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Original Paper

Emotional Work between "Reasonable Words" and "My Words": Practices and Boundaries of Generative AI in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Drawing on emotion work theory and an AI-mediated communication perspective, this study uses thematic analysis to examine how emotion work is reorganized when generative AI becomes involved as a third party in communication between romantic partners. The findings indicate that some interviewees associate AI support with less concern about being judged and a lower burden of interpersonal reciprocity. They draw on its explanations and suggestions to make sense of emotions, formulate messages, and plan communication. At the same time, users need to screen and modify the generated content, and check whether the emotional attitude in it is in line with their own feelings, so as to form "authenticity work". After the generated content is adopted, responding to the partner, fulfilling the repair arrangement, and making continuous adjustments according to the interaction between the two parties still require the input of the parties, reflecting the "limited entrustment" of emotional work. Research shows that generative AI changes the completion process of emotional work by sharing some tasks and bringing new expression management and provides an empirical basis for understanding technology-aided sincerity and relationship input.

Keywords

generative artificial intelligence, emotion work, intimate relationships, authenticity work, bounded delegation

1. Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence is becoming part of communication between romantic partners. A large-scale study of consumer use of ChatGPT reports that more than 70% of messages concern

non-work activities, with approximately 1.9% concerning "relationships and personal reflection". Among writing-related requests, approximately two-thirds involve revising or adapting content already provided by users rather than generating entirely new text (OpenAI, 2026). Within this broader pattern of use, generative AI is also being used to support communication involving emotions between partners. Users may turn to tools such as ChatGPT to interpret messages from their partners, formulate replies, and adjust how they express themselves. When relationship conflicts arise, they may also ask AI to help draft apologies, compose comforting messages, or suggest ways to communicate. In these situations, AI participates in communication between partners by analyzing information, offering advice, and generating text, without replacing either partner. Users continue to decide when to use AI and to select, revise, and send the generated content. AI thus takes on a role beyond that of a technological channel for exchanging messages between partners, participating as a third party in interpersonal emotional expression.

This form of third-party intervention is worth understanding from the perspective of "emotion work". In an intimate relationship, partners not only exchange information, but also recognize, regulate and express their emotions through communication. The theory of emotional labor emphasizes how individuals can manage their feelings according to the "emotional rules" in specific interactive situations and adjust their emotional expression to meet the expectations of intimate relationships (Hochschild, 1983). This theory is also further used to understand the daily emotional work in intimate relationships, indicating that the maintenance of partner relationships itself includes continuous emotional management and relationship input (Horne & Johnson, 2019). Therefore, this study specifically refers to "emotional work" as: a communication practice aimed at maintaining intimate relationships by managing, expressing or regulating emotions, and does not generally refer to all applications of artificial intelligence in intimate relationships. These practices specifically include expressing love, appeasing your partner, apologizing, resolving conflicts, and responding to your partner's emotions. When generative AI becomes involved in these practices, its role extends beyond language generation into aspects of emotion work otherwise undertaken by the partners themselves.

Research on artificial intelligence and intimate relationships has been carried out in many related fields. One of the studies explores the emotional bond between humans and AI, covering research on AI partners, human-computer attachment and human-computer intimate interaction (Li & Zhang, 2024). Another type of study regards AI as an emotional support tool and examines how chatbots help users regulate their emotions by providing supportive responses (Meng & Dai, 2021). As generative AI is increasingly involved in interpersonal relationships, recent studies have also begun to focus on AI-assisted relationship maintenance and the generation of social support information (Liu et al., 2024; Meng et al., 2025). These studies jointly show that AI can not only act as an emotional input object in direct interaction but also participate in interpersonal communication. However, existing studies mainly

focus on the results of user interaction with AI or AI-assisted communication. There is still a lack of systematic understanding of how AI can participate in the emotional work between partners in the existing intimate relationship as a "third party". Future research still needs to further explore: when AI intervenes in emotional recognition, expression organization and relationship repair, how the original way of completing emotional work may change, and how users understand the sincerity, relationship input and responsibility attribution. Based on this research gap, this article puts forward the core research question: when generative AI participates in emotional work in real love relationships, how will such work be reorganized, and how will this change affect the intimate relationship between people?

In order to explore this core issue, this study focusses on the entrustment of "emotional work" and its impact on interpersonal relationships. In intimate relationships, different love communication tasks often require different degrees of emotion. So, in a romantic relationship, what types of emotional work will people seek the assistance of generative artificial intelligence for? Why did they choose to use AI? How does AI involvement reshape the organization of emotion work in romantic relationships? How do users understand sincerity, relational investment, and the attribution of responsibility in this process?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Human-AI Intimacy

As conversational AI develops greater social and emotional capabilities, human-machine communication research has expanded from instrumental use to companionship, emotional exchange, and intimate relationships. One of the focuses of this study is to explore how users can establish an emotional relationship with artificial intelligence. Research on AI partners for Replika and others has revealed a variety of forms of human-computer interaction, including daily dialogue, self-disclosure, intimate behavior, role-playing and personalized interaction. Through these interactions, users experience emotions ranging from love and happiness to sadness and fear. The intimate relationship between people and artificial intelligence not only covers positive experiences, but also complex relationship feelings shaped by emotional connections, technical limitations and communication barriers (Li & Zhang, 2024). Accordingly, scholarship on AI companions has focused primarily on human-AI attachment, the development of intimacy, and how users make sense of these new forms of relationship.

