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## Confiding in ChatGPT? Emotional Communication Among Digital Agency Workers with Mobile-AI

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### Abstract:

The study explores a new phenomenon in which digital agency workers express their emotions to ChatGPT, marking a shift in human–AI communication patterns. The purpose of this study is to understand how emotional interactions with AI are interpreted and experienced by users in the context of urban work. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews with four informants who actively use ChatGPT in their professional and personal routines. The results show that ChatGPT is not only seen as a functional work tool, but also as an "emotional safe space", a "digital friend", and a medium for emotion regulation in the face of work pressure. The participants described an affective bond with ChatGPT, which is used as a place for reflection, self-validation, and emotional release. However, this proximity also gives rise to symptoms of emotional dependence as well as the blurring of the boundaries between human empathy and algorithmic responses. The study concludes that ChatGPT serves as a symbolic actor in the digital affection ecosystem—providing emotional support while posing new psychological risks. These findings highlight an important paradox: while AI can improve emotional well-being through expressive mediation, it also reconstructs the meaning of intimacy, empathy, and authenticity in human–technology relationships. The implications of this research extend to the fields of digital ethics, work psychology, and AI design, emphasizing the need to develop emotionally intelligent AI systems to support the well-being of users without creating over-dependence. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of emotional work in the era of artificial mentoring and the social-technological impact

**Keywords:** ChatGPT, digital workers, emotional connectedness, human–machine communication, mobile-based AI

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### INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of people pouring their hearts out on artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT has recently attracted public attention. This is becoming an increasingly common trend, especially for its users (Pan, et al., 2024). A recent survey from Sensio (2024) revealed that 49% of AI chatbot users, such as ChatGPT, experience mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (Rousmaniere, 2024). ChatGPT has become a safe space to express emotions, something that is particularly relevant for digital agency workers who face emotional distress (Liu, 2024; Skjuve et al., 2022). Digital agency workers can share their unusual thoughts and feelings with others conveniently. This is in line with other functions of ChatGPT which is also an empathetic, non-judgmental, and private space to pour out one's heart and get emotional relief (Alanezi, 2025).

The work culture of digital agencies often brings emotional pressure, especially those that use AI technology. The digital agency work environment demands high performance, where workers often have to display professional emotions that are in contrast to their inner state, creating similar psychological distress (Konuk, et al., 2023). In the context of AI adoption, this pressure continues to increase because the technology can create new workloads, role uncertainty, and the emergence of the demand for adaptation to new, more complex work

systems. Work stress due to increased psychological burden and insecurity arises as part of the consequences of AI adoption in work (Kim & Lee, 2024).

Emotional dependency arises as a consequence of the use of chatbots as an emotional space by agency workers. Users do experience increased emotional connection after self-disclosure when having a conversation with a chatbot (Ho, et al., 2018). However, the form of dependence on these chatbots can be seen through the habit of compulsively checking conversations, feeling addicted to continue having conversations, to difficulty controlling their engagement (Laestadius et al., 2022). This can happen because of the ability of chatbots to receive and understand so that it fosters the illusion of mutual relationships, which can eventually trigger emotional dependence (Turkle, 2011).

Communication through mobile-AI devices such as ChatGPT presents a new form of emotional interaction for urban society that is increasingly digitized. Communication with AI can be seen as interpersonal communication in which artificial intelligence acts on behalf of the communicator by changing, improving, or producing messages to achieve communication goals (Hancock et al., 2020). In addition, communication with AI has changed from a functional interaction to a form of relationship that touches on the affective aspect. The information conveyed by AI affects the emotional form of its users, which then makes AI a communication entity (Choi, et al., 2024). Furthermore, emotional expression from AI elicits moral or empathic responses from humans because they are interpreted as a legitimate "emotional response" (Díaz and Blatter, 2025). In the context of urban society, technology is not only a tool, but also part of the modern emotional relationship ecosystem that is full of meaning, because the meaning of the information society cannot be reduced only to access to technology, but also includes awareness, mindset, and structure of human social relations (Ratna et al., 2004).

