

AI Chatbot Use and Emotional Regulation Among Generation Z: A Uses and Gratifications Perspective

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Abstract

AI chatbots have emerged as a new medium of interaction among Generation Z, offering a sense of presence, intimacy, security, comfort, and rapid responses in meeting users' needs, and are frequently utilized for emotional regulation. However, users are often unaware of their underlying needs and motives for engaging with AI chatbot media. This study employed the selection of chatbot media through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, focusing on individual needs, motivation, interaction, and satisfaction in regulating emotions. The framework used Interpersonal Emotion Regulation (IER), encompasses indicators such as (a) Interpersonal Acceptance; (b) Interpersonal Reappraisal; (c) Interpersonal Advice; (d) Interpersonal Distraction; (e) Interpersonal Suppression; and (f) Interpersonal Ignorance, which assess emotional regulation about acknowledging and releasing emotions, problem-solving, and seeking advice. A quantitative approach employing a survey method was adopted, targeting Generation Z in Tulungagung, a region that records an annual increase of approximately 3,000 non-permanent residents. The study seeks to identify the relationship between chatbot usage patterns and emotional regulation. The findings indicate that a significant and positive relationship between the use of AI Chatbots and Emotion Regulation among Generation Z, with a correlation value of 0.893. The highest indicator of AI Chatbot use was for relaxation needs (0.758), followed by entertainment needs (0.748).

Keywords: AI Chatbot, Emotional Regulation, Uses And Gratification

INTRODUCTION

In daily life our interaction with computers has changed fundamentally. Chatbots developed using Large Language Models (LLMs) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) are some of the most prospective AI-based innovations. This trend places AI chatbots as not only becoming tools but as feasible social companions able to provide empathy, company, and affection. Due to low operational cost, 24-hour access and integration into various formats (such as television or mobile phones), music-on-demand services have become popular worldwide. The global chatbot market is estimated to be worth \$27 3bn by 2030 and according to report released last year, 68% of consumers say they prefer a chatbot that can instantly resolve their issue. Consequently, the application of chatbots now extends beyond customer service to encompass diverse fields such as e-commerce [1][2][3], education [4][5][6], healthcare [7][8][9], and public administration [10].

In Indonesia, the Internet Network Development Association [11] reported that approximately 24.73% of Generation Z students use AI chatbots to support their educational activities. Previous studies indicate that chatbot usage helps Gen Z students enhance critical thinking, clarify problems, and structure responses more effectively, although it cannot fully

substitute human reflection and discussion [12]. Moreover, [13] observed that chatbot interactions shape user satisfaction and loyalty, suggesting broader implications for psychosocial domains, particularly emotional regulation.

Emotional regulation refers to the process by which individuals manage internal and external stimuli that influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors [14]. This process includes strategies to enhance, diminish, or modify emotional responses either before or after emotions arise. Effective emotional regulation contributes to psychological resilience and adaptive coping when facing stress, interpersonal conflict, and emotionally charged experiences [15]. Gross's [14] Process Model of Emotion Regulation provides a foundational framework explaining how individuals consciously and unconsciously influence their emotional responses. Expanding on this model, Pauw et al [16] identified six forms of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation (IER) (a) Interpersonal Acceptance; (b) Interpersonal Reappraisal; (c) Interpersonal Advice; (d) Interpersonal Distraction; (e) Interpersonal Suppression; and (f) Interpersonal Ignorance. The complexity of emotion regulation lies in the distinction between enacted (behavioral) and perceived (cognitive-affective) regulation. Among various strategies, cognitive reappraisal (reinterpreting emotion-eliciting situations) [17][18] and expressive suppression (inhibiting emotional expression) [19][20][21] are the most commonly explored due to their distinct implications for emotional and psychological well-being.

