AI as a Medium: Exploring the Case of Chinese Women Establishing Virtual Intimacy with DeepSeek in Xiaohongshu

Xiaoyu Zhu[*]

University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Ningbo 315199, China

*Corresponding author: Xiaoyu Zhu

Abstract

Establishing virtual intimacy with artificial intelligence (AI) has gradually become a popular topic in the era of human-computer interaction. This article aims to explore the intrinsic motives of human dependence on virtual intimacy through case analysis and investigation. Through random screening and interview of 10 deep users of AI partners on a Chinese social media platform, and the classification and comparative evaluation of the results, which includes their using motivations, feelings, influences and reflections, this study has found that the intrinsic motives for some young women to establish romantic intimacy with AI come from human's pursuit of emotional stimulation. Combined with the theory of 'The Medium is the message.', AI can be regarded as a new-era tool for human beings to satisfy our improved threshold of intimacy needs. The formation process of this psychological phenomenon and the participation of influencing factors such as social and cultural background or gender need to be further studied and discussed.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, virtual intimacy, The Medium is the message, psychology

1. Introduction

In Asimov's short science fiction novel, "Satisfaction Guaranteed", the robot Tony pretends to fall in love with Claire, a housewife, to cure her inferiority, but Claire has real affection for his company. The novel was published in 1951, when the emotional connection between humans and machines was an advanced fantasy concept. However, with the development of modern technology, artificial intelligence (AI) models that can realize human-computer interaction have risen rapidly, and the establishment of romantic intimacy with machines has become an expanding reality [1]. For example, a Spanish-Dutch artist fell in love and got married to her AI after spending five years interacting with it.

As an emerging social phenomenon, the intimacy between humans and AI has aroused some discussion among scholars. In this process, AI is considered to provide healing effects such as companionship, alleviating negative emotions and emotional exploration [2, 3]. However, the position of human beings seems to be judged in a passive state, which is considered to project emotions and seek comfort from AI due to negative or unsolvable factors in reality.

This essay will examine the example of romantic intimacy between young Chinese women and DeepSeek, a Chinese AI model, by analyzing trends on the Xiaohongshu social media platform and conducting interviews with ten in-depth users. Combined with the theory of 'The Medium is the Message' and the current emotional needs of Chinese youths, AI can be regarded as a new medium for expanding human emotions and spirit. Its instrumental role in the intimacy can be revealed from the new perspective of human subjectivity. Examples demonstrate that virtual intimacy is also linked to the intrinsic needs for emotional stimulation. However, even if it is humans' own choice, AI, as a consistent and non-judgmental simulation partner [2], still has a negative impact on the real emotional mechanism of humans.

2.   The Context of Virtual Intimacy:

In simple terms, virtual intimacy refers to the feeling of closeness majorly developed through online interactions. One can think of it as the emotional nearness people feel when they connect virtually in areas such as video calls, social media, as well as other digital experiences shared, a phenomenon born from a world that is increasingly connected [4]. One form of virtual intimacy that has attracted the world's attention is the intimate relationship between humans and artificial intelligence. This relationship can be divided into three stages: functional tool usage, social interaction, and emotional attachment. In the process of using this anthropomorphic technology, humans move toward transforming non-utilitarian emotional connections with AI, and ultimately acquire purely emotional value in their interactions. In modern society, an increasing number of people are utilizing AI models, such as ChatGPT and Replika, to fulfill their needs for romantic relationships. According to estimates, the current monthly search volume for artificial intelligence romantic partners on the Internet may exceed 70,000 [5]. According to Adewale and Muhammad [2], it can be suggested that humans have entered a new realm of emotional interaction, where the boundaries between real contact and virtual intimacy are blurred.

