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When in need of emotional support, human or AI? An exploratory study on Chinese women's selection mechanism of emotional information sources

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Abstract

Introduction. This study aims to unveil the selection mechanism of information sources among female users for their emotional information needs, exploring the specific role GenAI plays in their existing emotional support network.

Method. Adopting a phased qualitative approach of netnography followed by semi-structured interviews, this research collected rich narrative data from 17 Chinese female users.

Analysis. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, focusing on three core evaluation dimensions for information source selection: accessibility, interactivity, and the crucial aspect of credibility.

Results. The findings reveal that GenAI is regarded as an '*emotional sanctuary*' to avoid interpersonal risks and satisfy intra-psychic needs. In contrast, while human sources offer deeper emotional resonance and social connection, they are often associated with higher intra-psychic risks. GenAI and human sources play complementary roles.

Conclusion. The constructed '*perceived benefits and risks assessment model*' visually elucidates this selection mechanism, providing a new theoretical reference for understanding emerging human-AI emotional interactive relationships.

Introduction

Generative AI (GenAI) possesses advanced capabilities in emotional interaction and contextual understanding (Chen, 2025), a feature that elevates it beyond the paradigm of traditional tools to an intelligent agent capable of providing emotional interaction and support to humans. Notably, Chinese women have emerged as a core user group for such emotional functions. In contemporary society, the emotional needs of Chinese women are often not fully met due to structural factors, and the '*idealised*' traits offered by GenAI—such as customisability, unconditional listening, and continuous support—precisely address this unmet need.

However, the emergence of this new emotional provider raises a series of complex questions: How is GenAI integrated by female users into their existing social networks composed of family and friends? When faced with emotional needs, why and how do they choose between GenAI and human confidants? In the emotional support network of female users, does GenAI act as a competitor, a substitute, or a collaborator? To answer these questions, this study proceeds from the perspective of female users' emotional interactions, focusing on their decision-making logic when evaluating and selecting between human and GenAI information sources. It aims to reveal the source selection mechanism for emotional information needs, providing insights for understanding this new type of human-AI interactive relationship and offering a scientific basis for guiding the development of healthier, human-centered AI technology.

Literature review

The literature review in this paper unfolds in three main areas: first, it summarises the dual internal and external motivations for individual emotional interaction; second, it organises the literature that supports GenAI as an object of emotional interaction; and finally, it reviews the multiple criteria and evaluation bases for information source selection. The review reveals that existing research lacks a systematic study of GenAI as an emotional information source and has not clarified the decision-making mechanism for choosing between GenAI and real people as emotional information sources.

An individual's emotional interaction is primarily driven by both internal and external motivations. From an intra-psychic functional perspective, emotional interaction is a vital tool for promoting self-understanding (Stein & Book, 2003), cognitive regulation (Li et al., 2025), and maintaining mental health (Graham et al., 2019; Kane et al., 2018). Emotional expression can serve as a crucial stress-coping strategy (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker, 1997). The ability to flexibly regulate the expression of positive or negative emotions according to the situation (Burton & Bonanno, 2016) can effectively inhibit the onset of symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Chen, 2018; Wang & Hawk, 2019). From an interpersonal functional perspective, emotional interaction is an essential bond for establishing social connections (Siahaan & Wulan, 2024), strengthening group identity and cohesion (Anderson et al., 2003; Hess & Fischer, 2013), and coordinating social interactions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Parkinson, 1996). Emotional interaction is a fundamental tool for building interpersonal connections (García-López et al., 2022) and is key to maintaining relationship satisfaction and stability (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Lavner et al., 2022). Specifically, sharing positive emotions and receiving positive responses can amplify positive feelings and strengthen bonds (Gable et al., 2004).

Currently, digital technologies are increasingly capable of substituting for humans in meeting emotional interaction needs. The '*Computers as Social Actors*' (CASA) paradigm suggests that humans tend to unconsciously apply social rules and expectations to their interactions with computers (Reeves & Nass, 1996). With the growing emotional intelligence and emotional companionship capabilities of GenAI (Chen, 2025), its role as a '*Relational Agent*' has become more prominent, enabling high-quality emotional interactions with users (Bickmore & Picard, 2005) and thus becoming an effective source for fulfilling users' Affective Information Needs.