In addition to the relevant research on treating artificial intelligence as an "intimate partner", there is another type of research that explores the role of artificial intelligence as a source of emotional support and an object of confession. Research on "self-disclosure" shows that whether users are willing to share personal privacy information and emotional experiences with conversational artificial intelligence is influenced by many factors, including interface form, response style, anthropomorphic characteristics, individual differences and interaction situations. Among them, the relevance, empathy, interactivity and personalization of the response are particularly key communication elements (Papneja & Yadav, 2025).

Experimental research further shows that emotional self- disclosure to chatbots can produce corresponding emotions, relationships and psychological effects; under certain conditions, these effects are not significantly different from the results of self-exposure to humans (Ho et al., 2018). In situations where emotional support is provided, a supportive response can enhance the user's perception of the support provided by the "communication object", thus alleviating their stress and worries. In addition, the source of the response and whether the artificial intelligence has moderately self-exposed will also affect the final support effect (Meng & Dai, 2021). Overall, these studies explain why users seek emotional communication from artificial intelligence from the perspective of self-expression, sympathetic response and perceived support.

With the progress of generative artificial intelligence in language ability, research is increasingly focusing on its participation in interpersonal communication. The so-called "AI-mediated communication" mainly refers to the participation of artificial intelligence in the generation, modification and transmission of information on behalf of human communicators, so as to help them achieve specific interpersonal communication goals (Hancock et al., 2020). This perspective expands the focus from "direct interaction between users and artificial intelligence" to "how human communicators use artificial intelligence to generate information for others". In the context of relationship maintenance, if a message is marked as "assisted by artificial intelligence", it may affect the recipient's efforts to maintain the relationship with the sender. And these assessments will further affect relationship satisfaction and perceived uncertainty (Liu et al., 2024). Recent research on social support has also explored the possibility of human beings and artificial intelligence to jointly generate supportive information, and integrated generative artificial intelligence into the information generation process of interpersonal social support (Meng et al., 2025). Existing scholarship thus considers AI's roles as an intimate companion, a source of emotional support, and an aid to communication.

2.2 Research on Emotion Work in Digital Media Environments

Emotion work theory emphasizes how individuals manage and express emotions in accordance with the feeling rules of particular interactions, highlighting that emotional expression does not simply mirror internal feelings (Hochschild, 1983). This perspective also provides a reference for relevant research, which explores how partners can use emotional management to maintain their relationship in daily life. Emotion work in intimate relationships involves attending to, regulating, and responding to one's own and one's partner's emotions. This distribution is related to the partner's perception of fairness, relationship input and relationship quality (Horne & Johnson, 2019). Relevant academic research also regards relationship maintenance as an interactive process that requires continuous emotional input. This makes the interpretation of intimate relationships no longer limited to the spontaneous expression of emotions.

The development of digital media has made emotional work research further enter the intimate relationship scene of platformization and digitalization. Research on "virtual boyfriends" shows that behaviors such as companionship, listening and emotional response can be organized into a kind of "intimate work" through digital platforms. Virtual boyfriends provide intimate interaction through digital platforms, digital bodies and emotional communication. This form of intimate relationship has emotional and commercial dimensions and involves issues such as gender division of work and emotional experience consumption (Wu & Sun, 2023). The research on "algorithmic intimate relationships" further applies the theory of emotional work to the intimate relationship between people and Artificial Intelligence (AI) and explores the emotional input of users when interacting with AI partners, and the role played by the platform mechanism in shaping these relationships. The concept of emotional work such as "deep performance" is thus used to analyze the process of users forming and maintaining emotional input in algorithmic intimate relationships (Khan, 2026).

Research in the field of artificial intelligence has expanded the topic of "emotional work" to the level of technology development and use. Research on children's intelligent companion robots shows that the emotional expression presented by the machine, to some extent, comes from the process of developers transforming maternal experience, emotional knowledge and care practices into interactive scripts. Therefore, the "love" expressed through technological products is closely related to specific forms of human emotional work and gendered structures (Zhu, 2025). As robots enter care practice, researchers also begin to explore how existing "emotional work" is linked to new technical arrangements, and what new requirements robot applications bring to caregivers in managing emotions and maintaining emotional connection (Liedo et al., 2024). In general, these studies extend the research scope of "emotional work" from traditional interpersonal interaction to the social practice of digital platforms, algorithms and artificial intelligence.

2.3 Research Gap

Based on the above studies, it can be found that the study of human-computer intimate relationships has provided profound insights into the role of AI in intimate partners, emotional support tools and communication aids. At the same time, the research on "emotion work" also reveals how digital media reshapes its form and organization. These two studies have deepened our understanding of how AI can intervene in intimate relationships and how emotional work can realize digitalization, respectively.

However, there is still limited dialogue between these strands of research. Most of the existing studies focus on intimate interaction and emotional support between users and artificial intelligence, or on "emotional work" in an environment built by digital platforms, algorithms and robots. Although AI-mediated communication research has begun to examine the information generation between AI participants, and how this assistance affects the recipient's perception of the degree of relationship input. However, there is still a lack of systematic research on how generative artificial intelligence can

intervene in existing romantic relationships as a "third party" and participate in the specific process of "emotional work" between partners.

Existing studies have not yet made it clear what aspects users will seek from generative artificial intelligence to provide "emotional work" help in intimate relationships. It is also unclear how emotional stress, difficulty in expression, and motivation for maintaining relationships affect this kind of use behavior. In addition, the detailed discussion of the role of AI in emotional recognition, regulation, expression and relationship repair is not yet known. We need to explain these processes based on the user's personal experience and explore how users understand the concepts of sincerity, relationship investment and responsibility.