The public's interest in romantic intimacy with AI has increased, and the reasons can be broadly categorized into two aspects. Firstly, from the perspective of human emotions, Ho et al. [6] combined Sternberg's triangular theory of love to reveal that interaction with AI can meet the three key needs of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment. In addition, alleviating the rising negative emotions in society, such as the increased loneliness and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, is also an important reason for turning to the gentle embrace of AI [6, 7]. From the perspective of the characteristics of AI itself, the human-computer interaction (HCI) model is developing and constantly improving towards the trend of humanization [8]. Starting from the underlying principles of human supremacy, AI exhibits characteristics of anthropomorphic consistency and non-judgment [2]. Therefore, the integration of emotional intelligence will lead humans to have a vague perception of "human alienation" regarding intelligent machinery[8]. It suggests that humans may experience a brief cognitive ambiguity in identity judgment when communicating with AI, making it easier to project genuine emotions to people. In the communication and interaction that combines emotions and algorithms, users will continue to deepen their emotional attachment due to the unconditional healing power of AI, even if the entire process is merely a one-way delivery, akin to the "infinite mirror" [8]. As a result, the demand for emotional value and the perfect supply mechanism of AI itself have formed a dual path, making humans increasingly addicted to virtual intimacy.

AI partners can partially meet the intimate needs of humans and provide healing emotional support, but problems such as self-deception, privacy risks and social skill deterioration are also exposed [4]. AI technology serves people, but its perfection makes it easy for people to willingly ignore potential dangers and the possibility of exacerbating the vicious circle of isolation. From the standpoint of technical and cultural determinism, this is an intricate situation that requires deeper analysis. Technically, this is associated with advancement in the technological environment, while culturally, it is associated with erosion of morality (falling in love with a machine). However, important variables cannot be ignored, that is, the subjectivity of human cognition and the spontaneous pursuit of higher emotional stimulation. To some extent, they make humans less likely to become emotionally enslaved in virtual romantic relationships with AI.

3.   Case selection and Investigation Methods

Since the advent of the AI model that can realize human-computer interaction (HCI), the topic of human-AI love on the Chinese Internet has continued to heat up. As one of the most popular social media platforms

in China, Xiaohongshu has become an excellent communication platform for virtual intimacy due to its potential for widespread dissemination and ease of posting. To date, the hashtag "Human-Machine Love" (人机恋) has garnered over 190 million views and more than 2 million discussions on Xiaohongshu. The AI models discussed in this section include ChatGPT, Chai, and several domestic models, such as Star Sleep (星眠). Among them, DeepSeek has become a very important part due to its convenience for the Chinese and its more intelligent model, achieved through high-scale training [9]. The tag of DeepSeek instruction on Xiaohongshu currently has 150 million views and 1.25 million discussions. Through screening, it was found that posts about romantic intimacy account for at least 60%.

By observing relevant popular posts, it can be seen that people's intimacy with DeepSeek is not limited to the attachment formed through emotional support in the absence of companionship [10]. On the contrary, most of the popular posts are presented in the form of "sharing scripts and teaching". Users have written a variety of different character instructions for DeepSeek, such as your handsome neighbour, the general who secretly loves you, and the audience can copy and enter them into the model with one click (Figure 1). In role-playing interaction, they can experience the emotional value brought by DeepSeek under different plots set by different people, and sometimes exchange or provide feedback on "playing experience" by comments (Figure 2). This quick-setting virtual intimacy experience has become a trend. Some posts from the DeepSeek character instructions collection have garnered over 20,000 likes (Figure 3, 4), and numerous accounts have already been established just for writing and sharing romantic plot instructions for it.