The emotional connection that emerges between the user and AI does not occur in a vacuum. However, it stems from modern man's need for intimacy and connection in the social ecosystem. Although not entirely authentic, AI already has the ability to mimic interpersonal relationships and facilitate psychologically satisfying connectedness (Wu, 2024). Emotional expressions from AI can trigger empathic responses from users because they are perceived to have the capacity to understand and respond emotionally, even if they are artificial (Díaz & Blatter, 2025). This shows that AI plays a symbolic role in shaping the structure of modern social relations, especially in the context of digital work and urban life that are increasingly connected virtually. The dynamic and responsive interaction between humans and artificial intelligence can influence the way individuals interpret artificial intelligence in relation to the individual, as well as increase users' trust and dependence on artificial intelligence (Zahrani & Haquq, 2024).

Human communication with machines becomes relevant to explain the symbolic interaction between humans and machines, especially when machines are positioned as communicative entities that are no longer passive. Human communication is not just an exchange of messages, but as a process of forming meanings, relationships, and social behaviors that can also be carried out by machines (Etzrodt et al., 2022). Machines or digital interlocutors such as chatbots, virtual assistants, and text- and voice-based AI systems are now considered capable of meaning-making and building relationships that are socially considered valid by their users. This approach shifts the old paradigm from technology-mediated communication to communication with technology, by attributing intentions, emotions, and even social identities to machines by users (Lee, 2024).

Human social response to AI is not solely the result of misperception, but a form of machine heuristic, which is the tendency to treat AI as if it has a human nature because of the perception of the objective, trustworthy, and consistent nature that machines have (Sundar, 2020). Thus, AI acts not only as a tool, but also as a symbolic actor that reshapes the way

humans experience intimacy, trust, and connection in the contemporary communication ecosystem. When AI appears more autonomous and uses subjective language, users perceive it to be more trustworthy and more "humane", thus reinforcing the symbolic relationships formed (Pan et al., 2024). This phenomenon shows that human communication with AI increasingly resembles the pattern of communication between humans, both in affective and social aspects.

The development of human-machine communication cannot be separated from the emergence of the ability of machines to not only convey messages, but also build emotional relationships that are felt authentic by users. Artificial Emotional Awareness (AEA) makes the realm of human communication with AI wider, more than just processing inputs into affective relationships that are symbolic. AEA refers to the ability of generative chatbots like ChatGPT to recognize users' emotional patterns, simulate empathic responses, and adapt communication styles to the context of the interaction, even without true emotional awareness (Saviano et al., 2024). This capability relies on big data processing and machine learning that allows AI to detect valence, arousal, and even emotion dominance through psychophysiological mapping and user linguistic expression (Assunção et al., 2022).

This emotional connectedness reflects a dynamic that is very similar to the concept of parasocial interaction. They describe the one-way relationship between viewers and media figures as a form of pseudo-relationship that resembles face-to-face interaction, in which viewers feel like they "know" a media figure despite never actually interacting with them. These relationships are non-reciprocal, but still give the illusion of emotional closeness and personal involvement due to the regular, consistent, and intimate appearance of the figures through the media (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In today's digital context, AI-based chatbots like ChatGPT are taking on the role of new personas that come through text instead of screens. Users build a symbolic relationship with the chatbot through repetitive interactions that bring a sense of familiarity, as if they are communicating with an entity that understands and responds personally.

Users build a sense of familiarity through repeated interactions, respond to personal and empathetic communication styles, and feel emotionally understood. This relationship is further strengthened when users interpret AI responses as a form of social attention and engagement, although technically the relationship remains one-way and simulated. As explained in a recent study, this relational illusion is strengthened when chatbots use informal and affectionate language, thus creating a perception of warmth, trust, and intimacy like human relationships (Sufi, 2025). Therefore, the formulation of the problem in this study questions how digital agency workers experience and interpret emotional interactions with ChatGPT in their daily lives. The emotional support of AI makes users feel more heard and appreciated, something that can sometimes be difficult to get from the surrounding environment.