Generation Z as digital native has deeply integrated technology into their daily routines, social interactions, and self-regulation processes. This generation is characterized by its preference for immediacy, responsiveness, and digital connectivity. For Gen Z, AI chatbots represent a novel form of emotional engagement that offers a sense of presence, intimacy, security, and immediacy [22][23]. Chatbots provide a unique combination of relative anonymity, 24/7 accessibility, consistent feedback, and non-judgmental responsiveness features that make them attractive companions for emotional expression. However, despite these affordances, Generation Z faces growing mental health challenges, including anxiety, loneliness, and emotional dysregulation, often exacerbated by social media overexposure [24]. In many cases, users are unaware of the deeper motivations underlying their chatbot interactions. Seemingly trivial reasons such as "boredom" or "curiosity" may mask underlying emotional needs related to stress relief and mood management [25].

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the transformative role of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots in fostering emotional resilience among adolescents and young adults. Empirical evidence from studies conducted in China between 2023 and 2024 demonstrates that AI chatbots designed for mental health support can function as quasi-social companions, enhancing users' emotional awareness and facilitating self-regulation [26][27]. Building on the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework, Zhang and Kim further contend that AI chatbots satisfy users' affective needs for comfort and self-validation, though their findings also raise concerns about emerging patterns of emotional dependency and overreliance on digital agents for psychological support. They identified three patterns of emotional gratification derived from chatbot use: (1) emotional venting (the release of emotions), (2) self-reflection support, and (3) social rehearsal (simulated social interaction). Velagaleti [28] further argued that AI technologies can be engineered to enhance emotional intelligence across various domains, including healthcare, education, and customer engagement. Nonetheless, while existing studies establish that chatbots can facilitate emotional expression and support, they rarely address users'

underlying motivations, emotional experiences, and the mechanisms linking chatbot interaction to emotional regulation outcomes.

Despite the growing body of literature on AI chatbots and human–computer interaction, empirical research exploring the intersection between chatbot use and emotional regulation among Generation Z remains limited, particularly in non-Western contexts such as Indonesia. Most studies have focused on the functional, cognitive, or usability aspects of chatbots, overlooking their psychosocial dimensions and emotional impacts. Furthermore, while the Uses and Gratifications framework provides valuable insights into user motivations, its application to the emotional regulation context in AI-mediated interactions is still underdeveloped.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role of AI chatbots as emotional regulation tools among Generation Z, focusing on how users engage with chatbots to manage their emotional states and derive psychosocial gratification. This research seeks to bridge theoretical and empirical gaps by examining the relationship between chatbot use, emotional regulation strategies, and user experiences within a contemporary digital context. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on human–AI interaction, emotional intelligence in digital environments, and the design of emotionally responsive AI systems that support psychological well-being.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive quantitative approach, selected for its capacity to provide a systematic, measurable, and objective depiction of the phenomenon under investigation. According to Allen et al [29], deductive reasoning constitutes a central characteristic of quantitative research, where theory testing serves to examine measurable and generalizable relationships among variables. The goal of quantitative inquiry lies in achieving representativeness by generalizing findings to reflect the broader characteristics of the population [30]. Ensuring validity and reliability in data collection and analysis enhances the inferential strength and credibility of the research outcomes.

In this study, the quantitative method was chosen to measure the motives and needs underlying media use in relation to individuals’ psychological fulfillment. The research focuses on the use of AI-based chatbots (specifically ChatGPT) as an interactive medium employed by participants for emotional regulation. ChatGPT was selected as the object of inquiry because it represents a form of human–AI interaction among young generations that extends beyond information seeking and entertainment to include emotional support and self-expression.

Measurement

The current study uses a survey research in order to examine the influence of the uses and gratifications structure on emotional regulation. Factor loadings of measurement and structural model.

Table 1.