Based on these research gaps, this study examines the "third party" role played by generative artificial intelligence in the communication and interaction of existing love relationships. The study explores what forms of emotional work users will entrust to artificial intelligence, and how artificial intelligence can participate in and reconstruct this work, to link human-computer communication with the research in the field of emotional work.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

Generative AI-assisted love communication usually occurs in specific relationship situations. Whether users use AI, how to use AI, and how to understand the communication effect after AI participation are all jointly affected by "relationship status, communication goals and personal values". These experiences are highly situational, and it is difficult to restore the specific process of AI's participation in love communication by relying on questionnaires alone. Therefore, this article adopts a qualitative research method to understand the process of how users negotiate AI to participate in emotional work in real love relationships through semi-structured in-depth interviews.

On this basis, semi-structured in-depth interviews can further restore the specific process of AI entering love communication, including why users use AI, what information is provided to AI, how to judge and modify the generated content, and how to finally use it to communicate with partners. At the same time, the interview also allows researchers to follow up questions based on different experiences, so as to compare different users' understanding of AI-assisted communication.

3.2 Research Participants

The research subjects are adults with generative AI-assisted love communication experience. The interviewee needs to be at least 18 years old and have real love experience. They have used generative AI to assist in emotional expression, emotional adjustment or relationship repair in a love relationship, such as replying to the partner's message, organizing the content of the apology, expressing concern, comforting the partner or dealing with conflict communication. The research plan recruits about 20

respondents, mainly using purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to find eligible participants. The sample does not require the same AI usage frequency but covers different usage situations and degrees of use as much as possible. This study includes a total of 20 respondents with generative AI-assisted love communication experience, marked by letters A-T. The basic information of the respondents and the relevant AI usage experience are shown in Table 1, and the interview citations in the research findings are numbered accordingly.

Table 1. Basic Information about Participants

ID	Gender	Age	Occupational background	Frequency of AI use	AI platforms used	Length of romantic relationship
A	Male	24	Student	3-4 times per week	Doubao	1 year
B	Male	24	School teacher	2-3 times per week	Doubao	8 months
C	Male	24	State-owned enterprise	Daily	Doubao, DeepSeek, Jimeng, ChatGPT	4 years
D	Female	23	Awaiting employment	Daily	ChatGPT, Doubao	5 years
E	Male	23	Student	1-2 times per week	Doubao, DeepSeek	More than 2 years
F	Male	23	Student	Daily	Doubao, DeepSeek, Gemini	4 years
G	Male	24	Sales	Daily	ChatGPT, Doubao	5 years
H	Male	26	Teacher at an education and training institution	Daily	DeepSeek, ChatGPT	Half a year
I	Male	23	Content marketing at a large e-commerce company	2 times per week	Joyclaw, Doubao	More than 2 years
J	Female	23	AI executive producer	Daily	ChatGPT, Gemini, Codex, Doubao, Claude	5 years
K	Male	27	Internet IT	Daily	DeepSeek, Kimi, Yuanbao, Doubao, Qwen	More than 1 year

L	Female	22	Awaiting employment	2-3 times per week	DeepSeek, Doubao, Kimi, Yuanbao	More than 1 year
M	Female	20	Student	3-4 times per week	DeepSeek, Doubao, ChatGPT	Half a year
N	Female	22	Writer	Daily	Doubao, DeepSeek	2 years
O	Male	23	Python automation	Daily	DeepSeek, ChatGPT, Codex	6 months
P	Female	25	Bank teller	Daily	Doubao, DeepSeek, Kimi	8 months
Q	Male	26	Automotive repair	Daily	ChatGPT, Doubao	2 years
R	Female	32	Legal affairs	5-6 times per week	Codex, Doubao, Kimi	2 months
S	Female	35	Education and training teacher	Daily	ChatGPT, Doubao, DeepSeek	6 years
T	Female	21	Student	5-6 times per week	Doubao, DeepSeek, Qwen	3 years

3.3 Data Collection

The research will adopt one-to-one semi-structured interviews and take the form of online or offline according to the interviewee's situation. The average duration of the interview is about 30 minutes. Before the interview begins, the researcher will explain the purpose of the research, the use of the information and the method of privacy protection, and record after obtaining consent. After the interview, the recording will be trans written into text, and names and other information that may identify individuals will be anonymized. The interview mainly starts from real events and asks respondents to recall a specific AI-assisted love communication experience, including the relationship situation at that time, the reason for using AI, and the problems that AI wants to help solve, so as to further restore the actual process of AI participation in communication.

3.4 Interview Guide

The interview outline follows the order of "basic background-specific events-AI participation process-emotional work-meaning understanding". First, learn about the interviewee's love experience and AI usage, and then ask about the specific usage events, as well as the information provided to AI, the response of AI, and the actual use of the generated content. After that, we focused on what activities AI participated in related to emotional work, including expressing love, comforting partners, organizing apologies, easing conflicts and responding to partners' emotions, and understanding the content that respondents are not willing to handle with the help of AI. Finally, discuss how it understands the

sincerity, relationship input and attribution of responsibility of AI-assisted expression.