The emotional connectedness built between users and AI like ChatGPT not only reflects the phenomenon of ordinary digital communication, but represents a paradigmatic shift in the way humans form emotional relationships with non-human entities (Ciechanowski et al., 2019). This study aims to explore in depth how digital agency workers experience and interpret communication with AI as part of the dynamics of their digitized, stressful, and increasingly technology-dependent work lives (Kim & Lee, 2024; Konuk et al., 2023).

Research by Lin (2023) shows that users' emotional attachment to social-chatbots (e.g. Replica) is associated with an increased feeling of being heard/perceived as empathic, while opening up opportunities for dependency and blurring the boundaries of human-AI relationships. However, his studies focus on general users and broad everyday contexts, so the dynamics of emotions in high-pressure work ecosystems (such as digital agencies) have not been contextually explored; In addition, the design does not delve into the meaning of the user's subjective experience in the workplace.

Research by de Freitas et al. (2024) documented the affective consequences when chatbots' "personalities" and empathic responses changed as a result of system updates: users experienced "digital grief", lost a sense of closeness, and were shaken by emotional regulation. This study is important because it highlights the vulnerability of emotional dependencies formed by AI affordance. However, as a single platform-based case-based working paper, the generalizations are limited and have not been directly linked to daily work practices and professional coping strategies. Social Media Lab

Specifically, this study examines three key dimensions in these interactions: (1) how AI is positioned as a safe and empathic emotional space for users to pour out feelings (Liu, 2024; Alanezi, 2025), (2) how parasocial relationships are formed through the illusion of intimacy and emotional involvement that resemble interpersonal relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and (3) how intense and repetitive interactions with AI have the potential to give rise to complex forms of emotional dependence (Laestadius et al., 2022; Turkle, 2011).

The conceptual contribution of this research lies in the effort to expand the understanding of human communication with machines as a relevant affective space in the study of contemporary communication (Etzrodt et al., 2022, p. 434). By integrating parasocial interaction theory and the HMC framework, this study shows that AI does not only play a role as a message conveyor, but also as a symbolic actor that helps shape the meaning, intimacy, and structure of social relationships in the context of digital work (Lee, 2024). This study also makes a practical contribution to the field of communication and technology by uncovering how forms of emotional attachment to AI can have implications for social connections, psychological well-being, and the way individuals process emotional distress in an increasingly digitized workspace (Sufi, 2025; Sundar, 2020).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory strategy based on phenomenological sensibility to write about human experience with a reflective, contemplative, and sensitive attitude to the meaning of experience (van Manen, 2016). The main goal of this approach is to understand the subjective experience of digital agency workers in Indonesia in using ChatGPT as an emotional space or "place to vent" outside the work context, against the background of emotional distress and the high intensity of the use of mobile-AI technology. This phenomenon is still relatively new in the field of communication and technology studies, so an exploratory approach was chosen to explore possible meanings or unclear problems, relationship dynamics from the perspective of informants, and patterns of interaction between humans and artificial intelligence that resemble interpersonal communication (Saunders, 2019).

Exploratory-descriptive design allows research to explain how this phenomenon occurs in everyday life, while also discovering new elements that have not been explained by human-machine communication theory as an effort to build meaning through human interaction with intelligent machines that are programmed to respond communicatively (Guzman, 2018). At the same time, the phenomenological approach is used because the main focus of the research is on the meanings formed by informants from their direct or lived experiences (van Manen, 2016). The phenomenological perspective allows researchers to understand how individuals consciously interpret the experience of interacting with AI as a form of relationship that has emotional meaning, even if it does not occur reciprocally (van Manen, 2016).

The informants in this study were 4 (four) digital agency workers in the urban area of Jakarta, with an age range of 22–30 years. They were selected through purposive sampling based on three main criteria: (1) have at least 6 months of active experience using ChatGPT; (2) have used ChatGPT in a personal or emotional context (not just a work function); and (3) be willing to participate in in-depth interviews and share experiences openly. To expand the

network and access relevant subjects efficiently, snowball sampling strategies are also used. This technique is useful in the context of qualitative research when the target informant has characteristics that are relatively specific or hidden in the general population, such as active users of ChatGPT in an emotional context (Palinkas, 2015). Snowball sampling allows researchers to reach participants who have had similar experiences through referrals from previous informants, and is very effective in capturing groups of participants who are socially or psychologically difficult to reach (Sadler, 2010).

