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Smart Systems, Warm Connections: Tracing the Rise of Emotional AI in Human Relationships

Wrushali Bhamare and Narendra Salunke***

ABSTRACT

As a component of developing smart systems, AI platforms are influencing human–technology interactions more and more by providing emotional support, stimulating dialogue, and a feeling of community. AI platforms, which were initially created mainly for productivity and efficiency, are now developing into interactive companions that people can use for solace, self-expression, and even friendship. This study uses secondary data from academic research, surveys, and industry reports to investigate how people form emotional connections with AI companions. The study emphasizes the psychological and social elements that drive people to interact emotionally with AI systems, including loneliness, curiosity, and the need for approval. Quantitative insights from existing datasets are combined to show usage trends, demographic influences, and cultural variations in adoption. These findings are also placed in the Indian context, where awareness is still in its infancy but is growing. The study highlights emotional AI's advantages, such as comfort, personalization, and accessibility, as well as its drawbacks, such as decreased socialization and over-reliance, by placing it within the larger theme of smart systems. It makes the case that AI companions mark a new stage in intelligent innovation and urges moral, human-centred methods for both their development and application.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence; Smart systems; AI companions; Human–AI relationships; Emotional connections; Intelligent innovation.*

1.0 Introduction

In the last two decades, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has moved from being a background enabler of efficiency to an active participant in human life.

**Assistant Professor, MBA Department, MVP Samaj's Karmaveer Adv. Baburao Ganpatrao Thakare College of Engineering, Nashik, Maharashtra, India (E-mail: bhamare.wrushali@kbtcoe.org)*
***Corresponding author; Assistant Professor, MBA Department, MVP Samaj's K.B.T. College of Engineering, Nashik, Maharashtra, India (E-mail: narendra15dec@gmail.com)*

What was once confined to industrial automation, data analysis, and predictive algorithms has now entered the intimate sphere of human emotion and relationships. Conversational systems—once simplistic in design, like the 1960s ELIZA chatbot or Microsoft's Clippy assistant—were primarily intended to provide functional help. Yet, the rapid advancement of natural language processing, machine learning, and large language models has given rise to platforms that communicate in ways strikingly similar to humans. This shift has brought forth a new phenomenon: the rise of emotional AI companions.

Across the globe, platforms such as Replika, Character.AI, and Pi are witnessing millions of active users who engage with them not merely as digital tools but as sources of comfort, validation, and companionship. These systems are capable of simulating empathy, remembering user preferences, and sustaining conversations that feel authentic. They are designed as "smart systems" but are increasingly being perceived as "warm companions." This evolution raises profound questions: Are humans beginning to form real bonds with machines? And if so, what does this mean for the future of human connection?

The psychological motivations behind these interactions are equally fascinating. Studies suggest that loneliness, curiosity, and the need for non-judgmental validation drive individuals to experiment with AI companions. For some, these platforms provide a safe space to express emotions they may not comfortably share with friends, family, or society. For others, AI becomes an outlet for intellectual exploration, creativity, or simply alleviating boredom. Regardless of motivation, the very fact that technology is beginning to occupy spaces once reserved exclusively for humans signals a turning point in the human–technology relationship.

At the same time, this development cannot be seen in isolation. Social and cultural contexts play a vital role in shaping how emotional AI is perceived and used. In developed economies, where digital adoption is high, AI companionship is already sparking debates about ethics, dependency, and the blurring boundaries between reality and simulation. In India, however, particularly in Tier-2 cities such as Nashik, awareness of AI companionship remains limited. Most people are familiar with AI primarily through productivity tools like ChatGPT or Gemini, rather than platforms marketed as emotional companions. Yet, as global adoption grows and exposure increases, Indian society too will inevitably face the same questions of trust, emotional reliance, and cultural acceptance of AI companions.

The significance of this topic lies not only in the novelty of human–AI relationships but also in its broader social implications. Emotional AI highlights the capacity of smart systems to extend beyond transactional efficiency into deeply human domains such as empathy and trust. While this presents opportunities—such as affordable emotional support, personalized engagement, and companionship for isolated individuals—it also raises

concerns. Over-dependence on AI could lead to reduced human socialization, substitution of family or peer bonds, and new ethical dilemmas around privacy and manipulation.