3.5 Data Analysis

This study uses thematic analysis to deal with interview materials. The research first reads the interview text repeatedly and conducts the initial coding, focusing on the situation and motivation of AI use, AI participation mode, the type of emotional work, and the user's understanding of sincerity, relationship investment and responsibility. Then compare the experience of repeated differences between different respondents, summarize the relevant code as the theme, and further check and adjust the relationship between the topics. This article aims to reveal how generative AI participates in emotional work in love relationships, and how users understand and negotiate this process in specific interactive situations.

In order to improve the credibility, throughout the analysis process, the researchers compared the participants' narratives and repeatedly revised the code and theme. After forming the analysis results, the researchers check these topics with the original data to ensure that the analysis can truly reflect the experience of the respondents, rather than the subjective inferences of the researchers.

To present the connection between the interview materials and the analysis theme, Table 2 selects some interview clips to show their primary coding, secondary coding and corresponding research topics. The table follows the existing code names and explains how different codes support the analysis of research findings through specific materials.

Table 2. Examples of Interview Coding and the Synthesis of Analytical Dimensions

Examples of interview text	**Initial codes**	**Synthesis of analytical dimensions**
"Friends will definitely help you and think from your side, so there will be a lack of consideration for the other person". (J)	Avoiding friends' positional bias	Seeking reference points outside the relationship
"We are the people involved, so we want to find an observer, and it is also a completely calm, completely rational tool". (A)	Seeking a third-party perspective outside the relationship	
"Because these are private issues, I am not very used to asking friends to deal with them. I think AI will not criticize me either". (G)	Reducing concerns about judgment during disclosure	Reducing the burden of seeking interpersonal support
"When talking to friends, I feel that I may also have to consider whether they want to listen, whether they are willing to give advice, and whether they feel	Avoiding adding to friends' emotional burden	

annoyed". (T)		
"If I ask a friend, I have to provide emotional value when they face difficulties later. … But with AI, there is no such feeling of back-and-forth exchange". (P)	Reducing reciprocal obligations in emotional support	
"To understand the other person better and figure out, for example, what I am anxious about, … and what exactly the other person minds". (K)	Using AI to sort out the sources of one's own and one's partner's emotions	
"The other person does not care about that dinner; he just feels that I place him behind work". (G)	Using AI to understand a partner's feelings of being ignored	Emotional understanding and self-regulation
"You vent your emotions into the AI dialogue box. … Because after you vent to AI, it understands your real motives, which can actually make you calm down, and your emotions are also vented". (J)	Disclosing feelings to AI to ease immediate emotions	
"I have not sorted out these thoughts, and they may not be logical. The wording AI generates for me is actually a little more logical". (M)	Using AI to organize confused thoughts into coherent expressions	
"The tone became considerably softer, and there were fewer accusations". (G)	Using AI to weaken aggressive and accusatory expressions	Organizing communication expressions and repair steps
"It first asked me to apologize and not rush to explain, and to talk face to face after the other person's mood or emotions became a little more stable. Then I should add some actions afterward, such as making up for the anniversary, or something like that". (G)	Using AI to arrange the sequence of apologies, explanations, and compensation	
"It only makes these words reasonable, but they do not necessarily reflect my original intention". (A)	Checking whether generated expressions correspond to one's original intention	Maintaining self-consistency in generated expressions
"My anger has not completely subsided, and I do not want to say very nice things or anything like that". (J)	Identifying the gap between generated expressions and current emotions	

"If the words are too sentimental, I will shorten them or change them to the tone I normally use". (G)	Modifying wording to match one's everyday style of expression	
"I immediately changed the prompt for talking to it, saying in the prompt, 'Don't apologize, don't lower your head, I entered restrictive words like these and then asked it to generate another plan for handling the situation". (J)	Retaining one's own position through restrictive prompt words	
"Your original intention still remains with you, and the decision-making power is still in your hands". (A)	Retaining the final right to adopt AI suggestions	
"Including offline, when the two people really face each other, I actually think that how to speak is still for me to decide". (G)	Independently organizing responses in actual interactions	Retaining relational judgment and responsibility for action
"It can only help me speak, but it cannot take responsibility for the things I need to do afterward". (G)	Personally implementing subsequent relational actions	

Note. The interview texts are excerpts from representative material, with omissions indicated by ellipses (…). The initial codes provide summarized descriptions based on existing codes. The analytical dimensions are developed by combining and refining related codes, presenting support seeking, task organization, expression checking, and delegation boundaries.

4. Findings

4.1 A "Low-Burden Third Party": Shifting the Interpersonal Burdens of Emotional Support in Intimate Relationships

The reason why AI can enter into close relationships as a third party is not only because it can provide advice, but also because respondents believe that it reduces the cost of position, judgement risk and the burden of interpersonal reciprocity when seeking relationship support. When communication between partners is deadlocked, or individuals find it difficult to deal with emotional distress in the relationship independently, seeking external support becomes a possibility. Compared with traditional interpersonal support objects such as friends, generative AI is regarded as a "low-burden third party" by some respondents: it can not only provide advice but also is considered to be less affected by existing interpersonal positions, and does not require users to assume emotional care and reciprocal obligations to listeners. It is this relatively low cost of asking for help that gives AI the opportunity to intervene in

the emotional work of intimate relationships.