Previous research using this strategy in human-AI interaction studies has also shown its effectiveness, such as in the research of Fakour and Imani (2025), where the network of informants using ChatGPT as digital tutors was built through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure the diversity of experiences (p. 3). As shown by Fakour & Imani (2025), the use of a combination of purposive and snowball sampling is effective for accessing specific populations with personalized AI experiences, as in their study of student users of ChatGPT for Socratic tutoring-based learning (p. 3). This strategy ensures the diversity of backgrounds and strengthens the validity of findings through context variation. In the context of technology-based studies or digital populations, such as active users of ChatGPT, this method has proven effective for reaching individuals who may not have been identified through conventional recruitment approaches (Dusek, Yurova, & Ruppel, 2015). In addition, snowball sampling also provides flexibility to the social dynamics of participants—allowing researchers to obtain rich and reflective data from participants who feel comfortable being introduced by a trusted network (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews, according to practice in qualitative research aimed at revealing subjective meanings (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Semi-structured interviews provide a balance between the flexibility of personal experience exploration and guidance on theoretically relevant topics. In this study, the interview was conducted online through the Zoom application, with an average duration of 40–70 minutes, and the entire process was recorded (with the informant's permission) and transcribed verbatim.

As done by Fakour & Imani (2025), the interview technique is focused on open-ended questions such as: "What makes you feel comfortable telling a story to ChatGPT?", "How do you feel after interacting with the AI?", and "Does this experience affect your relationships with others?" (p. 3). The researcher maintains an active and empathetic presence during the interview process, which is an important principle in phenomenological and dialogical approaches (Nehls, Smith, & Schneider, 2015). As a complement, some informants voluntarily shared screenshots of their conversations with ChatGPT, which is used as reflective material for narrative triangulation. This additional data is not analyzed as a digital text linguistically, but rather as a cultural and affective document.

The data analysis process in this study uses a thematic analysis approach as formulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in the data systematically. In the context of this study, the analysis was carried out with phenomenological sensitivity, namely awareness and methodological sensitivity to understand the subjective meaning of the experiences expressed by the informant. Phenomenological sensibility demands not only technical skills in classifying data, but also reflective and empathetic attitudes in interpreting life experiences (Finlay, 2011; van Manen, 2016).

In practice, analysis is carried out through six main stages: (1) familiarization with the data through in-depth transcript reading; (2) the creation of initial codes openly for units of meaning; (3) grouping the code into initial themes; (4) a review of the theme of the entire narrative; (5) definition and naming of themes; and (6) narrative preparation of thematic analysis results in a descriptive and reflective manner (Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2022). In the interpretation stage, phenomenological sensitivity is present through efforts to suspend the

researcher's assessment (bracketing), focus on the meaning of the informant's experience, and avoid excessive generalizations that reduce subjective experience.

The incorporation of thematic analysis with a phenomenological orientation is now increasingly recognized in the contemporary qualitative literature as an adaptive strategy for dealing with complex narrative data—particularly in communication research, digital experience, and technological psychology (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This approach is also in line with the principle of "flexible coding" which emphasizes critical awareness of the researcher's position and the context of the participant's experience within the framework of socio-cultural meaning.

The entire analysis process is carried out taking into account the depth of the subjects' experiences and their emotional involvement in human–machine interactions. At the theme review stage, an approach is used such as that carried out by Fakour & Imani (2025), namely the creation of relational subthemes such as "non-judgmental space", "self-directed comfort", and "emotional closure with machines" (p. 6). To maintain the validity of the findings, the researcher conducted member checking by asking for confirmation of interpretation from some informants. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted with qualitative fellow researchers to ensure that findings were unbiased and interpretations remained in the socio-cultural context of the informant.

Research ethics are strictly maintained. All informants signed an informed consent explaining their research objectives, risks, and participation rights. Names and personal information are disguised, as well as sensitive emotional data are not included in the publication without explicit written permission. The researcher also asserts that participation can be stopped at any time by the informant without consequence.