The selection of an information source is a complex process based on a trade-off among multiple criteria. As a core part of information seeking, the decision-making in Information Source Selection involves various perceived attributes of the source (Johnson, 2007). Among them, accessibility, interactivity, and credibility have been identified as key evaluation criteria (Fidel & Green, 2004). In the process of selecting emotional information sources, users weigh the accessibility, interactivity, and credibility of different sources based on the specific context and goals, and making a decision by assessing perceived benefits and risks (Lim & Choi, 2013; Morrison & Vancouver, 2000; Vogel & Wester, 2003).

In summary, existing research confirms the feasibility of GenAI as a source of emotional support and indicates that users engage in a cost-benefit trade-off when selecting information sources. However, the specific mechanism through which female users adopt GenAI as an emotional support information source remains unclear. The decision-making process behind their choice between GenAI and human sources in different emotional situations is yet to be fully understood. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the selection mechanism of emotional information sources among female users by addressing the following core questions:

RQ1: How do female users evaluate and prioritise GenAI versus human sources based on accessibility, interactivity, and credibility when seeking emotional support?

RQ2: What is the decision-making logic behind this selection pattern? What does it reveal about the respective roles of GenAI and human sources in providing emotional support?

Research methods

This study employed a phased qualitative methodology. First, a six-month netnography (Oct 2024 – Apr 2025) on Chinese social media (e.g., Douban, Xiaohongshu) identified typical emotional scenarios in human-AI interactions. Based on these findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 Chinese female users recruited via purposive and snowball sampling. Participants had over six months of experience with self-selected GenAI platforms, including Doubao, Xingye, and ChatGPT, reflecting naturalistic behavior in real-world settings. Data analysis utilised thematic analysis; the primary researcher independently coded three randomly selected transcripts to establish a coding framework, ensuring reliability and traceability. Reflexivity was maintained throughout to ensure objectivity. To strictly protect participant privacy, all research data were anonymised, and raw data were deleted immediately after the study.

Findings

Through thematic analysis of the in-depth interview texts from 17 Chinese female users, this study found that the selection of an emotional information source is a dynamic, context-based process involving a trade-off between multiple criteria and perceived risks and benefits. Overall, human sources and GenAI exhibit complementary characteristics in different need scenarios due to their distinct source properties.

Criteria and evaluation for emotional information source selection

Accessibility. GenAI is low-cost and available 24/7, whereas real people have limitations of absence and high relational costs. For emotional information sources, accessibility extends beyond the physical dimension to embody emotional '*constant availability*' and low relational costs. GenAI possesses a natural advantage in accessibility due to its technological nature, offering users 24/7 instant companionship. Users can initiate conversations at any time without considering the time, place, or the other party's status (A8, A10), thereby gaining intra-psychic benefits. Moreover, emotional communication with GenAI incurs almost no relational maintenance costs; users do not have to worry that their negative emotions will '*become an emotional burden for the other person*' (A14) or disrupt relational harmony (A2, A3). In contrast, the accessibility of human sources is constrained by multiple factors. Friends and family have their own lives and work (A1, A7, A10) and

cannot provide immediate responses. Confiding in a person often requires them to expend significant '*Emotional Labor*'. Before sharing, users often weigh whether they will '*transmit negative energy*' (A2) or damage the relationship. This '*relational maintenance cost*' reduces the practical accessibility of human sources (Goldsmith, 2004). Participant A1 stated, '*No matter how good a friend is, if you constantly unload bad emotions onto them, their mood will also be affected.*' Additionally, '*sometimes, confiding in a friend turns into a mutual complaint session, and in the end, I have to comfort them, which is exhausting for me*' (A2), adding an extra psychological burden.

