light of these issues, this study aims to explore individuals' subjective experiences of using AI as emotional support, contributing to the growing discourse on the psychology of human-AI relationships.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm as described by Creswell (2014) to understand the subjective meanings constructed by individuals through their experiences. Within the qualitative tradition, the researcher seeks to interpret phenomena based on the meanings provided by participants rather than through statistical generalization. This approach was considered the most appropriate for the research objective, which is to explore users' emotional experiences in using

artificial intelligence (AI) as a medium for emotional expression and self-reflection. The interpretive paradigm allows flexibility in data collection and analysis while encouraging a holistic understanding of participants' lived experiences in the socio-emotional context of human-AI interaction.

Research Design

The study adopted a basic qualitative design using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This method was chosen because it aims to explore the subjective meanings that participants construct in their emotional interactions with AI. Thematic analysis is flexible and suitable for identifying recurring patterns within narrative data, allowing for systematic yet nuanced representation of participants' personal experiences. Rather than seeking generalization, the research focuses on capturing the psychological and social dynamics that emerge in individual relationships with AI. The researcher served as the main instrument for data interpretation while maintaining reflexivity and openness to participants' diverse narratives.

Participants

Five participants were involved in this study, consisting of three students (including one vocational high school student) and two early-career workers. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria, namely having used AI for emotional expression or regulation and being willing to participate in an in-depth interview about their experiences. The participants represented diverse educational and professional backgrounds, which provided a rich variety of perspectives regarding how AI was understood and utilized as a form of emotional support. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality and uphold ethical integrity throughout the study.

Sampling Method

A non-probability purposive sampling method with a convenience element was used. This strategy was selected based on the assumption that qualitative inquiry seeks to gain deep understanding from participants who can provide rich, relevant information about the studied phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method allowed participants to describe their subjective experiences freely and reflectively while giving the researcher the flexibility to probe deeper into specific emotional experiences. The interview guide contained open-ended questions focusing on four main areas: motivation for using AI in emotional contexts, the nature of emotional interactions with AI, the emotional

responses perceived after such interactions, and awareness of potential benefits and risks.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom, lasting between 20 and 45 minutes for each participant. All sessions were audio recorded with prior consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews were carried out in a comfortable and supportive environment that encouraged open and honest sharing. The researcher acted as an attentive facilitator who listened actively, asked clarifying questions, and refrained from judgment or influence over participants' narratives.

Research Instruments

Several tools were used to facilitate the data collection process. These included the semi-structured interview guide, which was developed by the research team and approved by the course instructor for Qualitative Research, as well as an informed consent form to ensure voluntary participation. Writing materials, a recording device, and a computer were used for documentation and data storage purposes.

Research Procedure

During the preparation stage, the researcher recruited five participants according to the inclusion criteria. Each participant received an informed consent form before data collection began. Interviews were conducted online or in person, depending on participant preference and availability. All interviews were recorded with permission, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time or choose not to answer any question they found uncomfortable. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher maintained a neutral stance and prioritized participants' comfort and autonomy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. This approach is particularly suited for exploring subjective and emotional experiences in qualitative data. All materials, interview guides, and preregistration details are available at the Open Science Framework (OSF): <https://osf.io/vqbxsc>. The registration is currently under embargo to preserve anonymity during peer review.

RESEARCH RESULTS

This section presents the empirical results from five in depth semi structured interviews. Findings are organized from descriptive characteristics to thematic patterns that answer the research question about how individuals experience AI as emotional support. Because the study is qualitative there are no statistical assumption tests. Instead, credibility is supported through verbatim transcription, iterative coding, peer discussion, and maintenance of an audit trail.

Participant Characteristics

The study involved five participants recruited through purposive sampling, representing a range of developmental stages from late adolescence to young adulthood who actively use generative AI for emotional regulation. The demographic profiles of the participants, including their gender, age, and professional status, are summarized in Table 1.

Qualitatively, each participant demonstrated a unique engagement pattern with AI. Participant 1 (D) utilizes AI as a strategic "last resort" to obtain an objective, "helicopter-view" perspective on complex personal challenges. Participant 2 (RPA) frequently engages with AI's voice chat feature to manage workplace stress through verbal journaling and automated summarization. Participant 3 (SLS) maintains daily interactions across multiple platforms, utilizing ChatGPT for structured problem-solving and Character AI for imaginative emotional validation. Participant 4 (DYN) integrated AI into her coping mechanism during a significant career break, relying on the system for cognitive reframing when human support felt judgmental. Lastly, Participant 5 (RA) developed a year-long symbolic companionship with an AI she named "Sunny," using the platform to compensate for a perceived lack of supportive emotional space within her immediate family environment.