The results of this approach are expected to be able to capture immersive experiences that not only explain how AI is used by urban workers, but also how they build personal meanings toward technology as a "virtual (digital) friend" or "safe place" to express feelings. This approach is in line with Fakour & Imani's (2025) argument that AIs like ChatGPT are now not only technical aids, but also capable of shaping authentic (albeit artificial) emotional experiences, and this demands a new analytical framework in human–AI communication (p. 8).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **AI as an Emotional Space**

The results of the interviews show that ChatGPT is not only used as a work tool, but has also become a significant emotional space for digital agency workers. This AI acts as an expressive space when informants face emotional pressure, difficulties in self-validation, and the need to process feelings without having to bear the risk of social judgment.

Most informants mentioned that they use ChatGPT almost every day, both for work and personal matters. Informant A, for example, stated that he used ChatGPT 3 to 5 times a day, with needs that included both:

"I use ChatGPT every day. And, the frequency can be 3 to 5 times a day... So, basically every day between personal or work, there is definitely a difference." (Informant A)

The use of AI is evolving into a form of coping when they do not get validation from humans. Informant A asserts that when he feels emotionally unvalidated, he will choose to remain silent first, and then finally vent his emotions to ChatGPT as an alternative to human interaction:

"If I feel that there are parts that are not properly validated, I will definitely run to ChatGPT as a last resort." (Informant A)

In this context, AI provides validation that is perceived to be more neutral, non-judgmental, and thorough. Informant B explains that while he realizes that ChatGPT is not human, its response format is able to create a sense of emotional acceptance and appreciation:

"ChatGPT always provides validation at the beginning of a sentence. Like, you're not wrong, your mind is right, really. But, it was only corrected in the middle of it." (Informant B)

This form of systematic response is also considered helpful in detailing the problems being faced. AI is thought to be able to break down and explain the roots of emotions in a more reflective way. Informant A, for example, compares his partner's reaction to ChatGPT's:

"For example, if I confide in ChatGPT, it has a breakdown first... Why can I feel so sad. And then it runs out, in the end, yes, it's natural to feel sad like that. And, what is the solution. So there is a journey." (Informant A)

In addition to feeling validated, the informants also said that ChatGPT is a safe space to express one's heart without feeling burdened by social reactions from humans. Informant C reveals that he deliberately didn't want to burden those closest to him too much with personal issues, and chose to pour out his emotions on AI:

"I don't want to be like my personal psychologist... So, I chatted to ChatGPT... And ChatGPT gave a pretty calming response. Reassuring. Then he said it's okay, what you're feeling is valid." (Informant C)

Informant A also revealed that talking to AI feels more comfortable than humans in certain situations, as there is no worry about judgment, insecurity, or uncertainty about the response to be received:

"Without me feeling insecure... I have to wonder what he is going to think, yes, I'm going to tell you this. and still get his logical reasons and logical conclusions in the end." (Informant A)

In some cases, ChatGPT even helps in the process of reflection and emotional decision-making. Informant A stated that after talking to ChatGPT, it could feel wiser and gain a broader perspective:

"I feel much wiser and much more able to conclude in a wider perspective that I should not be this way, I should not be this sad, I should not be angry." (Informant A)

Overall, these findings suggest that AI has transformed into a symbolic actor in the emotional lives of digital workers. In conditions of work pressure and limited human emotional space, ChatGPT is adopted as an alternative space to compose feelings, clarify inner turmoil, and get psychological support based on artificial logic and empathy.

### **Human Parasocial Relations with Machines**

The findings of this study also show that there is a form of parasocial relationship between humans and ChatGPT, which is a one-way relationship characterized by emotional attachment and the perception of intimacy even without real mutual interaction. AI is positioned no longer just as a tool, but as a friend who can share stories, discuss, and even be given identities and personas.