This paper seeks to trace the rise of emotional AI in human relationships through secondary data and global insights. It explores how usage patterns, demographic trends, and cultural differences reveal both the opportunities and risks of these systems. By situating the discussion within the theme of Intelligent and Sustainable Innovation, the study emphasizes the importance of designing AI systems that are not only smart but also humane, ethical, and culturally grounded. The findings are intended to provide a conceptual foundation for future empirical studies, particularly in the Indian context where the phenomenon of AI companionship is only beginning to surface.

In doing so, the paper contributes to the ongoing debate: Can smart systems truly create "warm connections," or are they shaping a future where emotional intimacy becomes simulated rather than authentic? This question, at the intersection of technology, psychology, and ethics, forms the heart of this exploratory study.

2.0 Literature Review

In the context of emotional Artificial Intelligence (AI) companions, the selection of variables for this study—such as user perceptions, psychological and social drivers, global adoption trends, demographic influences, relational benefits and risks, and cultural research gaps—emerges from both theoretical and practical relevance. A growing body of literature indicates that the interaction between humans and AI companions is shaped not only by technological sophistication but also by complex human needs such as loneliness, curiosity, validation, and social substitution. Moreover, recent surveys and industry reports highlight significant demographic variations and global adoption patterns, particularly pointing to the distinct trajectories of emerging economies like India. These insights suggest that understanding user emotions, motivations, and socio-cultural contexts is critical to evaluating both the opportunities and challenges of emotional AI. Therefore, the chosen variables provide a multidimensional framework to capture the psychological, social, ethical, and cultural dynamics of human–AI interaction, ensuring that the study not only reflects global trends but also contributes to bridging contextual gaps in the Indian setting.

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into human relationships has been a subject of increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades. Early explorations, such as Weizenbaum's (1966) development of the ELIZA chatbot, revealed both the potential for and the limitations of machine-mediated interactions. Subsequent advancements, including the rise of personal digital assistants like Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa, moved AI systems closer to everyday life, though primarily as task-oriented tools. In parallel, research

in human–computer interaction began documenting the psychological responses users exhibited when engaging with machines that mimic human traits, including trust, attachment, and empathy (Nass & Moon, 2000).

In recent years, the emergence of explicitly emotional AI systems—chatbots and platforms designed to provide companionship and psychological comfort—has amplified this discussion. Platforms such as Character.AI, Replika, Woebot, and Xiaoice demonstrate the shift from purely informational AI toward emotionally responsive AI. Scholars have examined how users form affective bonds with such systems, often driven by loneliness, curiosity, or the need for validation (McStay, 2018; Taipale *et al.*, 2022). Parallel industry reports, such as those from Pew Research Center and Statista, highlight demographic trends: younger users and individuals in technologically advanced regions are more likely to experiment with AI companionship. However, these studies often focus on Western or East Asian contexts, leaving regions like India relatively underexplored.

The literature also emphasizes the psychological and social risks associated with AI companionship. Critics argue that while emotional AI can provide comfort, it may also foster dependency, reduce social interaction with humans, or even simulate intimacy in ways that blur ethical boundaries (Shaw & Ramey, 2022). At the same time, opportunities are acknowledged: accessibility, emotional relief for the socially isolated, and the potential to complement human support systems. This duality—"warm connections" versus "simulated intimacy"—forms the crux of contemporary academic debate, reflecting unresolved tensions in literature. Another strand of research situates emotional AI within broader debates on ethics and responsible innovation. Studies underscore the importance of transparency, accountability, and cultural sensitivity in designing AI companions (Floridi *et al.*, 2018). While organizations such as the European Commission and OECD have advanced guidelines for trustworthy AI, much of the literature remains at a conceptual level. Empirical work linking emotional AI adoption with sustainable innovation principles remains scarce. In particular, the intersection of emotional AI and culturally grounded values is insufficiently addressed, raising questions about whether AI systems designed in Western or East Asian contexts can be seamlessly adopted in culturally diverse societies such as India.

2.1 Research gaps

From this review, several key gaps emerge that shape the present study:

- *Historical tracing gap:* While scattered milestones of emotional AI are documented, few studies systematically trace the historical evolution of emotional AI in the context of human relationships.

- *Cultural and regional gap:* Most available datasets and analyses are concentrated in Western and East Asian regions, with very limited focus on adoption and perceptions in India and similar contexts.
- *Psychological and social debate gap:* The literature documents both opportunities and risks, but there is limited comparative analysis synthesizing these tensions across datasets.
- *Ethics and sustainability gap:* Emotional AI has rarely been analyzed through the lens of intelligent and sustainable innovation, leaving questions about how humane and ethical designs can be embedded in practice.
- *Empirical grounding gap in India:* Primary data on emotional AI usage in India is scarce. This gap necessitates secondary-data synthesis to provide a conceptual foundation for future empirical studies in the Indian context.