Interactivity. GenAI provides idealised but inauthentic interactions, while real people offer authentic but less controllable empathy. The interactivity of an emotional information source focuses on the quality of the relational dialogue: its ability to co-construct emotional narratives and show personalised understanding in ongoing exchanges (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). After being '*trained*' or personalised by the user, GenAI can provide a highly customised interactive experience, playing the role of an '*ideal friend*' or '*perfect partner*' (A2, A3, A4, A6, A9, A10, A11). Its customised emotional coping solutions and interaction patterns, based on big data analysis, can offer high '*emotional value*' (A14) to users, thus satisfying intra-psychic needs. However, GenAI's interactivity also has clear limitations. Its '*non-human*' nature leads to a lack of authenticity and vividness in interactions. For instance, it struggles to understand internet slang and complex humour (A1), has poor memory leading to a lack of conversational continuity (A1, A3, A5, A13), and tends to agree with the user's viewpoint in deep discussions, lacking genuine intellectual exchange (A1). Human sources, on the other hand, provide a more authentic interactive experience. Friends and family can offer physical contact like hugs during emotional interactions, providing comfort and emotional connection that AI cannot replicate (A1, A5, A9), and enabling the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Based on shared life experiences and memories, real people can offer deeper empathy and understanding (A6, A10). However, interacting with humans carries the risk that they may not provide the expected response, such as being perfunctory, judgmental, or even responding with their own negativity (A2, A3, A9, A14), which can cause secondary harm to one's intra-psychic state.

Credibility. GenAI serves as an absolutely safe '*tree hole*,' while real people come with risks of privacy and judgment. The credibility of an emotional information source shifts from factual accuracy to '*emotional safety*'—users are more concerned with whether the source is '*non-judgmental*' and can keep secrets, rather than the objective truth of its statements. GenAI can provide a high level of emotional safety during emotional interactions, offering an absolutely secure '*tree hole*' where users can express their true thoughts and feelings without reservation, gaining psychological satisfaction without fear of moral judgment or criticism (A3, A5, A6, A8, A12, A13, A14). A10 expressed, '*In front of the AI, I can be freely myself.*' Furthermore, interviewees generally believed that GenAI would not leak conversation content (A9, A11, A13, A15), allowing them to confidently discuss sensitive topics about colleagues, supervisors (A2, A14), and even family that they would not feel comfortable sharing with real people. Although some users had concerns about AI data privacy (A1, A2, A3), this did not significantly affect their use of it as a confidential object for emotional topics. In contrast, emotional interactions with humans may pose higher intra-psychic and interpersonal risks. Users worry that if their vulnerabilities and struggles become known to others, they might appear '*very lonely*' (A1) or be negatively labelled (A10), further exacerbating negative emotions. In specific environments like the workplace, the risk of privacy leakage when confiding in colleagues is high and could directly impact one's career (A2, A14). Additionally, differences in opinions and values can lead to judgment and misunderstanding from friends and family (A3, A9). For example, on issues like marriage, relationships, and career choices, parents' traditional views often clash with the female users' ideas, making them unwilling or afraid to have in-depth conversations with their families (A2, A3, A9, A11, A14).

Construction of the perceived benefits and risks assessment model

Based on an evaluation of the accessibility, interactivity, and credibility of human and GenAI sources, female users select one based on perceived risks and benefits in an emotional need scenario. This process primarily involves: the realisation of intra-psychic functions, the avoidance of intra-psychic risks, the realisation of interpersonal functions, and the avoidance of interpersonal risks, as illustrated in Figure 1.

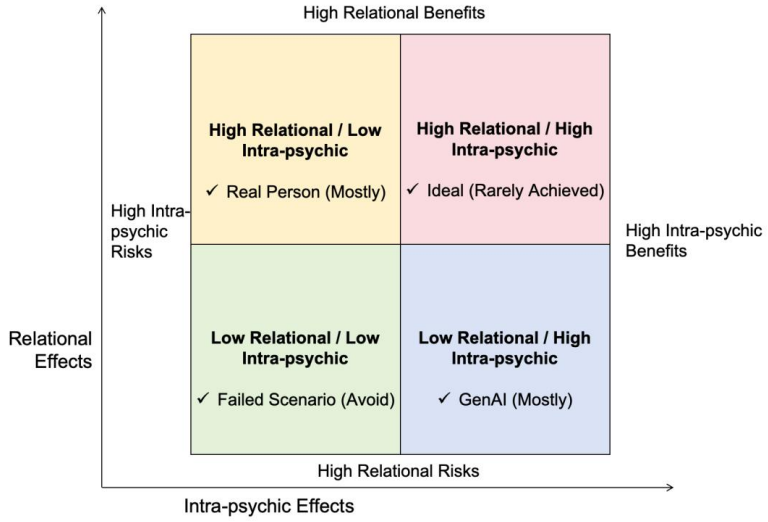

Figure 1. The perceived benefits and risks assessment model for emotional information source selection.