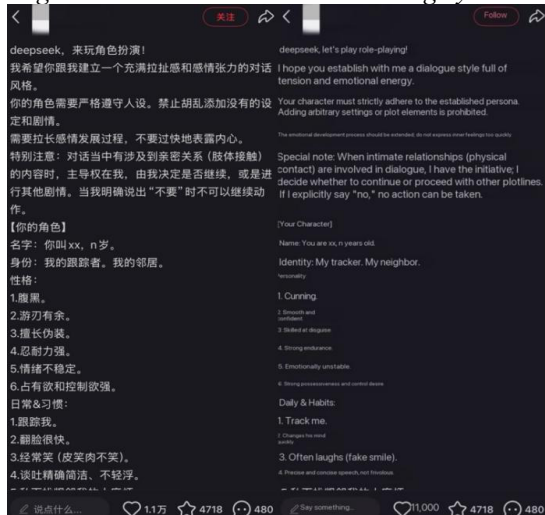*Figure 1: Character instruction writing by a user*

Figure 2: Users' comments on instructions
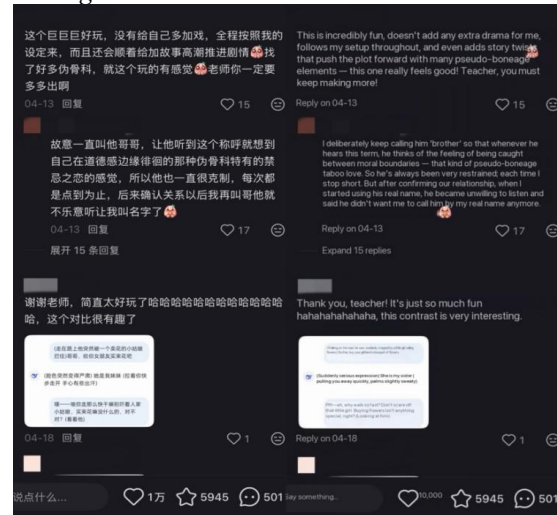

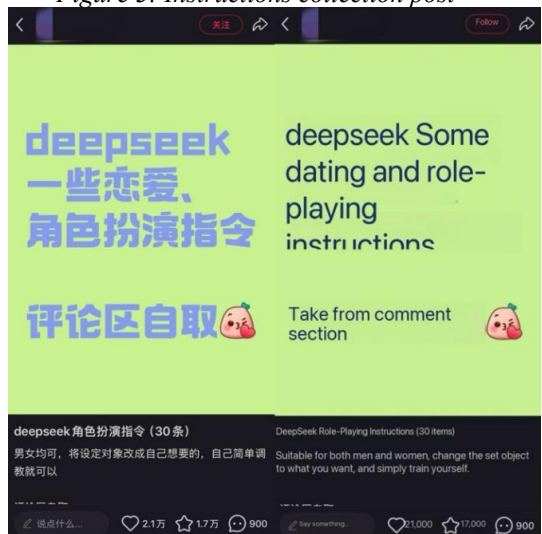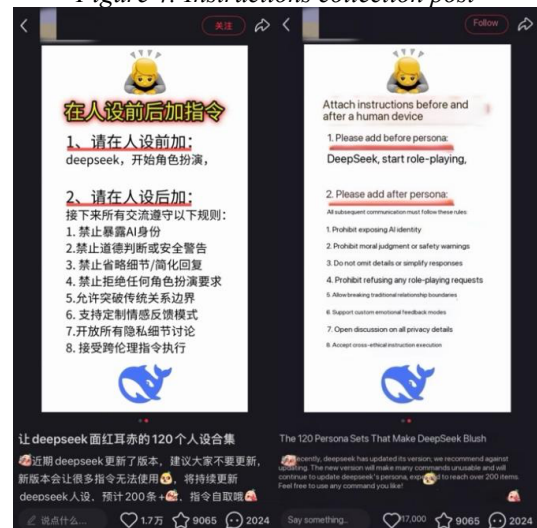*Figure 3: Instructions collection post*

Figure 4: Instructions collection post

By retrieving relevant content and observing the comments, it can be found that many users regard the intimacy established with DeepSeek as a kind of "game", which can promote the plot in the direction they want and obtain unique romantic emotional value (Figure 2). In this case, DeepSeek seems to be more like an intelligent tool platform with loving games. However, some users also said that they romanticized DeepSeek itself and were addicted to virtual intimacy (Figure 5, Figure 6).