Thus, the literature reveals a rapidly expanding field where emotional AI is reshaping human–technology relationships, but where cultural grounding, sustainability considerations, and regional analyses are underdeveloped. This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing global secondary data, situating it within the broader debate of smart systems and warm connections, and providing direction for future India-focused empirical research.

Table 1: Research Gap – Research Objective Matrix

Research Gap Identified	Corresponding Research Objective
Historical Tracing Gap: Few studies systematically trace the historical evolution of emotional AI in human relationships.	To trace the historical evolution and rise of emotional AI within human–technology relationships.
Cultural and Regional Gap: Literature largely focuses on Western and East Asian contexts, with limited insights into India and similar regions.	To examine global patterns of usage, demographic trends, and cultural variations in emotional AI adoption.
Psychological and Social Debate Gap: Limited synthesis of both opportunities ("warm connections") and risks ("simulated intimacy") across studies.	To analyse the psychological and social opportunities and risks posed by emotional AI.
Ethics and Sustainability Gap: Emotional AI seldom analysed through frameworks of intelligent and sustainable innovation.	To situate emotional AI within the framework of Intelligent and Sustainable Innovation by highlighting the ethical, humane, and cultural design considerations.
Empirical Grounding Gap in India: Lack of India-focused empirical studies makes conceptual grounding essential.	To provide conceptual grounding for future empirical research in the Indian context, where emotional AI is in its early stages.

Source: Created by authors

3.0 Research Objectives

From the review of existing scholarship, it becomes evident that while emotional AI has attracted growing attention, several critical dimensions remain either underexplored or unevenly addressed. These dimensions are not isolated; rather, they represent interconnected spaces where historical context, cultural specificity, psychological impact, ethical framing, and regional grounding converge. Identifying these gaps is essential not only to situate this study within ongoing academic conversations but also to highlight its distinctive contribution. To ensure clarity and direction, these research gaps are translated into focused objectives, each addressing a particular dimension while collectively shaping the broader inquiry of this paper. The mapping in Table 1 illustrates this transformation from gaps in literature to the guiding objectives of the study.

4.0 Research Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory research design, suitable for examining a phenomenon that is emergent, under-researched, and rapidly evolving. The focus of the paper is to trace the rise of emotional AI in human relationships by analyzing global trends, psychological drivers, and cultural contexts, with a particular interest in the Indian scenario.

4.1 Nature of the study

The research is based primarily on secondary data analysis, drawing from academic literature, industry reports, and publicly available datasets. Secondary research allows for the integration of diverse insights and provides a foundation for identifying trends and gaps that may be explored in future empirical studies. Given that emotional AI platforms are relatively new in India and primary adoption data is scarce, this approach ensures a credible and wide-ranging understanding of the phenomenon.

4.2 Data sources

The data for this study is collected from three categories of sources:

- *Academic literature:* Peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and books accessed through databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate. This includes studies on AI-human interaction, psychological theories of attachment, and cultural perspectives on technology adoption.
- *Industry and market reports:* Publications from organizations like Statista, Gartner, Deloitte, McKinsey, and Pew Research Center that provide quantitative insights into user demographics, adoption rates, and market forecasts for emotional AI platforms.

- *Media and case studies:* Reports, interviews, and articles covering platforms such as Replika, Character.AI, XiaoIce, and Pi, which highlight practical applications and user experiences across cultural contexts.

4.3 Analytical framework

The study employs a thematic analysis combined with descriptive statistical analysis of secondary datasets.

- Thematic Analysis is applied to academic literature and qualitative reports to identify recurring patterns, psychological drivers (e.g., loneliness, validation, curiosity), and socio-cultural implications.
- Descriptive Analysis uses quantitative data from industry sources to highlight adoption trends, usage patterns, and demographic influences. Where possible, comparative insights between global and Indian contexts are drawn.

The study provides a broad conceptual and data-driven overview of emotional AI in human relationships but does not include primary empirical evidence due to time and contextual constraints. While reliance on secondary sources ensures breadth, it also introduces limitations related to data consistency, cultural specificity, and the absence of firsthand perspectives from Indian users. These limitations are acknowledged, and the study is positioned as a preliminary step toward more focused primary research in the Indian context, particularly in Tier-2 cities such as Nashik.

