



Trusting the Algorithm: Emotional Engagement with ChatGPT in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: This study examines emotional engagement with ChatGPT among 121 university students from diverse academic disciplines, focusing on the relationships between trust in the AI, the emotional framing of prompts, and the explicit use of ChatGPT for emotional support. Results reveal a paradox: higher trust correlates with increased emotional self-awareness ($r = .386$) and perceived emotional intelligence ($r = .508$), while deliberate emotional framing is linked to lower perceived AI emotional intelligence ($r = -.412$) and reduced emotional benefits ($r = -.259$). Students who use ChatGPT for emotional support report diminished emotional awareness ($r = -.190$) and less favourable emotional outcomes ($r = -.270$), indicating an “empathic expectation gap” where emotional intent exposes the system’s limitations. The findings highlight the need to integrate ChatGPT in digital pedagogy as a reflective tool rather than a substitute for human connection, with attention to ethical design, user education, and emotional literacy.

KEYWORDS: ChatGPT, emotional intelligence, higher education, AI in learning, digital pedagogy, emotional framing, trust in AI.

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Introduction

Generative AI systems such as ChatGPT have transitioned from experimental technologies to integral elements of academic life, particularly in higher education. Initially embraced for their ability to streamline cognitive tasks—summarising information, generating ideas, and assisting with research—they are now entering the affective domain. Students increasingly use ChatGPT not only to complete assignments but also to reflect on their thoughts, manage stress, and engage in self-expression during challenging academic periods.

This evolution mirrors broader societal changes. Harari (2017) describes postmodern societies as marked by emotional isolation, with individuals turning to digital platforms for connection. ChatGPT's always-available, non-judgmental nature positions it as a candidate for emotional support, a perception reinforced by findings that some users rate AI-generated responses as more compassionate than those of human experts (Ovsyannikova et al., 2025). However, this carries inherent risks. Park et al. (2023) warn of the “empathic expectation gap,” where users’ emotional expectations exceed what AI can deliver, leading to dissatisfaction and even emotional detachment.

In educational contexts, the stakes are particularly high. Emotional well-being is closely tied to academic success and retention rates. As generative AI tools become embedded in students’ academic routines, understanding their influence on emotional awareness and self-regulation is essential for designing effective digital pedagogy.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications

The role of trust in human-AI interaction has been well established in cognitive tasks, but its influence on emotional engagement is less understood. Glikson and Woolley (2020) suggest that trust in AI not only increases reliance on the system but also shapes perceptions of its capabilities. In affective contexts, trust may encourage students to interpret responses as emotionally intelligent, even when they are generated through pattern recognition rather than genuine empathy (Feng et al., 2022).

Emotional framing—the use of affective cues in prompts—has emerged as a strategy to elicit more human-like responses. However, Gill and Mathur (2024) caution that this can backfire, as users may become more conscious of the system’s limitations. Park et al. (2023) frame this as a mismatch between expectations and reality, where scripted emotional nuance risks feeling artificial and undermines perceived authenticity.

An alternative perspective comes from Andries and Robertson (2023), who describe AI as a “reflective mirror.” Through affective mirroring (Q. Wang et al., 2024), AI can return emotionally attuned responses that prompt users to reflect on their own feelings. This reflective capacity could be pedagogically valuable, fostering emotional literacy among students. However, reliance on AI for emotional regulation raises concerns about diminishing interpersonal coping strategies—skills that remain essential in both academic and professional environments.

While this growing body of literature highlights key dynamics in human-AI emotional interaction, there remains a lack of empirical evidence on how these processes play out in higher

education. This study addresses that gap by examining the interplay of trust, emotional framing, and support-seeking behaviour among university students.

Research Aim and Research Questions

This study investigates how trust in ChatGPT, emotional framing, and explicit emotional support use influence students' emotional awareness and affective outcomes. By focusing on higher education, it aims to produce insights that will guide educators and policymakers in integrating AI tools into digital pedagogy in ways that support emotional development without fostering dependency.

Research Results

A structured online questionnaire was distributed to 121 university students representing fields such as Business and Economics, Health Sciences, Engineering and IT, Law and Politics, Education, Social Sciences, and Arts and Design. Items were grouped into thematic sections: trust in ChatGPT, perceived emotional tone detection, use of emotional framing, emotional expression awareness, explicit emotional support use, and post-interaction emotional outcomes. The survey also captured demographic data.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations to explore the relationships between key variables.