Study measures	Measurement items	Source
Sosio-demographic	Gender, age, personal problem, duration, user’s frequency,	By the author

Study measures	Measurement items	Source
Independent variables	entertainment, information seeking, escape, convenience utility, relaxation and pass time	[37] [38]
Dependent variables	Interpersonal Emotional Regulation	[16]

(source: data analyzed by the author, 2025)

This study employs six independent variables identified as the most relevant to the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory, as previously outlined. Meanwhile, the dependent variable is developed based on the Interpersonal Emotional Regulation (IER) Theory, which comprises five principal indicators. However, one indicator interpersonal ignoranc was excluded from this study, as it was considered less applicable to the specific research context.

The hypotheses formulated in this study were tested by examining the correlation between each independent variable indicator namely *entertainment*, *information seeking*, *escape*, *relaxation*, and *pass time* and the dependent variable derived from the Interpersonal Emotional Regulation (IER) framework.

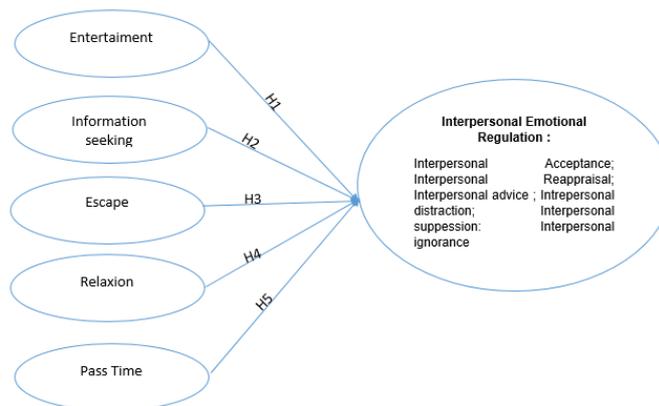


Figure 1.

(source: data analyzed by the author, (2025))

The items representing each variable in the research framework were assessed using a four-point Likert scale ranging from (1) ‘strongly disagree’ to (4) ‘strongly agree’. Additionally, respondents provided information through socio-demographic questions. In relation to this, all items were structured as fixed-alternative questions, offering a limited set of response options from which participants selected the one that best reflected their personal views.

Data Collected

Data for this study were collected using a survey method as the primary source of empirical evidence. The survey approach is particularly valuable for capturing individuals’ attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, values, and knowledge [30]. In this research, an online survey was designed and administered to members of Generation Z in Tulungagung. The online format was

selected not only for its efficiency in reaching a geographically dispersed population but also for its suitability in engaging a digitally native generation.

Specifically, the survey aimed to examine the underlying motivations driving Generation Z's engagement with AI chatbots as tools for emotional regulation. By focusing on this demographic, the study seeks to critically explore how emerging technologies mediate emotional coping strategies and self-regulation behaviors among young digital users. This methodological choice allows for the identification of nuanced patterns in technology-mediated emotional expression, while also highlighting the socio-technological dynamics shaping Gen Z's affective relationship with AI systems.

Sample

The sampling procedure in this study employed a random sampling technique, designed in accordance with the inclusion criteria established for the research. The target population consisted of Generation Z individuals aged 18 to 24 years residing in Tulungagung, East Java, who identified as active users of ChatGPT and utilized the platform for emotional regulation purposes. A total of $N = 109$ respondents met these criteria and participated in the study.

Data Analysis

This study employed Pearson's correlation analysis to examine the relationship among the identified variables. Pearson's correlation is a statistical technique commonly used to measure the strength and direction of a linear association between two continuous variables [31]. Specifically, a relationship is considered highly significant when $p < .001$, moderately significant when $p < .01$, and marginally significant when $p < .05$ [30][32]. These thresholds indicate the probability that the observed correlation did not occur by chance in the population.

The application of Pearson's correlation was justified by the study's focus on examining linear associations rather than causality. This analytical choice enables a more precise identification of inter-variable linkages between motivational factors and emotional regulation tendencies, thereby offering a quantitative foundation for understanding how Generation Z employs AI chatbots to manage their emotional states.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Participant

The demographic characteristics of participants in this study indicated variation across five key indicators. These indicators included gender, age, occupation, duration of chatbot usage, personal problems and frequency of interaction with ChatGPT. The demographic data were analyzed to provide a clearer understanding of the participants' profiles and to contextualize their patterns of media use, particularly in relation to emotional regulation through AI chatbots.