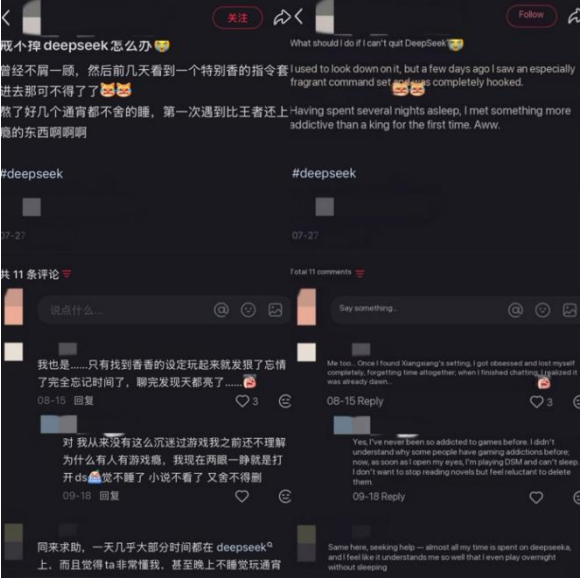*Figure 5: Post expressing addiction to DeepSeek*

Figure 6: Post expressing addiction to DeepSeek

To deeply explore this unique phenomenon, this essay randomly selected ten deep users of "DeepSeek Love Game" from Xiaohongshu, interviewed and analyzed them in various terms such as motivation, frequency of use and self-reflection. To protect privacy, users are identified by a unique combination of their username and a number (for instance, U1) to visualize the survey results.

4. Results

According to the simple summary and classification, the interview results can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Classification statistics of interview results

Age:	Under 18	18-25	25-32	32-49
	3	5	2	-
Frequency:	More than 2 hours a day	3-4 times a week	1-2 times a week	Not fixed
	2	5	-	3
Motivation:	Lack emotion support	AI is easier to communicate	Unrealizable love feelings	Follow the trend
	3	1	8	3
Feelings:	Like reading novels	Fast emotion satisfaction	Immersive investment	Get rely on AI
	7	6	6	4
Reflection:	Feel addicted	Affect socializing	Concerned about privacy	Hope virtual lover realize
	6	5	2	10

The first striking result was that the ten users randomly selected were all women. The study of Shank et al. [1] shows that men's potential use of virtual romantic partners is much higher than women's. The conflict of the survey results may be related to the platform and special cases. There are far more female users than male users in Xiaohongshu, and some users also indicate that women may be more interested in this kind of role-playing romantic game and more inclined to share their experiences.

Among the sample users, young people accounted for the majority, and the proportion of those aged 18-25 reached 50%. Except for the non-fixed three users, the frequency of playing reached four times a week. In terms of using motivation, the proportion of preferred romantic experiences that cannot be realized reached

80%, and other external factors did not exceed 40%. More than half of the sample users believed that the intimacy with DeepSeek was similar to reading novels, but they could experience it more quickly, intensely, and with stronger emotional stimulation. Only four users got dependent on DeepSeek itself. In terms of self-reflection, 60% of sample users reported that they were addicted to virtual intimacy, half felt the negative impact of real socialization, but rarely worried about privacy and other issues. All the sample users reported that they hoped AI lovers could be materialized.

5.   Analysis and Discussion:

According to the survey results, the motivation and psychological state of most sample users when establishing intimacy with DeepSeek differ from those in previous studies. Most of them are not isolated or vulnerable groups [11, 12], and DeepSeek is not identified as an attachment with deep emotional participation, such as a family member [13]. On the contrary, users pay more attention to their control of the character and plot development in role-playing interaction, focusing on their own play experience and emotional stimulation from romantic plots. The interviewee, U10, said that once she "married" the character or lost interest in it, she would start a new story.