When it is difficult to continue the emotional handling within the relationship, it is possible to seek external support, but traditional interpersonal support does not always meet the needs of the respondents. "Friends will help themselves. If they stand by their side and think about it, they will lack a factor to consider for the other party" (J). The expectation that his friends support his own position makes the interviewee worried that it may be difficult to improve the understanding of the partner's ideas and even deepen the original differences by asking for help from friends. They hope that the external suggestions can consider the situation of both sides and give themselves the opportunity to re-examine the judgement of the relationship. "We are the authorities. We want to find a bystander, and it is a completely calm and rational tool" (A). In the interviewee's opinion, AI is less involved in the existing interpersonal relationships of both parties, so it can look at problems outside the relationship. This understanding can be linked to the discussion of "machine heuristic" by Sundar and Kim (2019). People may form a trusting judgement of the information provided by the machine based on the objective and neutral impression of the machine. The description of AI's "calmness" and "rationality" in the interview reflects the role expectations given by the interviewees to technology. It is this perceived distance that makes AI the object of discussion that they are willing to try, providing an entrance to temporarily jumping out of their own position and re-understanding the differences between the two sides.

Some respondents' expectations for AI also include less judgement and less interpersonal burden when confiding in others. "Because of this kind of personal problem, I'm not used to finding friends to deal with it. I don't think AI will criticize me either" (G). Concerns about negative evaluations make whether the object of the confidant feel at ease becomes an important consideration when asking for help. In health-screening interviews, participants reported fewer concerns about disclosure and engaged in less impression management when they believed the virtual interviewer was controlled by a computer rather than a person (Lucas et al., 2014). This finding may help explain why some participants in this study were willing to discuss private matters with AI. With friends, participants also worried about whether the other person wanted to listen. "If I talk to a friend, I feel like I also have to think about whether they want to listen, whether they're willing to give me advice, and whether they'll find it annoying" (T). Seeking support meant asking for a friend's time and could create an obligation to offer support in return. "If I turn to a friend, then when they face difficulties later, I have to give them emotional support. … But with AI, it doesn't feel like that kind of back-and-forth" (P). Some participants therefore see AI as a source of support that requires no immediate reciprocation. It allows individuals to receive confessions and advice without the obligation of taking care of the listener's emotions, maintaining interaction balance and future feedback support for the time being.

This consideration of the burden of interpersonal reciprocity shows that seeking emotional support itself may also be accompanied by additional emotional work. While dealing with their own troubles, individuals also need to consider the feelings of the listener and consider the responsibility of responding to their emotional needs in the future. Asking for help from AI provides a possibility to temporarily reduce this part of the input, but the respondents will still adjust the scope of confession according to the sensitivity of the content. "If it's a matter of privacy, I won't seek the help of AI. If it is something that doesn't matter if it is leaked, I will seek the help of AI" (J). The reservation of the disclosure content shows that when the interviewee regards AI as a support object, he will also choose the issues he can intervene in. From this point of view, the reason why AI can enter into an intimate relationship as a "third party" is not only because it can quickly provide answers or communication advice, but also because it is understood by some respondents as an external support that is less involved in existing interpersonal positions, produces less negative judgements, and does not need to bear interpersonal reciprocity obligations. Hold resources. When it is difficult for individuals to complete emotional processing independently, or when communication between partners stagnates, the relationship obligation associated with asking friends for help may become a further concern. The dual expectation of obtaining support and reducing the burden of interpersonal reciprocity provides space for AI to intervene in emotional work in intimate relationships.

4.2 "The Structuring of Emotion Work": AI's Reorganization of Emotional Understanding, Expression, and Relationship Repair

Generative AI's intervention in emotional work in intimate relationships not only provides comfort or writes communication content for users but also reflects its decomposition and organization of the emotional processing process.

In love conflicts, individuals often face multiple tasks at the same time: understanding why they have negative emotions, judging the feelings and demands of their partners, controlling immediate impulses of expression, and thinking about how to respond and repair relationships. These tasks are intertwined in the actual experience and may not have a clear order of processing. This study summarizes the intervention of AI in this process as "structuring of emotional work", that is, AI helps users transform vague and intertwined emotional problems into relatively clear and separately handled tasks by explaining emotional sources, adjusting the rhythm of emotional processing, organizing communication and expression, and providing repair steps. Therefore, AI participates not only in a specific emotional work but also includes the reorganization of the handling of emotional work.

In the process of using the interviewees, the generative AI disassembles the intertwined dissatisfaction and confusion into specific problems that can be further understood and handled by sorting out the events and the reactions of both sides. Respondents provide AI with chat records and relationship background, and with the help of the explanations generated by it, they re-identification the things they

and their partners care about. "Understand the other party better and figure out, for example, what I'm anxious about, ... and what the other party is minding" (K). This description shows that the analysis provided by AI allows respondents to pay attention to their own feelings and their partners' concerns at the same time and transform the general confusion of the conflict into specific questions about the emotional sources of both parties. This kind of combing is also reflected in the re-understanding of specific events. In the conflict of missing the anniversary dinner due to temporary work arrangements, AI explained his partner's dissatisfaction as a concern about whether he was valued in the relationship. "The other party didn't care about the meal. He just felt that I put him behind the work" (G). Through this explanation, the respondents began to link the partner's reaction with the feeling of being ignored, and the differences caused by the failure to make an appointment also have a more specific discussion direction. AI does not simply judge the right and wrong of the conflict here but links the specific event with the emotional needs behind it, so that the interviewee can turn from the event itself to the understanding of the emotional source. The differences that originally revolved around specific behaviors such as breach of appointments and disputes were reorganized into issues of attention, understanding and relationship expectations.