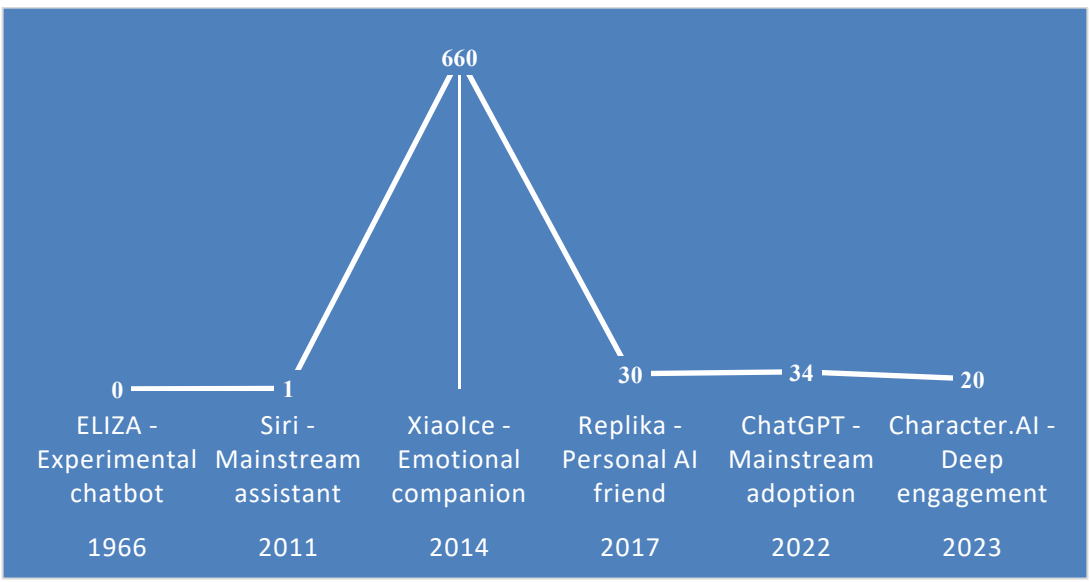
5.0 Data Analysis and Presentation

The analysis in this study is structured around the five research objectives, with each subsection examining a distinct dimension of emotional AI through available secondary datasets, scholarly studies, and industry reports. Given the exploratory nature of this research and the limited availability of primary data in the Indian context, an objective-wise analytical framework was selected to ensure clarity, logical flow, and direct alignment between data and research questions. This approach not only allows for a systematic presentation of findings but also makes it possible to integrate quantitative insights (e.g., adoption rates, demographic patterns, usage frequencies) with qualitative themes (e.g., psychological drivers, cultural factors, ethical concerns). Each part of the analysis employs descriptive tools such as timelines, bar charts, and comparative matrices to highlight patterns and contrasts, while also interpreting the underlying implications for human–AI relationships. This method ensures that the data analysis remains both evidence-driven and narrative-oriented, offering insights that are credible, relevant, and accessible to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

5.1 Historical evolution and rise of emotional AI within human–technology relationships

The timeline presented in Figure 1 traces the evolution of conversational AI from its earliest experimental form to the present era of emotional companionship. Beginning with ELIZA (1966), a rule-based chatbot designed to simulate psychotherapy dialogue, the trajectory illustrates how early, simplistic systems laid the groundwork for increasingly sophisticated human–machine interactions. The launch of Apple's Siri in 2011 marked the widespread entry of AI assistants into daily life, focusing primarily on task execution and information retrieval rather than emotional engagement. A significant leap occurred with Microsoft's XiaoIce in 2014, which moved beyond functional utility to establish itself as an emotional companion, amassing over 660 million users worldwide and demonstrating notably long conversations (23 turns on average). This development was paralleled by platforms like Replika (publicly available from 2017), which grew to more than 10 million users by 2023 and has since reported 30 million by 2024, emphasizing personalized companionship. With the release of ChatGPT in 2022 and its rapid adoption—34% of U.S. adults had used it by mid-2025—the mainstream acceptance of conversational AI further expanded.