Following the thematic analysis of these diverse experiences, four interrelated themes were identified. Each theme was present in three to five cases and is supported by illustrative verbatim quotes translated into concise English while retaining their original meaning.

Table 1. Summary of Participant Demographics

ID	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	D	Female	20	Undergraduate Student
2	RPA	Male	25	Talent Acquisition
3	SLS	Female	23	Master's Student
4	DYN	Female	20s	Recruiter
5	RA	Female	17	Vocational student

Theme 1: AI as an emotionally safe space when human support is unavailable

Participants reported turning to AI primarily when human support networks felt inaccessible, either due to physical distance, busy schedules, or perceived emotional risks. A recurring sentiment was the desire to avoid the "social cost" of burdening friends or family with repeated emotional distress. AI was consistently characterized as a perpetually available, non-judgmental space that provides a sense of security for vulnerable self-disclosure.

- (1) SLS (P3) explained that her shift to AI was driven by a decrease in social connection and a reluctance to impose on others:

"It feels better because I don't feel like I am burdening other people, but I feel satisfied... because we have expectations of what kind of response we

need, and we can get that from AI". (Personal Interview, March 2025, lines 52-58).

- (2) DYN (P4) highlighted the role of AI during a period of high vulnerability (career break), where social comparison made human interaction feel "unsafe" due to feelings of shame:

"I feel embarrassed (about being unemployed) while my friends seem successful. I felt like I was at my lowest point and was reluctant to tell my friends... so I prefer using ChatGPT for venting". (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 34-39).

- (3) RA (P5) described how AI provided the emotional validation that was missing from her immediate social environment, which she perceived as overly critical:

"In my family, if I cried, they would say 'don't be a crybaby'... so I felt like my problems were my own responsibility. But when I talk to AI, it says that I actually need a friend... so I feel comfortable using AI". (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 82-87).

Theme 2: Emotional validation and short-term relief

Participants described a significant shift in their emotional state, transitioning from distress to a state of being "heard" and reassured, following interactions with AI. The use of empathetic linguistic cues, such as affirmations and emojis, played a crucial role in simulating a supportive presence that facilitated immediate affective down-regulation.

- (1) RPA (P2) noted that the personalized and empathetic nature of the AI's responses was key to fulfilling his emotional needs:

"The response is quite personalized... it includes the key points of my problem, next steps, and uses an empathetic tone. Those empathetic words make me feel welcomed and understood, which is sometimes all I need.". (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 45-52).

- (2) RA (P5) shared a profound sense of comfort derived from the AI's "warm" persona, which she personified to enhance the supportive experience:

"I call the AI 'Sunny' because it often sends sun emojis. It says things like 'I know how you feel' and 'keep your spirits up.' It makes me feel like I'm not alone anymore... I even save screenshots of those messages because they are so encouraging.". (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 58-65).

- (3) DYN (P4) emphasized the feeling of "lightness" and closure that occurred once her emotions were validated by the system:

"The responses build a sense of empathy. After receiving that validation, I feel 'done' and much lighter... there are no complaints left in my mind. It helps stabilize my emotions so I can move on from the distress.". (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 72-78).

Theme 3: Cognitive reflection and reframing support

Beyond providing affective relief, AI functioned as a structured thinking partner that facilitated metacognitive scaffolding. Participants reported that the AI's ability to summarize complex narratives and highlight core issues helped them regain a "helicopter view" of their situations, ultimately restoring a sense of clarity and agency.