Descriptive Findings

The descriptive results (Table 1) reveal moderate-to-high levels of trust ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.818$) and considerable variation in perceived emotional tone detection ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.266$). Emotional framing was reported by nearly half of respondents ($M = 1.45$), yet only around 23% used ChatGPT explicitly for emotional support. Emotional outcomes were generally neutral to mildly positive ($M = 2.26$ on a 1–3 scale).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Frequency of use	121	1	4	2.26	1.013
Trust in information	121	2	5	3.50	0.818
Emotional tone detection	119	1	5	3.13	1.266
Use for emotional framing	121	1	2	1.45	0.499
Emotional expression awareness	121	1	5	2.55	1.087
Use for emotional support	121	1	2	1.77	0.423
Emotional outcome post-use	121	1	3	2.26	0.571

Source: Authors' elaboration

Correlation Findings

Pearson correlations (Table 2) revealed that trust positively correlates with perceived emotional tone detection ($r = .508$, $p < .001$), emotional awareness ($r = .386$, $p < .001$), and positive emotional outcomes ($r = .239$, $p = .008$). Emotional framing, however, was negatively correlated with perceived emotional intelligence ($r = -.412$, $p < .001$) and emotional outcomes ($r = -.259$, $p = .004$). Students using ChatGPT for emotional support were more likely to use emotional framing ($r = .335$, $p < .001$) but reported lower emotional awareness ($r = -.190$, $p = .037$) and less favourable outcomes ($r = -.270$, $p = .003$).

Table 2:

Pearson Correlation results

Variables	r	Sig. (p-value)	Direction
Info_trustworthiness ↔ Emotional_tone_detection	0.508	0.000	Positive
Info_trustworthiness ↔ Emotional_expression_awareness	0.386	0.000	Positive
Info_trustworthiness ↔ Emotional_outcome_post_use	0.239	0.008	Positive
Emotional_tone_detection ↔ Use_for_emotional_framing	-0.412	0.000	Negative
Emotional_tone_detection ↔ Emotional_expression_awareness	0.381	0.000	Positive
Emotional_tone_detection ↔ Emotional_outcome_post_use	0.319	0.000	Positive
Use_for_emotional_framing ↔ Emotional_expression_awareness	-0.321	0.000	Negative
Use_for_emotional_framing ↔ Use_for_emotional_support	0.335	0.000	Positive
Use_for_emotional_framing ↔ Emotional_outcome_post_use	-0.259	0.004	Negative
Emotional_expression_awareness ↔ Use_for_emotional_support	-0.190	0.037	Negative
Emotional_expression_awareness ↔ Emotional_outcome_post_use	0.307	0.001	Positive
Use_for_emotional_support ↔ Emotional_outcome_post_use	-0.270	0.003	Negative

Source: Authors' elaboration

Pedagogical Interpretation:

These findings indicate that while trust can facilitate productive emotional engagement with AI, overreliance on emotional framing or direct emotional support may hinder emotional growth. In educational settings, this suggests that AI can be integrated as a reflective tool for emotional self-awareness exercises but should not replace human-led mentoring or peer support groups.

Conclusions and Implications

The results confirm ChatGPT's potential as a reflective tool in higher education, capable of

fostering emotional awareness when trust is established. However, they also reveal the limitations of AI in delivering genuine empathy, particularly when emotional engagement is artificially prompted.

From a pedagogical perspective, educators can leverage ChatGPT's reflective capacity in activities that encourage students to articulate their emotions in writing, followed by human-facilitated discussions. At the same time, AI literacy should be embedded into curricula to ensure students understand the boundaries of AI's emotional capabilities.

Policy Implications: Institutions should establish clear guidelines for AI use in academic and emotional contexts, striking a balance between digital tools and human interaction.

Future Research: Longitudinal studies should examine the impact of sustained AI use on emotional development, and cross-cultural research should explore how trust and emotional framing vary in different educational contexts.

Limitations: The study's reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, and the sample's demographic composition—primarily young adults—limits generalisability.

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