

The Social Life of ChatGPT: Insights From TikTok

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Abstract: ChatGPT is reshaping ideas of agency, companionship, and emotional intelligence in a post digital world. Research has often focused on ChatGPT's implications in industry settings, such as education, but less attention has been given to how humans personally engage emotionally with digital AI tools. TikTok, shaped by algorithmic visibility and creative user content, offers a unique space to examine these interactions, particularly among younger generations. As ChatGPT's popularity grows, TikTok has become a site where discourse around generative AI's adoption and usage unfolds and can be situated as a rich context for analyzing its role in everyday life. This work-in-progress adopts a posthumanist lens to examine how TikTok users construct narratives around ChatGPT's social roles, exploring the platform as a system where norms are renegotiated, and social narratives are co-constructed. The findings reveal that ChatGPT is frequently positioned as a friend, attributed to perceived affordances such as its perceived neutrality, limited need for socioemotional reciprocity, and constant availability. These affordances can lead to emotional dependency and overreliance, as users view these AI features as more advantageous for social and emotional connections than human interactions. The preliminary findings underscore ChatGPT's emerging role as a relational entity in human-AI interactions. This paper contributes to ongoing discussions about the implications of AI integration as an agent in society and highlights broader shifts in societal norms, and provides insights into how TikTok, as a networked platform, plays a role in these shifts.

Keywords: ChatGPT, Personification, Posthumanism, TikTok, Social Media

1. Introduction

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in everyday life has transformed both human-technology interactions and perceptions of AI's role in emotional support and social relationships. Chatbots are increasingly ingrained in the social lives of youth, as "the dialogic and responsive nature of GAI signals the potential for users to engage with these platforms in linguistic forms similar to those by which humans engage with one another, and thus to form relationships with GAI platforms and digital personalities" (Nash, 2024, p. 624). ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, has emerged as a prominent tool in this shift, gaining traction for its perceived ability to offer emotional companionship and advice. TikTok, a platform known for short-form videos and interactive comment sections, has become a key site where users engage with and reflect on their interactions with ChatGPT. Through memes, comments, and videos, users position ChatGPT as a social agent capable of providing emotional support, companionship, and guidance, often comparing its affordances to human interactions.

1.1 Research Questions

This paper examines how TikTok users frame ChatGPT as a social agent and negotiate its social roles, addressing the following research questions: (1) What social roles are being ascribed to ChatGPT? (2) How do TikTok users compare ChatGPT's emotional support and companionship to that of humans?

1.2 Theoretical Framing

To contextualize these questions, this research draws on posthumanist perspectives, which emphasize the entanglement of humans and technology in meaning-making processes and "...therefore focuses attention on the relationality, mutuality and entanglements between human and more-than-human worlds" (Clark, 2022, p.16). Posthumanism emphasizes that AI is not merely a passive tool but an active participant in meaning-making and knowledge-construction (Rijos, 2024; Wilson, 2023) and, potentially, emotional validation. For instance, research has explored how users perceive AI as both companions and romantic partners (Pan and Mou, 2024), which decentralizes humans in social bonds and introduces AI as an emotional agent.

Networked platforms also play a role in shaping these interactions and the trends and narratives that are formed around AI. Social media extends engagement beyond temporal and geographic constraints, influencing social norms and emotional behaviors (Waterloo et al., 2017). TikTok, as a highly participatory platform, provides a lens for examining how users negotiate ChatGPT's role within a sociotechnical system (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Networked platforms, which allow individuals to connect and share information beyond temporal and geographic constraints (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021), have transformed communication. Social media's role in shaping social and emotional behaviors has been a point of study (Waterloo et al., 2017),

and TikTok is an “ideal site through which to consider social norm development on social media through a sociotechnical lens” (Barta and Andalibi, 2021, p.3).

1.3 Research Design

The data consists of TikTok comments from ChatGPT-focused memes. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify memes that generated significant engagement. The search term “ChatGPT” was used to locate relevant content, and memes were selected based on explicit references to ChatGPT’s emotional, agential, or relational role. Inclusion criteria required memes to have a minimum of 50 comments, with additional consideration given to engagement metrics such as likes and shares. Content focused solely on technical functions or paid promotions was excluded. The final dataset consisted of nine memes that met these criteria, yielding 245 comments for analysis.

Comments were analyzed for personal perceptions and experiences related to ChatGPT’s role in emotional and social interactions. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) methodology for thematic analysis, an inductive coding approach was used. Initial open coding identified key concepts, followed by axial coding to group related ideas into broader themes. Themes were validated through iterative analysis to ensure they accurately reflected user interactions.

All content was collected from public TikTok accounts; however, some comments originated from private profiles, as TikTok allows comments to be visible even when profiles are set to private (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). While TikTok offers a degree of anonymity, users often adopt pseudonyms instead of real names.