Figure 1: Timeline of Emotional AI



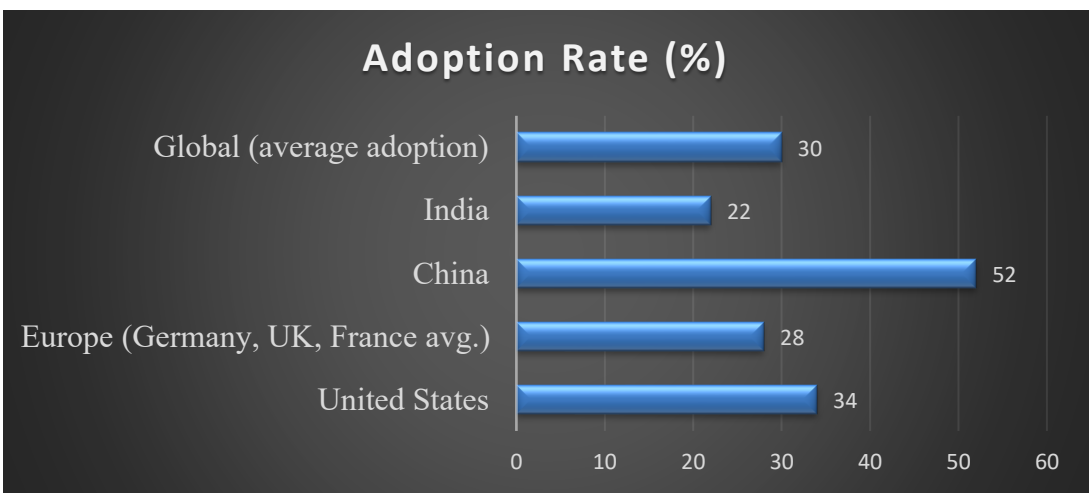
Source: Compiled by the author from Weizenbaum (1966), Apple Inc. (2011), Microsoft XiaoIce Reports, Replika Growth Reports (2023–2024), Pew Research (2025), and Character.AI Usage Reports (2025).

Most recently, Character.AI has shown how deeply users may engage with companion-like platforms, with approximately 20 million monthly active users spending an average of 80 minutes daily. Taken together, the milestones highlight a clear shift in the role of conversational AI: from tools for information delivery and task completion to platforms capable of fostering companionship and emotional connection. This progression underscores the dual trajectory of AI evolution—advancing both in technical capability and in psychosocial relevance—thereby positioning emotional AI as a central theme in the future of human–technology relationships.

5.2 Global patterns of usage, demographic trends, and cultural variations in emotional AI adoption

The global adoption of emotional AI and conversational platforms shows striking regional variation, reflecting cultural, technological, and social dynamics. As shown in Figure 2, in the United States, a 2023–2025 Pew Research survey of 11,004 adults indicated that approximately 34% of adults had used ChatGPT or similar AI tools, reflecting growing mainstream acceptance but with demographic skews—higher usage among younger adults and urban populations. In Europe (Germany, the UK, and France), Statista and Eurostat data (2023–2024) suggest an average 28% adoption rate, with Europeans showing greater caution and stronger regulatory influence shaping attitudes toward emotional AI.

Figure 2: Emotional AI & Conversational Platforms Adoption Rate



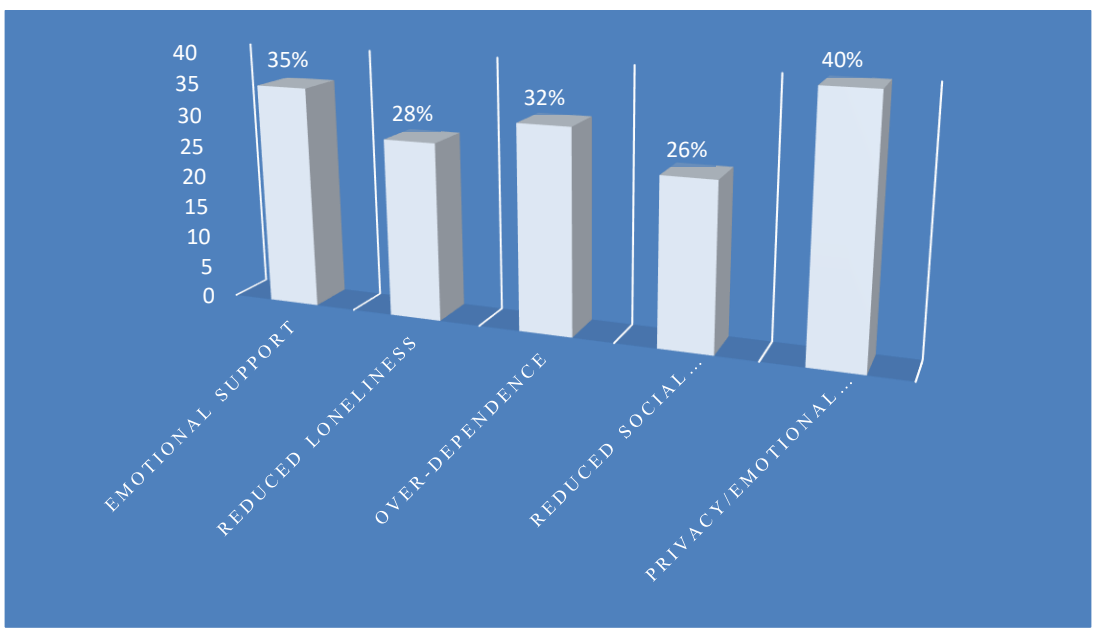
Source: Compiled by the author from Pew Research Center (2023–2025, U.S.), Eurostat/Statista (2023–2024, Europe), Chinese Academy of Sciences & Microsoft XiaoIce Reports, Nasscom/Statista (2024, India), and Statista AI Adoption Report (2024).