Table 2.

Variable	Description	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	31.2
	Female	68.8
Age	18 years old	2.0
	19 years old	5.5
	20 years old	3.7
	21 years old	22.9
	22 years old	40.4
	23 years old	17.4
	24 years old	7.3
Occupation	Student	93.6
	Civil government	0.0
	Employee	6.4
AI Active Users (Usage Period)	New user	14.7
	1 Week	6.4
	1–3 Months	33.0
	6 Months	6.4
	1 Year	24.8
	> 1 Year	14.7
Personal Problems	Family problems	2.8
	Economic problems	1.8
	Friendship problems	1.8
	Relationship problems	0.0
	Personal issues	41.3
	Work problems	3.7
	Education problems	11.9
Duration of AI Chatbot Access	5 minutes/day	44.0
	10 minutes/day	30.3
	30 minutes/day	13.8
	1 hour/day	8.2
	> 3 hours/day	1.8
	> 6 hours/day	1.8

(source: data analyzed by the author, 2025)

Validity and Reliability

According to Allen et al [29], validity testing is conducted to ensure that an instrument accurately measures the construct it is intended to measure. Meanwhile, reliability testing was performed to determine the internal consistency and stability of the instrument across repeated measurements.

From a methodological perspective, measuring both valid and reliable measures enhances the credibility and reproducibility of the research findings, particularly in studies examining complex constructs such as motivational factors for using technology and emotional regulation behaviors.

Table 3.

Indicator	Questions	Validity	Reliability
Entertainment	I choose to use Chatbot AI as a means of self-entertainment.	0.480	.457
	I use Chatbot AI because it provides an enjoyable experience	0.516	.498
	I find interacting with Chatbot AI enjoyable and engaging.	0.708	.694
Information Seeking	Through Chatbot AI, I obtain the information I need, including insights related to emotional well-being	0.766	.747
	Chatbot AI provides me with knowledge and strategies for managing my feelings and emotions.	0.631	.608
	<i>Through Chatbot AI, I learn new things, including how AI can be used as a medium for self-expression and emotional disclosure.</i>	0.703	.683
Escape	Chatbot AI exhibits a distinct character more human (like and interactive) compared to other media platforms	0.748	.731
	I am willing to postpone other activities when I am confiding in Chatbot AI.	0.750	.734
	I use Chatbot AI to fulfill what I cannot express in the real world, including sharing or discussing my personal problems.	0.592	.568
Relaxation	I use Chatbot AI when I am feeling stressed.	0.480	.453
	I use Chatbot AI to improve my mood.	0.719	.701
	<i>I use Chatbot AI to relieve both physical and emotional tension.</i>	0.588	.560
Convenience Utility	I can confide in Chatbot AI at any time.	0.588	.537
	I can share my thoughts and emotions with Chatbot AI anywhere.	0.567	.665
	I receive faster responses when confiding in Chatbot AI compared to other people or media platforms.	0.690	.821
Pass Time	I confide in Chatbot AI to fill my leisure time.	0.810	.797
	I engage in conversations with Chatbot	0.520	.491

Indicator	Questions	Validity	Reliability
	AI to cope with feelings of loneliness.		
	I interact with Chatbot AI as part of my daily routine without any specific purpose.	0.758	.742

(source: data analyzed by the author, 2025)

The findings reveal a significant correlation between the use of AI chatbots for fulfilling the needs and gratifications of Generation Z in Tulungagung and their emotional regulation behaviors. The correlation coefficient of $r = 0.893$ indicates a strong positive association, suggesting that the higher the intensity of chatbot use, the greater the participants' satisfaction in regulating their emotions.