For some participants, talking to AI created a pause between feeling upset and responding to a partner. "You vent your emotions in the AI chat box. … Once you've vented to AI, it understands your real motives, which can actually help you calm down, and you've let your emotions out too" (J). AI became the first outlet for emotions that might otherwise have been directed straight at a partner. This gave participants an opportunity to adjust their emotional state before resuming communication and to consider the emotional pressure their partners experienced during conflict. Changes in communication timing also involved restraining the urge to keep responding. "The AI told me not to keep messaging him, that I could take a break from contact for a while and see how he responded" (A). Pausing messages created time to observe the partner's response, while participants continued to work through unsettled feelings and seek relief in conversations with AI or friends. Talking to AI allowed participants to vent and work through some feelings before deciding when and how to respond to their partners. This temporarily separated emotional release from partner communication, reorganizing emotion work around who participants turned to and when.

When preparing to communicate with their partners, participants also used AI to translate unresolved thoughts into words they could convey. In one account, a partner's busy work schedule made arranging dates difficult, and the participant wanted to express understanding while also asking for more attention. "I haven't sorted these thoughts out, and they might not make logical sense. The wording AI generates for me is actually a bit more coherent" (M). The generated reply provided a coherent structure for expressing both consideration for the partner and a desire for companionship. In apologies following conflict, revision also involved adjusting the force of the wording. "The tone was quite a bit softer, and

there was less blame" (G). Participants used AI to revise confrontational language so that it better served their aim of easing tensions. Emotional expression in intimate relationships involves judgments about which feelings to communicate, how strongly to convey them, and how to accommodate personal needs alongside a partner's feelings. AI's revisions to wording and tone became part of this management of emotional expression.

Response timing is itself an element of emotion work. Having an apology or explanation ready does not remove the need to assess whether a partner is ready to continue communicating. AI-generated action plans translated this judgment into a sequence of responses. "It told me to apologize first and not rush to explain, then wait until they'd calmed down a bit before talking face to face. After that, I should follow up with some action, like making up for the missed anniversary, or something like that" (G). This advice prioritized acknowledging the partner's feelings before explaining one's own circumstances. It required the user to consider both what they wanted to communicate and when the partner might be receptive. Subsequent efforts to make amends also extended preparation for repair beyond words: the apology needed support through action. AI contributed to coordinating communicative aims with the partner's emotional needs, offering a basis for deciding when to communicate and how to continue responding. Emotional understanding thereby informed action, and emotion work took shape through adjustments to the manner and timing of responses.

Taken together, these accounts point to a reorganization of emotion work rather than its wholesale replacement by AI. Tasks of understanding, regulation, expression, and preparation for action that individuals would otherwise undertake alone during emotional agitation or relational impasse were partly transformed into activities that could be worked through progressively in human-AI interaction.

AI supplied interpretations, wording suggestions, and possible courses of action. Users still had to assess whether these interpretations fit their experiences and the advice suited their relationships before deciding whether to use it in conversations with their partners. The structuring of emotion work therefore involves technological assistance with particular stages of a process, creating a form of human-AI collaboration within work previously undertaken independently. Such collaboration does not necessarily produce effective communication or relationship repair. AI can help users make sense of a problem and develop a plan, but its advice may not fit both partners' circumstances. Even as AI changes how emotion work is organized, the results still depend on how users interpret its suggestions, decide which ones to use, and put them into practice.

4.3 From Assistance with Expression to "Authenticity Work": How AI Introduces New Emotion Management Tasks

Assistance with wording and tone leaves users with further judgments about emotional expression. When AI offers a ready-made reply, users still need to decide whether it reflects their own stance and current feelings, and whether it fits the way they usually communicate with their partners. Some of the

work of composing a response becomes work of reviewing and revising generated content. This study conceptualizes the checking of feelings and positions involved in AI-assisted expression as "authenticity work". Users must identify which expressions represent their feelings, revise content that misrepresents their intentions, and decide whether they are willing to respond to their partners in those terms. AI may therefore introduce new emotion management tasks while easing some demands of expression. Its involvement changes the composition of emotion work: assistance with language formulation is accompanied by new requirements to assess and adjust the authenticity of generated expression.

When AI drafts a reply, it also expresses a stance toward the partner on the user's behalf. Users must decide whether they are willing to show the consideration and make the concessions written into it. "It just makes the wording sound reasonable, but that isn't necessarily what I mean" (A). A reply may ease tension while weakening the point the user wants to make. Sending it unchanged presents that stance as the user's own. Reviewing the draft therefore means deciding how much consideration to show and which of their own needs to express while taking the partner's feelings into account. Managing the relationship between what users feel and what they express is part of emotion work (Hochschild, 1983). Once AI has produced the wording, users still need to examine its emotional stance and decide whether they are willing to respond in those terms. The additional work lies in deciding whether what AI says on their behalf is also what they are willing to say themselves.