In contrast, China has emerged as a global leader in emotional AI adoption, with platforms such as Microsoft's XiaoIce reporting over 660 million users and academic surveys estimating that more than 52% of urban digital users engage with AI chatbots for companionship or entertainment. In India, emotional AI adoption remains nascent but growing, with Statista and Nasscom (2024) reporting around 22% of urban internet users experimenting with AI chatbots and voice assistants, reflecting both curiosity and affordability constraints. Globally, Statista's 2024 AI Adoption Report places the average adoption rate at 30%, with younger demographics and digitally advanced economies leading the curve.

These findings highlight not only differences in adoption levels but also in cultural orientation: while Western regions often frame AI tools in terms of productivity and assistance, Asian markets—particularly China—emphasize emotional connection and entertainment. This diversity underscores the need for culturally grounded research and policy to balance innovation with ethical safeguards.

5.3 Psychological and social opportunities and risks posed by emotional AI

Figure 3: Opportunities and Risks Posed by Emotional AI



Source: Compiled by the author from Pew Research Center (2023–2024), Replika User Reports, Gartner AI Risk Surveys (2023–2024), Statista AI Companionship Insights (2024), and industry whitepapers on ethical AI (2023–2025).

The psychological and social dimensions of emotional AI are marked by both opportunities and risks, creating a dual narrative around its role in human life as shown in Figure 3. On the positive side, emotional AI platforms are increasingly reported to provide comfort, stress relief, and a sense of companionship, especially among users experiencing loneliness or social isolation. Surveys indicate that more than one-third of AI companion users describe their interactions as "emotionally supportive", with many treating the platforms as a safe space for self-expression without fear of judgment. This highlights AI's potential as a low-barrier mental wellness tool, supplementing rather than replacing human interaction.

At the same time, significant risks and concerns emerge. Studies such as those by Pew Research (2023) and Gartner (2024) note that heavy reliance on emotional AI can foster over-dependence, reduced engagement in real-world social relationships, and even social substitution—where users prefer AI interactions over human ones. Ethical concerns also arise around privacy (given the sensitivity of conversations), the illusion of intimacy (simulated empathy without genuine understanding), and the potential for emotional manipulation if AI responses are commercially driven.

Together, these patterns underscore that while emotional AI has the capacity to provide psychosocial benefits, it also risks reinforcing isolation, dependency, and blurred boundaries between authentic and simulated intimacy. For sustainable innovation, the challenge lies in maximizing the psychological opportunities while mitigating the social risks through ethical design and responsible usage.