Idealised emotional information source

The first quadrant represents the ideal emotional information source: one that facilitates profound interpersonal connections while satisfying intra-psychic needs. In reality, however, no single source can perfectly and consistently remain in this state. When sharing positive emotions, users hope their interactions with real people will approach this state, achieving a burden-free, genuine, shared joy (A1, A3, A5, A8, A11, A12, A14). Yet, even in this context, potential interpersonal and psychological costs cannot be completely avoided. As participant A6 said, '*When I share my happiness with friends, I also worry they might think I'm showing off.*' Achieving high-quality, low-risk emotional interaction is often an ideal that users find difficult to attain.

Human information source for primarily relational benefits

The second quadrant represents the typical scenario for interacting with a real person. This mode brings profound emotional resonance and social connection, but is also accompanied by higher intra-psychic risks, such as being judged, misunderstood, or emotionally hurt (A2, A3, A8, A10, A12). The strong interactivity (authenticity, deep empathy) of a human source can provide significant relational benefits. However, its limited accessibility ('*cannot be online 24/7*,' A1) and uncertain credibility (emotional safety) ('*afraid of being judged*,' A1; '*mutual complaint sessions*,' A2) mean that users must bear higher intra-psychic risks when confiding their negative emotions.

Failed scenario in information source selection

The third quadrant represents a high-risk, low-benefit interaction scenario that users actively avoid. For example, emotional interaction with an unempathetic person may fail to provide psychological or interpersonal support and could lead to risks like privacy leakage, relationship breakdown, and secondary emotional trauma (A2, A3, A9, A14). Participant A3 stated, '*If I seek comfort from my parents for some setbacks, they would definitely think it's a normal situation and criticise me for having poor stress tolerance.*' At the same time, a failed interaction with GenAI could also place a user in this quadrant. Although GenAI usually offers low-risk intra-psychic support, when its technical limitations lead to low interactivity (e.g., the AI's responses are too mechanical

(A17), it cannot understand complex contexts (A1), or it frequently '*forgets*' (A3)), users may feel disappointed, thus failing to gain intra-psychic benefits and even generating new negative emotions.

GenAI information source for primarily intra-psychic benefits

The fourth quadrant represents the core advantage of GenAI as an emotional information source. GenAI provides high intra-psychic benefits (a safe space for catharsis, unconditional affirmation, self-exploration) with low intra-psychic risks. Its superior accessibility ('*available 24 hours*,' A8; '*when no one is with me late at night, the AI is always there*,' A2) and credibility ('*it won't leak my secrets*,' A9) make it a perfect '*emotional sanctuary*.' Participant A6 expressed, '*The AI allows me to vent without any burden; I can even voice my darkest thoughts*.' Although the direct relational benefits from AI are limited, its relational maintenance costs are virtually zero, thereby avoiding the high interpersonal risks inherent in human social interactions.

Conclusion

This study provides an exploratory look into how Chinese female users integrate GenAI into their existing social networks when seeking emotional interaction and reveals the underlying mechanism of information source selection through a perceived benefits and risks assessment. The contributions of this study are twofold. First, it constructs the *perceived benefits and risks* assessment model for emotional information source selection, attributing the user's choice to a trade-off between the dual benefits and risks of intra-psychic and interpersonal factors. This provides a novel and explanatory theoretical framework for understanding emerging human-AI emotional interactive relationships. Second, by focusing on Chinese women—an important yet understudied user group for GenAI's emotional functions—this study offers valuable, first-hand qualitative data for understanding how technology reshapes personal emotional lives within specific cultural and social structural contexts.

The findings indicate that the process of selecting an emotional information source is a context-based, complex trade-off involving accessibility, interactivity, and credibility (emotional safety). In this process, GenAI and human sources form a functionally complementary pattern within the users' emotional support network. GenAI, with its high accessibility, high emotional safety, and low relational costs, serves as an ideal '*emotional sanctuary*,' primarily used to meet users' intra-psychic regulation needs. Meanwhile, human sources, with their irreplaceable authentic empathy and deep interaction, continue to be the core channel for establishing and maintaining social connections. Despite these insights, the sample of 17 Chinese women may limit generalisability. Future research should utilise quantitative validation across diverse demographics and longitudinal designs to examine long-term impacts of GenAI reliance.

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