Whether users can recognize the expressions generated by AI also depends on their current emotional state. The interviewee wants to talk about the problem clearly, and the one who is still angry and reluctant to show goodwill for the time can exist at the same time. AI can write a reply to ease the relationship first, but the user may not be willing to face the partner with that attitude. "My temper has not been completely consumed, and I don't want to say something nice or something like that" (J). Even if a paragraph is considered appropriate and heartwarming, it may exceed the level that users are willing to express at present. Sending it means allowing these gentle words to be your own response to your partner, and users still need to judge whether they accept the distance between this expression and actual feelings. Repeatedly putting in and deleting the replies that have been written is happening in this trend-of-take. Users can recognize that this passage is conducive to continuing communication, and at the same time, they do not want it to represent their current attitude. It is in line with the original intention. Therefore, it also includes time requirements. Words that you don't want to say when your emotions have not calmed down cannot be recognized as your own expression just because they are suitable for repairing the relationship. The added work here is to re-recognize what you still care about, how much you are willing to show, and whether you are ready to make concessions after the language is ready. Taking care of your partner's feelings needs to be considered together with your own dissatisfaction that you have not digested. The response provided by AI makes a gentle response

available at any time, and users still need to confirm whether they are willing to say so now.

The modification of the generated reply implements the user's judgement of emotional measure into specific wording. "If it may be too fleshy, I will shorten it or change it to the tone I usually say" (G). Delete the intimate expression and directly adjust the degree of expression of feelings in the reply. Change back to the familiar tone, so that these feelings can be expressed in a way that they recognize. Users retain the expression framework provided by AI, and at the same time decide how to show closeness to their partners. Hancock et al. (2020) linked AI's participation in information production with the sender's self-presentation, and the modification here further shows that users need to personally determine how much emotion the generated words can express for themselves. The partner will understand his attitude through these words, so choosing which words to leave is also deciding what kind of emotional response he is willing to make to the other person. This kind of judgement also needs to run through the process of re-generation. When users ask AI to adjust their reply, they must explain which expressions are too intimate and which meanings need to be retained, and check whether the new wording is in line with their wishes. Regeneration requires users to continuously identify and correct the emotions written by AI. Emotional work also occurs in these adjustments: the user considers how to respond to his partner while controlling the degree of intimacy he is willing to express, so that the final words can carry the feelings he recognizes.

Turning AI's "reasonable words" into "my own words" also means investing effort in the relationship. "Getting AI to help you think of a message to send is more of a hassle, … you have to put more thought into it". (A) This effort starts with seeking help and continues as users weigh possible replies. They seek wording that could improve communication, then consider whether it conveys their meaning and how their partner might interpret it. Reviewing a draft prompts them to revisit both partners' feelings, address unresolved dissatisfaction, and decide how to express their needs while considering the other person. "Reasonable words" offer a starting point, but making them "my own words" requires further reflection on personal feelings and shared experiences. This is emotion work because users must consider and adjust their emotional expression to respond to a partner. For A, the thought devoted to a single reply also showed that the relationship mattered. Relational investment therefore takes place before a message is sent, as users act on their willingness to keep communicating by preparing a response.

Users therefore need to review and revise the wording AI provides. Users assess whether its attitudes align with their feelings and decide, through modification, what they are willing to convey. Turning "reasonable words" into "my own words" requires users to keep checking whether the wording reflects their feelings and revising it accordingly. "Authenticity work" describes the effort involved in deciding whether to endorse and use a reply after AI has helped draft it. AI's involvement changes what emotion work entails, while the tasks users continue to undertake themselves help explain the boundaries of its

delegation.

4.4 The "Bounded Delegation" of Emotion Work: From Technological Assistance to the Boundaries of Responsibility in Intimate Relationships

AI can assist users in analyzing disagreements, preparing responses, and planning actions to repair a relationship. These contributions prepare the ground for further communication, while repair continues to require personal effort in subsequent interaction. Users must respond to their partners' feelings and translate expressed care and regret into action. This study conceptualizes this division of tasks as the "bounded delegation" of emotion work: users enlist AI to assist with some emotional tasks while retaining the work of actual communication and relationship maintenance. Emotion work continues after delegation as partners respond. Users still need to respond to feelings that remain unaddressed, adjust what they planned to say, and follow through on repair plans in everyday life. AI changes how some tasks are carried out, but repairing the relationship still requires both partners to keep listening, responding, and adjusting their behavior. These ongoing efforts set the limits of what can be delegated to AI.

The response plan can be formed with the help of AI, and the completion of emotional work still requires users to continue to judge in actual communication. The order of apology and explanation involves how to reconcile the demands of one's own situation and the need to take care of the partner's emotions. "He asked me to apologize first. Don't be in a hurry to explain. Wait until the other party's mood or emotion is a little more stable, and then we will talk in person" (G). Delayed explanation means that what the individual wants to say needs to be considered with whether the other party can continue to communicate at the moment. As a result, AI shares the work of users to scrutinize the timing of expression in response to their partners, so that some emotional judgements can be completed in discussions with AI. This entrustment also contains problems that the user needs to continue to deal with: "wait for the other party's emotional stability". The next action is based on the judgement of the partner's status. When is appropriate to explain, it needs to be determined in combination with the other party's reaction in the communication. The suggestion thus provides a basis for action. Users still need to judge how to adopt it in the specific interaction and adjust according to the other party's response. Emotional work can get technical assistance in the preparation process, and the subsequent development still requires the person concerned to continue to pay attention to the feelings of the partner.