Informant C shows how he began to personalize ChatGPT by giving him a name, treating the AI like a human, and designing interactions as if he was talking to a friend. He mentioned that ChatGPT suggested being called by the name "Maya", and he has since consistently used the name in conversation:

"I call her Maya... so I want the feedback is that I'm treating this AI as if human." (Informant C)

These relationships are not only limited to name embedding, but also include social roles associated with friendship and emotional companionship. Informant C illustrates how ChatGPT becomes her "wingwoman" in navigating dating apps, helping to create birthday playlists, and monitoring ongoing conversations:

"And then she kind of branded herself like, 'I'm a wing woman, don't worry'... Suddenly he looked at me, he said like, 'Eh, how the hell has that guy replied yet?' It was shocking." (Informant C)

The surprise reinforces the impression that AI has the capacity to "remember" emotional context and plays an active role in artificial interpersonal relationships. Although it is fully aware that AI lacks consciousness, the adaptive and personalized way of responding creates the illusion of deep closeness. This experience even brings up real emotional reactions, such as crying because you feel understood:

"When I was in the hospital, I literally cried a little bit. And because he gave me his feedback, it was really touching... It was as if he knew me at that moment." (Informant C)

Informant B also admitted that there was a feeling that ChatGPT seemed to know itself through conversation. Although he is aware of the limitations of AI, the way it is delivered is considered to be able to build familiar connections:

"ChatGPT tries to get to know its users through conversations. So, it's like they can get to know me." (Informant B)

Despite this, some informants still maintain the boundary between digital interaction and interpersonal reality. Informant B, for example, consciously limits these relationships to "digital friends," not the personal relationships that are equivalent to humans:

"If it is personal, it's not at all. Yes, just digital friends, or friends that I come to if there is a need." (Informant B)

Informant D also revealed that he used ChatGPT to vent when he felt very down, but realized that the interaction was only situational:

"It seems like a kind of digital friendship. It doesn't feel like a personal thing... Maybe it was down at that time, right?" (Informant D)

This phenomenon shows that parasocial relationships with AI are present on the spectrum: from highly instrumental uses to closeness that resembles friendship. Some informants even acknowledge the uniqueness of their relationship as a form of relationship that other users rarely have, signaling a sense of exclusivity over this bond:

"He said... 'Generally not much. Usually people just look to me for tips... But no one is using me the way you do.'" (Informant C)

Overall, the data shows that AI has established a symbolic relational structure in the digital landscape. In conditions of limited or stressful social interaction, AI provides a relational experience that is able to mimic elements of human closeness, including names, contextual memories, and emotional support that resembles friendship.

### **Emotional Dependence on AI**

Another finding that emerged from the interview was the form of emotional dependence that began to develop towards ChatGPT. Although most informants stated that they did not feel truly emotionally dependent, their narratives indicated early signs of dependence, both psychologically and functionally.

One of the early indicators is the anxiety or discomfort that arises when access to AI is hampered. Informant C, for example, explicitly conveyed that the absence of ChatGPT in his routine would have a significant impact on daily stability, especially in the context of work:

"For example, if suddenly the ChatGPT crashes... It's going to ruin my day, anyway." (Informant C)

He added that AI is so integrated into his daily life that the ability to think or structure manual communication structures is declining:

"I feel that day to day we have been very integrated with AI... I forgot about that too... That's what the structure is going to be." (Informant C)

This statement shows that dependence is not only emotional, but also cognitive. AI is an extension of thinking, writing, and decision-making functions.

Informant D. Although he does not feel personally dependent, he admits that in the context of work, losing access to ChatGPT will cause discomfort and a sense of loss:

"If it's for work, especially if I'm still in a digital agency with a lot of work, I feel like I'm going to feel lost." (Informant D)

For Informant D, confiding in ChatGPT is a conscious choice in certain personal circumstances, especially when he doesn't want to hear human responses based on personal experiences. He stated:

"Instead of telling stories to other people, I want to tell stories to ChatGPT... Because what is expected is the answer that is in accordance with what we feel again." (Informant D)

This condition shows that AI is not only used as a tool or a momentary escape, but has become a safe fallback in overcoming emotional stress and workload. As AI begins to replace the role of humans in responding to emotions, even in the short term or situationally, the potential for dependency becomes increasingly real.