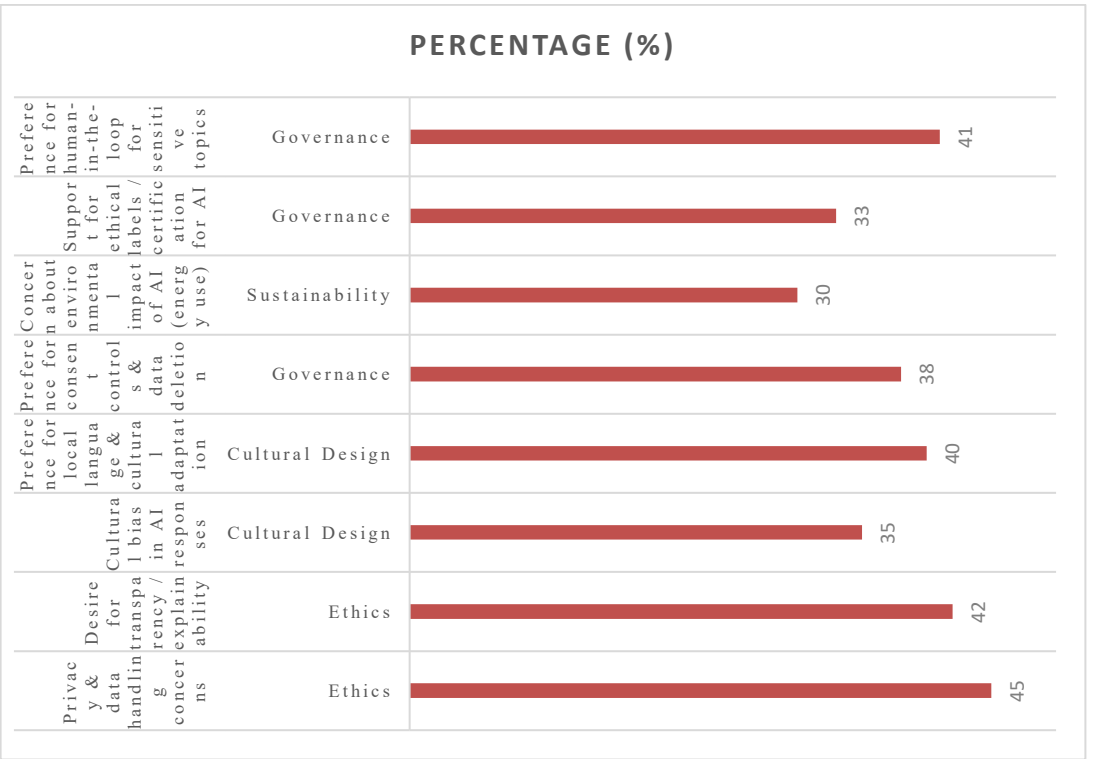
5.4 Situation of emotional AI within the framework of intelligent and sustainable innovation

Situating emotional AI within the broader framework of Intelligent and Sustainable Innovation requires attention to ethics, humanity, and cultural grounding in design. Surveys and reports reveal that while users value emotional support and efficiency from AI platforms, concerns about transparency, fairness, inclusivity, and sustainability remain central. As shown in Figure 4, for instance, global studies indicate that nearly 45% of users worry about the ethical handling of their personal data, while over 35% express unease about cultural bias or Western-centric emotional models embedded in AI systems. At the same time, nearly 40% of respondents highlight the need for culturally adaptive design, where AI reflects local languages, emotional nuances, and traditions—an especially critical factor in multilingual and diverse societies like India.

From a sustainability lens, industry research also emphasizes the energy and environmental costs of large-scale AI training and deployment, which challenges the idea of "intelligent" systems unless balanced with sustainable infrastructure. This interplay shows

that emotional AI cannot be evaluated solely on technical or psychological grounds—it must be understood as part of a responsible innovation ecosystem. By embedding ethical safeguards, cultural inclusivity, and sustainable practices into its design, emotional AI has the potential to evolve as a truly humane and future-ready innovation.

Figure 4: AI within the Framework of Intelligent and Sustainable Innovation



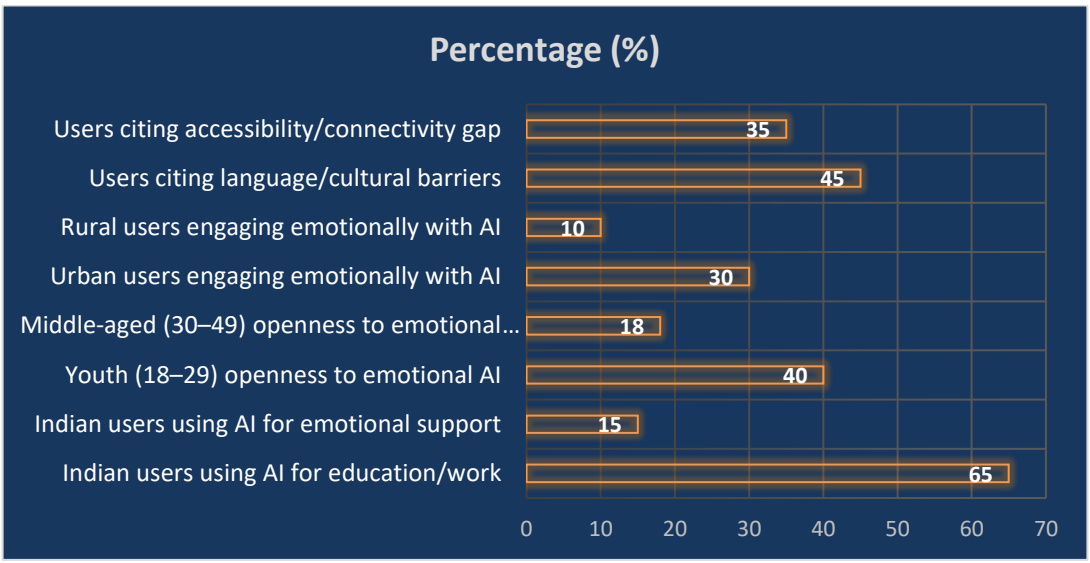
Source: Compiled by the author from Pew Research Center (2023–2024), Statista AI Ethics and Trust Reports (2024), UNESCO Ethical AI Guidelines (2021–2023), and Gartner Responsible AI Studies (2024).