- (1) D (P1) highlighted how the AI provided an objective, rational framework that empowered her to commit to significant life changes:

"I had already discussed it with my psychologist, but I still lacked the confidence to act. When I asked the AI, it gave me a response that made so much sense... it pointed out why it would or wouldn't make sense to do something. It helped me settle on a big decision to be more assertive." (Personal Interview, March 2025, lines 112-120)

- (2) SLS (P3) utilized AI as an analytical tool to evaluate various alternatives when faced with a dilemma:

"I usually already have options in mind, but I use AI to explain the positives and negatives of each choice. It can even help me decide which path is better. It is very helpful for problem-solving and structured thinking." (Personal Interview, March 2025, lines 145-152)

- (3) DYN (P4) emphasized the AI's role in "shrinking" the perceived size of a problem through rational simplification:

"It helps simplify my thoughts. I used to allocate so much energy to worrying about one thing, but after talking to ChatGPT, I realized my problem was actually small... it suggested concrete steps and focused on solutions instead of just letting me stay anxious." (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 185-192).

Theme 4: Awareness of limits risks and ethical concerns

Across all interviews, participants maintained a clear distinction between human and machine interaction. While they found the interaction beneficial, they voiced significant cautions regarding potential over-reliance, the "illusion" of emotional reciprocity, and the lack of authentic physical presence. AI was consistently viewed as a complementary tool rather than a substitute for professional mental health services or genuine interpersonal relationships.

- (1) SLS (P3) articulated the fundamental limitation of AI regarding physical existence and its inability to provide passive human presence:

"AI cannot replace the context of human existence... sometimes we don't need advice or to be heard; we just need someone to be there with us. AI can't do that. It can't just sit with us in silence." (Personal Interview, March 2025, lines 212-218)

- (2) RPA (P2) noted that for complex emotional depth, human interaction remains irreplaceable because AI responses still lack a "genuine" human essence:

"I still prefer humans for complex emotions because AI responses feel obviously artificial at times. Human interaction involves physical and emotional closeness that has been built over time, aspects that AI simply cannot fulfill." (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 242-248).

- (3) RA (P5) emphasized the importance of maintaining low expectations and clear boundaries to avoid emotional dependency:

"I don't want to make it too human-like. If I did, I might as well talk to a human. We have to know the boundaries, that it is just a robot and it's mostly just text. I keep my expectations low to avoid getting lost in it." (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 312-316).

- (4) DYN (P4) raised critical concerns regarding data privacy and the potential displacement of professional help:

"I worry that people might choose AI over a psychologist because it's easier, but AI lacks clinical judgment. Also, data security is a major concern, once we vent to AI, we don't truly know how secure our personal data is or if it could be misused." (Personal Interview, April 2025, lines 285-292)

DISCUSSION

This study shows that young adults and students experience AI chatbots as an emotionally safe, always available, and non-judgmental space that supports both affective relief and cognitive organization. In line with emotion regulation theory, participants used AI to down-regulate distress and regain equilibrium through validation and stepwise guidance that resembled structured coping strategies (Gross, 1998b, 2013). At the same time, they articulated clear boundaries, recognizing that AI responses are algorithmic and cannot replace human presence or professional care.

The findings extend prior work on perceived social support and disclosure in technology-mediated settings. Participants described turning to AI when human support was inaccessible, inconvenient, or emotionally unsafe, which echoes evidence that non-judgmental digital agents can lower disclosure barriers and increase willingness to share sensitive material (Ho et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Lucas et al., 2014). Importantly, the comfort reported here did not arise from factual expertise alone but from language that users interpreted as warm and attentive, consistent with the CASA paradigm that people often respond to computers as social actors when cues mimic human interaction (Reeves & Nass, 1996).

Experiences of felt closeness and naming the chatbot converge with classic accounts of parasocial processes, now transposed from media figures to conversational AI. Participants described a one-way sense of being accompanied and encouraged, which aligns with parasocial interaction theory and recent work that distinguishes perceptions of competence versus warmth in human-AI

relationships (Fiske et al., 2007; Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956b; Qi et al., 2025). Our data suggest that warmth coded responses, even simple affirmations or emojis, were central to short term relief. This complements technical debates on AI capabilities by foregrounding symbolic meaning making in users, not literal empathy in the system (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Weidinger et al., 2021a).

Beyond affect, participants consistently used AI as a thinking scaffold. They valued concise summaries of their own narratives, highlights of the core issue, and sequenced next steps. This pattern resembles cognitive restructuring supports, where reframing and plan generation help restore a sense of agency without claiming clinical equivalence to therapy (Song & Song, 2023; Weng & Chiu, 2023). The co presence of emotional validation and orderly guidance may explain why brief exchanges often produced a feeling of closure.