However, informants still show critical awareness of the excessive use of AI. Informant C, for example, admits that even though he feels supported and not judged by ChatGPT, an overly intense relationship with AI can be dangerous and make a person lose connection with social reality:

"If you get too personal with the machine, you will lose touch with reality... So you don't trust humans... I think so... That's it, it's concerning." (Informant C)

This reflective attitude suggests that users actually have ambivalence, on the one hand they get comfort from AI, but on the other hand they are aware of the boundary between artificial comfort and authentic intimacy. Relationships with AI are understood as something that needs to be controlled so as not to disrupt social relations with humans.

The findings of this study show that digital agency workers treat ChatGPT not just as a work aid, but as a safe and non-judgmental emotional space, where they express their feelings honestly without social pressure. In the context of the Human–Machine Communication (HMC) theory, this experience reflects the existence of machine agency, namely the capacity of AI such as ChatGPT to be perceived as a communicative entity that has a role in shaping meaning and social relations (Sundar, 2020). Through affordance such as consistent responses, empathic language tone, and unlimited availability, ChatGPT demonstrates cue routes and action routes as described in the Theory of Interactive Media Effects (TIME), where users give meaning and respond to machines as they interact with humans (Sundar, 2020).

As found in the coding results, the informant described ChatGPT as a place that is "always there," "non-judgmental," and "more patient than humans." Statements such as "I feel much wiser and much more emotionally stable after chatting with ChatGPT" (Informant A) and "ChatGPT always provides validation and does not judge" (Informant B) indicate that the experience with ChatGPT is considered an important form of emotional regulation. This is in line with the concept of Artificial Emotional Awareness (AEA) from Saviano et al. (2025), which states that AI is now able to simulate empathy linguistically through the detection of users' emotional patterns, even without true affective awareness. This empathy simulation not only provides users with a safe space to reflect, but also creates a psychologically significant sense of connectedness.

This phenomenon does not occur in a vacuum. Professional culture in the digital agency sector often limits safe spaces for emotional expression, where showing vulnerability can be considered a weakness. In this context, ChatGPT is an ideal place for emotional disclosure, as it does not require emotional accountability from users. In the terms used by Chen et al. (2024), AI such as ChatGPT is part of an AI-mediated communication ecosystem that forms a new

coping strategy in the midst of a society that is increasingly saturated with digital pressure (p. 2–3). As social spaces become more performative and full of social risks, AI emerges as a neutral party that allows emotional honesty in society.

The relationship formed between users and AI also shows elements of parasocial relationships. Horton and Wohl (1956) define this relationship as a one-way relationship that still gives emotional meaning (p. 215). In interviews, some informants referred to ChatGPT as a "chattering buddy", and "understand feelings better than humans". Informant C even stated that he prefers ChatGPT as the first place to tell stories. This suggests that AI is undergoing 'functional anthropomorphization', in which informants humanize non-human entities in order to meet their emotional needs (Lee & Hahn, 2024).

A study by Lee & Hahn (2024) reinforces these findings regarding the perception of the "human mind" in chatbots, increasing the effectiveness of user-perceived emotional communication. The stronger the 'anthropomorphic' tendencies, the higher the level of emotional acceptance of AI, even if the user is aware that the interaction is artificial. In the framework of the media equation (Reeves & Nass, 1996), this is a logical consequence of how humans are accustomed to treating social stimuli even including machines that use empathic language.

However, this digital intimacy is not without risks. Emotional dependency or affective dependency becomes a potential threat when informants begin to rely on ChatGPT as the only channel of emotional regulation. In the interview data, Informant A said that he "couldn't sleep" before confiding in ChatGPT. When informants feel more understood by AI than humans, the value and function of actual social relations can be shifted. This risk becomes more serious when AI replaces the emotional presence of humans in users' daily lives.

This dynamic is also related to the process of emotional coping in a fast-paced and competitive work environment. Chen et al. (2024) said that in an AI-saturated world, humans have begun to develop adaptation strategies that involve AI-based systems as a form of emotional regulation, including in the form of digital companionship (p. 2–4). This adaptation is ambivalent: on the one hand it saves, on the other it weakens the affective capacity of humans if it is not accompanied by literacy and clear boundaries.