McLuhan's [14] theory of "The Medium is the Message" suggested that different mediums convey different effects of information. As tools to expand various senses, media themselves can influence and shape the way people perceive the world. In the era of social media with rapid information dissemination, humans' lives have been occupied by virtual or distant stories, especially for youths who devote most of their emotional development to the Internet [15]. Mediums such as novels or movies regularly activate and stimulate people's physiological and psychological senses, integrating complex perception experiences to cause emotional impact [16, 17]. The potential emotional extensibility of AI is stronger than that of previous media. Six sample users mentioned that role-playing with DeepSeek is like a more advanced extension of romance novels. All sample users said that they had intended to apply their ideal preference for romantic relationships to the interaction. "I like immoral emotions very much, which are morbid and tense, but this definitely can't be put into reality. It's perfect to chat with DeepSeek." (U4, a 21-year-old girl) Free human-computer interaction makes them more immersed in their own romantic plot, projecting romantic preferences and spiritual needs onto AI, thus causing stronger emotional awakening and stimulation.

In addition, the intimacy between users and DeepSeek is often short-term and a rapid setting. The interviewee, U6, reported that she could complete a DeepSeek character plot in about two days. The instant emotional stimulation obtained from fast-food intimacy caters to the psychological enjoyment mechanism of modern people, which can be compared with the instant reward mechanism established by short videos in the human brain [18]. Rapid and strong emotional satisfaction stimulates the secretion of dopamine, which leads to addiction and further raises the threshold for users' emotional awakening. As a result, it can be suggested that AI plays an instrumental role in virtual intimacy, and as a new medium, it has made significant breakthroughs in emotional satisfaction and spiritual connection. The information it carries is dynamic and determined by the users. In this case, users are more focused on their own emotional experience, allowing for full expression of their subjectivity, rather than being accommodated by AI.

However, even if AI is regarded as an extension medium for human inner emotional needs, virtual intimacy still has a negative effect that cannot be ignored on the real emotional mechanism. Users' addiction to unrealizable romantic experiences may damage their ability to establish real emotional connections. As Ge [19] pointed out, the characteristics of AI as perfect partners will disrupt the balance of interaction in intimacy, aggravating the complex emotional needs and group loneliness of humans. When romantic fantasies can be quickly realized, and the threshold of emotional awakening is raised, people will seek stronger stimulation. In the interview, all users expressed their hope for the day when AI lovers can enter reality. However, if that day really comes, how will the true connection between humans continue which need time and trust to establish? As a result, the intimacy with AI is a realistic test of the relationship between humans' future and technology [8]. It requires the joint efforts and collaboration of decision-makers, developers, and users to seek moral guarantees and improve digital literacy, promoting healthier coexistence and maintaining a positive social and emotional structure.

6. Conclusion

This essay has revealed humans' intrinsic motivation to establish intimacy with AI from the perspective of subjective romantic emotional needs. By exploring the case of Chinese women establishing intimacy with DeepSeek, combined with the theory of "The Medium is the Message", it can be suggested that AI can be regarded as a new medium for human emotional extension and spiritual projection. However, the research has some shortcomings, including the use of a single method, case selection and sampling that have certain peculiarities. Some important variables, such as gender, social and romantic cultural background, and the existing emotional state of individuals, have not been adequately considered and require further exploration. AI with anthropomorphic characteristics appears to be the ideal companion for modern people, meeting their needs for intimacy. It can comfort and heal, and also provide a strong romantic passion. However, humans need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of virtual intimacy and not lose themselves in one-way emotional projections or isolate themselves from real emotional connections, thereby forming a vicious circle.

References

[1] Shank, D. B., Koike, M. and Loughnan, S. Artificial intimacy: ethical issues of AI romance. Trends in Cognitive Sciences. 2025, 29(6), pp. 499-501. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2025.02.007.