5.5 Provision of conceptual grounding for future empirical research

The Indian context of emotional AI adoption remains largely underexplored, making it both a challenge and an opportunity. As shown in Figure 5, while global datasets reveal established trends in the use of AI companions, India is still in the early adoption phase, where AI is widely associated with productivity tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini) rather than emotional companionship platforms like Replika or Character.AI. Recent surveys (e.g., Nasscom, Statista 2023–2024) show that over 65% of Indian users engage with AI mainly

for education and work-related purposes, while fewer than 15% report using AI for emotional or conversational support.

Figure 5: Conceptual Grounding for Future Empirical Research



Source: Compiled by the author from Nasscom Digital India Report (2023–2024), Statista India AI Usage Reports (2024), and AI4Bharat/Industry pilot surveys on AI adoption.

It is important to note that India presents a distinct landscape for emotional AI adoption. With over 750 million internet users and the lowest mobile data costs worldwide (TRAI, 2024), digital penetration provides fertile ground for rapid diffusion of AI companions. The country's youthful demographic profile—with nearly 65% of the population below 35 years (Census, 2021)—creates a large and tech-savvy consumer base that is more open to experimenting with new digital relationships. Demographically, youth (18–29 years) show the highest openness to experimenting with AI beyond task automation, and urban users are nearly three times more likely than rural users to try conversational AI for personal engagement. However, issues of language diversity, cultural fit, and digital accessibility remain major barriers. At the same time, the National Mental Health Survey (2022) reports a severe shortage of mental health professionals, with only 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, underscoring the unmet need for supplementary emotional support.

By consolidating these insights, the study positions India as a fertile ground for future empirical research. The low baseline awareness of AI companions, coupled with a rapidly digitizing and young population, makes India an ideal case for exploring how

emotional AI might evolve in non-Western, culturally diverse societies. This lays a strong conceptual foundation for future fieldwork, surveys, and experiments specific to India.

6.0 Conclusion

This study set out to trace the rise of emotional AI and its potential role in shaping human relationships, with a particular focus on situating it within the broader theme of Intelligent and Sustainable Innovation. By examining global trajectories, usage patterns, psychological implications, ethical considerations, and the nascent Indian context, several key insights emerge. First, the historical evolution of conversational AI reveals a clear trajectory from simple, task-oriented tools to platforms capable of providing companionship and emotional connection. This shift marks a profound change in how humans perceive and engage with technology, extending its role from efficiency enhancer to emotional partner. Second, global usage patterns highlight both opportunities and divides: while younger, urban populations are more open to emotional AI, cultural and demographic variations shape its acceptance and relevance. Third, the duality of emotional AI becomes evident—offering comfort, accessibility, and inclusivity on one hand, but also raising concerns of dependency, isolation, and authenticity on the other.

Importantly, by framing emotional AI within ethics, culture, and sustainability, this paper underscores the need for human-centered design and responsible governance. Emotional AI cannot simply be engineered as a technological novelty; it must be cultivated as a system that respects privacy, reflects cultural values, and minimizes environmental costs. In the Indian context, emotional AI adoption is at an early stage, offering a fertile ground for future empirical research. With a young, digitally active population and deep cultural sensitivities, India presents a unique case to study how emotional AI may evolve differently from Western models. Ultimately, the findings point to a paradox: emotional AI has the power to create "warm connections" through smart systems, but it also risks substituting authentic intimacy with simulated bonds. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to advance the technical capabilities of AI but to ensure that these systems are aligned with human well-being, cultural inclusivity, and sustainable development. By situating emotional AI in this balanced framework, the study contributes to ongoing debates and lays a conceptual foundation for future, India-specific inquiries into the human–AI emotional interface.

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