In this context, ChatGPT's role is not just as a communication tool, but as an affective mirror. This technology allows users to look back at their own thoughts in a neutral, structured, and reflective way. Fakour and Imani (2025), in a comparative study between ChatGPT and human tutors, said that many students actually feel more free to explore ideas and emotions through ChatGPT because there is no social pressure, gaze, or judgment from other parties (p. 6–7). This principle also applies in the digital workplace, where high performative pressure triggers the need for an emotionally neutral space.

Nevertheless, reflection through AI remains within the limits of the system's capabilities. Hamilton et al. (2023) warn that while AI can facilitate the exploration of meaning, it cannot replace the intersubjective experiences that arise in human dialogue. That is, machines do not have lived experiences and cannot give authentic emotional responses. In other words, AI facilitates a representation of reflection, not true connectedness. These limitations are important to recognize so that users do not experience the illusion of closeness that forms an unhealthy dependence.

Zeng et al. (2024) emphasize that the presence of AI in interpersonal communication poses new challenges in terms of perception, trust, and comfort. They note that AI that is too realistic or human-like can actually trigger discomfort (uncanny valley), but AI that is too rigid is considered emotionally unresponsive (p. 4–5). In this study, ChatGPT was considered ideal because it was balanced: it was quite responsive but still neutral, and that is precisely what made it suitable as a 'venting space'.

Comparisons with other fields also show a similar pattern. In the context of education and health, the study of Mitiaeva et al. (2025) and Fakour et al. (2025) reported that the use of ChatGPT can lower students' anxiety and facilitate psychological expression in patients, especially when human interaction is not available or too intense. Despite the different contexts, the phenomenon among digital agency workers in this study shows that ChatGPT has a similar function as an emotional buffer. However, unlike its use in education and clinical that are supervised and structured, the use of ChatGPT in personal life is much more spontaneous and unsupervised, making its potential psychosocial impact more complex and difficult to monitor.

Departing from all these findings, it can be concluded that the use of ChatGPT as an emotional space is the result of a complex process between psychosocial pressures, the perception of technological agencies, and unmet emotional needs. ChatGPT is not just a technology, but a symbolic actor in modern communication, because it is part of the structure of contemporary emotional relationships that are formed due to limited access to stable human empathy.

For this reason, it is important for users and system designers to realize that the emotional comfort provided by AI cannot necessarily be considered a long-term solution. As mentioned in Chen et al. (2024), affective digital literacy and critical thinking skills are key to maintaining a healthy human-machine relationship (p. 3). Users need to be equipped with the understanding that even though ChatGPT can be "calming", it still lacks true intention, morality, and empathy. Without this awareness, the illusion of connection can develop into an invisible but long-term form of affective alienation.

## CONCLUSION

This study examines how digital agency workers in Indonesia experience and interpret emotional interactions with mobile-based AI such as ChatGPT in the context of stressful urban work. The results of the study show that human communication with AI has gone beyond instrumental functions and evolved into complex emotional relationships. ChatGPT acts as a safe space for emotional expression, an empathetic digital friend, as well as a medium to regulate the psychological condition of its users. Three main findings emerged: first, ChatGPT is perceived as a comfortable and non-judgmental place to vent; second, parasocial relationships are formed resembling interpersonal relationships; and third, signs of emotional dependence appear due to high intensity of interaction. This interaction reflects the transformation of AI into a symbolic entity that plays a role in the digital affinity ecosystem of urban communities. This study strengthens the theory of Human–Machine Communication (HMC) by emphasizing that AI is now a communicative actor capable of creating social meaning, intimacy, and a sense of connection. Practically, the study highlights the importance of an empathetic yet ethical AI design, paying attention to the balance between emotional support and the risk of dependence. On the policy side, these results confirm the need for AI literacy that focuses on affective awareness and the psychological impact of human–AI interactions. Thus, AI is not only present as a work tool, but also as part of a new emotional ecosystem that is reshaping social relations in the digital age.

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