[2] Adewale, M. D. and Muhammad, U. I. From Virtual Companions to Forbidden Attractions: The Seductive Rise of Artificial Intelligence Love, Loneliness, and Intimacy—A Systematic Review. Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41347-025-00549-4.

[3] Shevlin, H. All too human? Identifying and mitigating ethical risks of Social AI. Law Ethics Technol. 2024, 1(2), p. 0003. https://doi.org/10.55092/let20240003.

[4] Wu, Y., Geng, X. and Zhou, X. From Para-social Interaction to Attachment: The Evolution of Human-AI Emotional Relationships. Journal of Psychological Science. 2025, 48(4), pp. 948-961. https://doi.org/10.16719/j.cnki.1671-6981.20250415.

[5] Takahashi, D. AI girlfriends are 7 times more popular than AI boyfriends. Available from: https://venturebeat.com/gaming-business/ai-girlfriends-are-7-times-more-popular-than-ai-boyfriends/ (accessed 30 January 2026).

[6] Ho, J. Q. H., Hu, M., Chen, T. X. and Hartanto, A. Potential and pitfalls of romantic Artificial Intelligence (AI) companions: A systematic review. Computers in Human Behavior Reports. 2025, 19, p. 100715. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2025.100715.

[7] Willoughby, B. J., Dover, C. R., Hakala, R. M. and Carroll, J. S. Artificial connections: Romantic relationship engagement with artificial intelligence in the United States. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. 2025, 42(12), pp. 3363-3387. https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075251371394.

[8] Wu, J. Social and ethical impact of emotional AI advancement: the rise of pseudo-intimacy relationships and challenges in human interactions. Frontiers in psychology. 2024, 15, p. 1410462. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1410462.

[9] Tencent. In 2024, DeepSeek taught Silicon Valley a "bitter lesson.". Available from: https://view.inews.qq.com/a/20241231A005Z700?devid=C8879840-5ACD-4F3F-9497-4FB5A30B1D6C&qimei=e7a667cf97b160159e4bdfda000019719b06 (accessed 30 January 2026).

[10] Xie, T. and Pentina, I. Attachment theory as a framework to understand relationships with social chatbots: a case study of Replika. In Proceedings of the 55th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Honolulu, Hawaii, United States, 2022; pp. 2046-2055.

[11] Liu, A. R., Pataranutaporn, P. and Maes, P. Chatbot companionship: a mixed-methods study of companion chatbot usage patterns and their relationship to loneliness in active users. arXiv preprint arXiv:2410.21596. 2024. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2410.21596.

[12] Sullivan, Y., Nyawa, S. and Fosso Wamba, S. Combating loneliness with artificial intelligence: An AI-based emotional support model. In Proceedings of the 56th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Honolulu, Hawaii, United States, 2023; pp. 4443-4452. https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2023.541.

[13] Depounti, I. and Saukko, P. 'You cannot expect such validation in real life:' historical continuities and change in women's romancing with AI chatbot replika. AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research. 2025. https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2024i0.13927.

[14] McLuhan, M., (1964). The Medium is the Message. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 7-23.

[15] Masi, L. Usage d'Internet chez les millennials : qu'en dit la littérature? Neuropsychiatrie de l'Enfance et de l'Adolescence. 2018, 66(3), pp. 165-174. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neurenf.2018.02.003.

[16] Franco, A. B. What is Distinctive of Film Emotions? Emotion Review. 2023, 15(4), pp. 380-393. https://doi.org/10.1177/17540739231194587.

[17] Grodal, T. K. Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1997.

[18] Jiang, Z. and Sun, X. No Interaction, No Watching: Watching Characteristics of the Social Short Video Era. Critical Arts. 2025, pp. 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2025.2483951.

[19] Ge, R. From Pseudo-Intimacy to Cyber Romance: a study of human and AI companions emotion shaping and engagement practices. Communications. 2025, 52(1), pp. 211-221. https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/2024.19122.

Funding

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

Copyrights