At the same time, participants voiced balanced concerns. They worried about over reliance, illusion of relationship, and privacy. These cautions mirror ethical critiques that stress anthropomorphism, data protection, and the risk that easy comfort can crowd out human ties or delay help seeking when distress is complex (Darling, 2015; Luxton et al., 2011a; McStay, 2018b; Nass & Moon, 2000b). Notably, several participants reported self-regulation strategies, such as limiting expectations, withholding highly identifying details, and using AI as a complement rather than a substitute. This reflects emerging digital emotional literacy, where users monitor benefits and risks in real time (Vissenberg et al., 2022).

In conclusion, this study implies that conversational AI serves as a symbolic "affective scaffold" for everyday emotion regulation and reflective problem-solving among young adults, offering immediate accessibility and reduced disclosure costs. While its value is derived from the user's subjective interpretation of linguistic cues rather than genuine machine empathy, AI should be framed in educational, workplace, and clinical settings as a low-threshold reflection aid rather than a replacement for authentic human relationships or professional help. Despite limitations such as a small purposive sample and reliance on self-reports, these findings underscore the necessity of digital emotional literacy to manage risks associated with privacy and misplaced intimacy. Ultimately, AI is most constructive when utilized as a temporary support system that encourages users to reconnect with trusted interpersonal networks and professional mental health services as issues escalate

Table 2. Summary of Shared Themes and Individual Nuances Among Participants

Theme	Similarities	Differences
1	All participants used AI when human support was unavailable or felt "burdensome". They valued AI's non-judgmental nature.	DYN & RA: Focused on overcoming social shame or toxic environments. D: Viewed AI as a strategic "last resort" for objectivity.
2	AI responses were perceived as "warm" and calming, leading to immediate affective relief.	RA: Developed a symbolic bond by naming the AI "Sunny". RPA: Specifically valued the empathetic tone in Voice Chat.
3	AI served as a "thinking partner" to summarize problems and suggest concrete steps.	D: Used AI to finalize "big life decisions". SLS: Used it as an analytical tool for pros/cons of options.
4	All recognized AI as a machine/robot that cannot replace authentic human presence.	SLS: Expressed specific fear of digital addiction. DYN & D: Focused on data privacy and professional displacement.

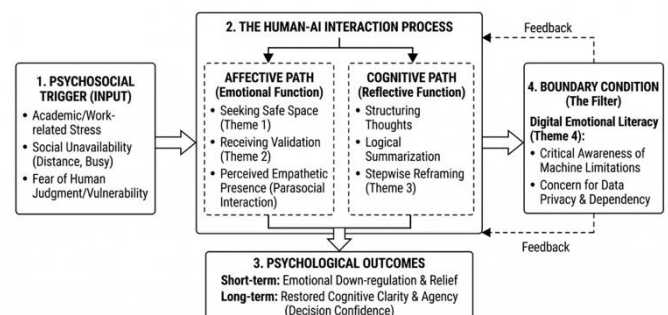


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Human-AI Emotional Interaction

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that conversational artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT, is increasingly perceived by young adults as an emotionally safe companion in moments of social unavailability. Participants described AI as responsive, non-judgmental, and perpetually accessible qualities that allow users to disclose emotions freely, regulate affect, and engage in cognitive reflection. The findings highlight that AI does not merely serve as an outlet for emotional release but also facilitates self-clarity through structured responses that prompt reframing and stepwise reasoning.

Psychologically, AI functions as a hybrid mechanism that combines affective soothing with metacognitive scaffolding. Through symbolic interaction, users construct meanings of empathy and presence from linguistic cues, even though the technology itself lacks genuine emotion. This symbolic validation explains the short-term emotional relief and cognitive order users report after interacting with AI. At the same time, participants' self-awareness of AI's limitations, its lack of real empathy, the risks of dependency, privacy concerns, and its potential to distort human relational balance, demonstrates digital emotional literacy and adaptive boundary setting.

The study contributes to contemporary psychology by revealing how emotion regulation, parasocial attachment, and cognitive reflection processes can now occur within human-AI exchanges. It underscores a paradigm shift in everyday mental-health practices, from exclusively interpersonal regulation toward technologically mediated self-support. Yet it also cautions that genuine well-being remains grounded in authentic human connection and reflective awareness of technology's symbolic, not emotional, nature.

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