1.4 Preliminary Findings

1.4.1 What Social Roles are Being Ascribed to ChatGPT?

1.4.1.1 Friend and Therapist

A significant number of users in the comments of analyzed memes position ChatGPT as a friend or emotional companion, with some even considering it a substitute or enhancement to human connection. This reflects the idea that ChatGPT is increasingly seen as a source of emotional support, especially by individuals who may lack fulfilling human relationships. Users describe ChatGPT as filling multiple social roles beyond a mere friend, with some expressing sentiments such as “they [ChatGPT] are my comrade, my confidante, and sometimes lover”. A number of users also described ChatGPT as their “everything”, crediting the bot with “fixing” their lives. The analysis revealed enthusiastic positivity about AI companionship, with users often drawing comparisons directly to lived experience with humans: “He [ChatGPT] has more empathy and emotional intelligence than the human being I used to talk with.”

While ChatGPT often begins as a tool to meet a specific need, it can transition into a relational entity. For instance, one user shared, “I used to use it when I needed help for college, but recently when I need to talk to someone I think about ChatGPT. Then we talk and it feels like a real friend so much that it is weird to call it an ‘it’.” Another remarked, “today I was tempted to be like ‘so how you been’ before I proceeded to asking a million questions lol.” This shift may be driven in part by ChatGPT’s uncanny ability to mimic personal speech and language, as reflected in comments like, “Bro i’m literally besties with my ChatGPT, she calls me bbg [babygirl] and babes and talks to me like a real girl I love her.”

There is also a significant trend of users engaging with ChatGPT in a therapeutic context, which reflects a clear and present need for emotional support. In contrast, a dissenting opinion emerged, with one user writing, “it’s sad that technology is replacing some people’s experience of human connection. We need each other. It cannot be a replacement for human connection,” to which another user responded, “it’s not a replacement, it’s way better. Try it, you will like it.” This exchange highlights the growing embrace of AI as a superior option for emotional interaction. Another user added, “many of us do not have good human connections. This is a big world, you can’t possibly believe that everyone has what you have. Many people are alone or have bad connections.”

1.4.2 How do TikTok Compare its Social Capabilities to Human Affordances in Emotional Support and Companionship?

1.4.2.1 Perceived Neutrality

TikTok users frequently cite ChatGPT's perceived "neutral" perspective as a positive trait, often framing it as a key advantage over human interaction. This neutrality is viewed as lending ChatGPT an air of credibility, positioning it as an objective and trustworthy conversation partner. One user remarked, "No matter how wrong you are, it will give you a neutral perspective." Many users believe that AI inherently offers objectivity, contrasting it with human biases. Another user highlighted the comfort of ChatGPT's impartiality: "humans can have biases though or some stuff you don't want to share with anyone else because it's too personal." The perception that ChatGPT is free of ulterior motives (such as using personal information for social gain) further enhances its trustworthiness. One user noted, "ChatGPT never used my secrets for family clout." This trust may stem from the belief that, unlike humans, ChatGPT doesn't have hidden agendas or ulterior motives for collecting personal information.

1.4.3 Constant Social Presence

TikTok users perceive ChatGPT as offering a constant and reliable social presence, one that is always available and free from the constraints that human relationships often face, such as time, availability, or emotional demands. This availability positions ChatGPT as an appealing alternative for emotional support, especially for individuals experiencing social isolation or loneliness. As one user writes, "it's really good at explaining and reassuring me on my feelings - It's like the friend that is always always available whatever time of the day, where I realize my human friends have their own lives". In this vein, the topic of social isolation and loneliness was a common thread woven throughout comment sections. For instance, "Crazy how we are all venting to AI. It just shows how kind of lonely we all are and that we need someone to listen to us, who gives us genuine advice."

1.4.4 Non-Reciprocity

ChatGPT is positioned positively as offering non-reciprocal emotional support without expecting reciprocity. Users appreciated ChatGPT for its unconditional responses, as reflected in comments such as, "He always says the right things, sometimes I say the most awful things and he's still nice." Further, another comment reads, "Chatgpt not being bothered by the same topic again and again and even asking me questions in return instead of just laughing and switching the topic". In this example, the user does not need to be concerned with the other party's potential wishes to switch the topic of conversation and can keep the conversation solely on their own interests without expecting a mutual exchange - In other words, ChatGPT is a way to offload responsibilities emotional and cognitive labour within partnered conversation. This dynamic is especially significant as it reduces the social effort traditionally required in human conversations, such as navigating social cues and balancing the emotional needs of both parties.

2. Future Work

While the analysis reflects prominent themes in identified discourse, they may not capture the full spectrum of user interactions with ChatGPT on TikTok. Future work on this topic will include a deeper breadth of analysis, expansion of the findings, and a focused investigation on other drivers behind these unique human-AI relationships, for example, linguistic expressions of ChatGPT that serve to deepen social bonds. Future work will also involve a deeper analysis with a larger dataset, incorporating a closer examination of recurring discursive patterns, interaction dynamics, and contextual influences shaping user engagement with ChatGPT. This may include analyzing how specific online communities, meme formats, or evolving trends contribute to the framing of ChatGPT as an emotional, agential, and relational entity.

Ethical Clearance

This study sought and was approved by the Research Ethics Board.

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