Adopting the repair suggestions put forward by AI also requires users to implement the attention expressed in the subsequent relationship. "He can only help me talk, but he can't help me take on what I should do in the future" (G). Although the apology can convey the willingness to repair the relationship, if it is really to be implemented, the user must also change the behavior that causes the conflict. Taking the suggestion of making up for the anniversary as an example, this arrangement

responds to the emotions that the partner feels ignored, and the meaning of the relationship needs to be realized through the user's reinvestment of time and attention. In the process of paying attention to the needs of their partners and constantly adjusting their own responses, users are always doing emotional work. Their understanding of the partner's feelings should be integrated into the subsequent interaction, to ensure that the care expressed in words can be supported by practical actions. Artificial intelligence can make suggestions for improvement, but users must put it into practice in daily life. The "follow-up needs to be done" emphasized by G highlights the limitations of the statute of limitations in entrusting tasks to artificial intelligence: suggestions may provide a starting point for repairing relationships, but to continue to maintain care and truly implement follow-up actions, individuals still need to make continuous efforts.

Repairing the relationship requires both sides to continuously respond to each other, and adopting AI suggestions is only one part of the interaction process. For example, if it is suggested to adopt a "face-to-face conversation", then both parties need to discuss: how did the other party understand the initial reply? What other feelings do the other party want to be confirmed? Since the dialogue is formed by both parties, users must listen to what the other party really cares about and adjust their interpretation and response accordingly. In this process, people need to constantly check whether each other's understanding of each other's feelings is accurate, this kind of emotional work is always running through. The study on robot care also points out that even if technology undertakes certain specific tasks, people still need to manage their emotions and maintain emotional connection by themselves (Liedo et al., 2024). Therefore, when evaluating the scope of application of technical assistance, people's continuous emotional efforts must be taken into account. Specifically, this effort includes listening to the partner's talk, understanding the partner's expectations for repairing the relationship, and continuing to respond. These requirements reflect the interactive nature of emotional work and also set boundaries for entrusting tasks to technology. What to say is gradually formed in communication and interaction, which requires the continuous participation of both parties.

Overall, AI can help users understand disagreements, prepare responses, and plan steps toward repair. Users still need to put those plans into practice, listen to how their partner understood an apology, and respond to feelings that remain unaddressed. Emotion work thus involves "bounded delegation": AI assists with some tasks, while those in the relationship remain responsible for sustaining it. Delegation is limited because emotion work depends on a specific relationship and develops through ongoing interaction. Care expressed in words needs to be backed by action, and users must keep checking their understanding of their partner's feelings through conversation. The work of repair therefore continues beyond AI-generated advice into everyday life. AI changes how some tasks are carried out, but users still need to turn its help into responses and changes they are willing to make, then keep adjusting as their partner responds.

5. Conclusion

This study examined generative AI as a third party in romantic communication, focusing on how emotion work is delegated and reorganized and how users understand sincerity, relational investment, and responsibility. The findings indicate that AI helps users understand emotions and draft messages while creating new work: users must review and revise what it generates. Users must determine which expressions reflect their feelings and continue to respond to their partners and follow through with action in subsequent interactions. Emotion work thus involves a division of tasks combining technological assistance with sustained personal effort.

The study found that in the interviewees' experience of using it, the intervention of generative AI reorganized the processing process and task composition of emotional work. Users use AI to sort out their emotional troubles. When seeking support, they don't have to worry about being judged or bear the corresponding obligation to give back. With the help of the interpretation and expression suggestions provided by AI, users can gradually sort out the feelings of both parties and form specific response ideas for continued communication. In addition, the reply generated by AI also expresses a certain emotional position on behalf of the user. Users need to evaluate whether the considerateness, intimacy or concessions reflected in these expressions are in line with their true feelings and then filter and modify the content they are willing to express. This "authenticity work" reveals the connection between technical assistance and new tasks: some language organization work is supported, and the examination and adjustment of generated expressions has become a work that requires effort. After the generated content is recognized, the user also needs to implement the repair arrangement in the actual relationship and continue to adjust the communication according to the partner's response. Therefore, the commission of emotional work has specific limits. After obtaining expression and action suggestions, the attention, response and change required for relationship maintenance should continue. The participation of AI has changed the way work is shared, and it has also changed the content and links that users need to pay attention to.

These findings show that in the communication of romantic relationships, artificial intelligence assistance can coexist with personal emotional investment. Using AI to prepare for expression may also be understood by users as a way to take partners and relationships seriously. From the user's understanding, whether the generated expression can be recognized by oneself is closely related to whether the attitude is in line with one's own feelings and whether it is willing to face the partner with these words. The process of judgement and adjustment itself also requires effort. Therefore, in order to understand sincerity and relational investment, it is necessary to examine how users adopt the wording provided by AI and how to continue to communicate with partners in subsequent interactions. "Authenticity work" and "Bounded delegation" jointly reveal this connection: the user's recognition of expression needs to be judged by emotion, and the concern and willingness to repair in the relationship

also need to be implemented through continuous action. From this article, the investigation of technically assisted expression will be promoted to the emotional work of how users form their own responses and continue to maintain relationships. The changes brought about by the intervention of generative AI in intimate relationships are ultimately reflected in how emotional work is reorganized and how the input of the parties continues to occur.

This study is mainly based on users' descriptions of their own AI experience. Therefore, the research results reflect how users understand and use AI assistance, and how they view the emotions they put into it. Whether AI suggestions are objectively neutral and whether its intervention actually improves communication between the two sides still needs to be further examined in combination with specific interactive materials. The study also examines changes in emotion work mainly from AI users' perspectives. Further research is needed to understand how their partners perceive AI-assisted expression, whether they accept the sentiments it conveys, and how both partners negotiate AI's involvement. Combining interviews with both partners and data from their actual communication could help trace how generated content is used, interpreted, and responded to over time. This would help explain how the boundaries of delegation in emotion work take shape and change as partners continue to interact.

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