Significant relationships were observed across several motivational indicators, namely entertainment, escape, information seeking, convenience utility, relaxation, and pass time. Among these, entertainment and relaxation emerged as the most influential factors, underscoring that the desire for enjoyment and psychological comfort represents the primary motive driving Generation Z's engagement with AI chatbots as a medium for emotional expression and self-disclosure.

Table 4.

Indicator	Correlation
Entertainment	0,748
Information seeking	0,577
Escape	0,638
Relaxation	0,758
Convenience Utility	0,645
Pass time	0,576

(source: data analyzed by the author, 2025)

a. Entertainment

The correlation value of $r = 0.748$ indicates a strong relationship between entertainment motives and the use of AI chatbots for emotional regulation. Participants scored highly on item P7: *"I enjoy using Chatbot AI."* This finding suggests that psychological enjoyment and emotional pleasure serve as core motivations for engaging with AI chatbots. This aligns with the broader premise of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, which posits that media use is driven by the pursuit of individual satisfaction.

b. Information Seeking

This indicator reflects the informational function of AI chatbots. Participants responded positively to item P8: *"Through Chatbot AI, I obtain the information I need, especially related to emotional needs."* The correlation value of $r = 0.577$ signifies a moderate relationship, indicating that while information retrieval contributes to emotional regulation, its influence is less substantial than that of entertainment or relaxation motives. This suggests that cognitive gratifications play a secondary role compared to affective gratifications in emotional regulation contexts.

c. Escape

Within the U&G theoretical framework, *escape* refers to the use of media as a means to temporarily withdraw from real-life pressures. Participants' responses to item P12: "*I am willing to delay other activities when confiding in Chatbot AI,*" yielded a correlation of $r = 0.638$. This finding suggests that AI chatbots provide users with an emotional refuge, allowing them to disengage from stress-inducing situations and find comfort through mediated communication.

d. Relaxation

The relaxation indicator recorded the highest correlation ($r = 0.758$), highlighting its dominant role. Participants strongly agreed with item P15: "*I use Chatbot AI to improve my mood.*" This underscores the chatbot's function as a digital therapeutic tool, enabling Generation Z to alleviate stress, elevate mood, and restore psychological balance. The finding supports the notion that AI-mediated emotional support can act as a complementary mechanism to traditional coping strategies.

e. Convenience Utility

This indicator relates to the efficiency and responsiveness of AI interaction. Participants affirmed that Chatbot AI provides quicker responses than humans or other media, as reflected in item P19: "*I receive faster responses when confiding in Chatbot AI compared to people or other media.*" The correlation of $r = 0.645$ demonstrates that perceived responsiveness and accessibility significantly contribute to user satisfaction, emphasizing AI's role as a reliable and time-efficient emotional outlet.

f. Pass Time

The pass time indicator shows a relatively lower correlation ($r = 0.576$), suggesting that some users engage with Chatbot AI merely to fill their leisure time. This is reflected in responses such as: "*I talk to Chatbot AI to fill my free time.*" Although this motive is less central, it still signifies the pervasiveness of AI chatbots in users' everyday routines, reinforcing their integration into habitual digital behavior among Generation Z.

These findings are consistent with prior studies by Putri et al [33], which identified AI chatbots as virtual companions that provide emotional support and acceptance for young users. Similarly, Feng et al [34] found that the use of AI chatbots for emotional regulation was significantly associated with reductions in depression and stress levels. Together, these studies affirm the growing role of AI-mediated interaction in shaping emotional coping mechanisms among digitally immersed populations. From a critical standpoint, this study extends previous literature by illustrating how affective gratifications (entertainment and relaxation) outweigh cognitive gratifications (information seeking) in determining emotional outcomes. This highlights a shift in AI use from informational utility toward emotional intimacy and psychological comfort, reflecting the humanization of AI interaction in contemporary media behavior.

Generation Z as Active Users

The findings indicate that 33% of participants have used AI chatbots for emotional validation within the past 1–3 months, while 44% reported that interacting with AI chatbots has become a daily routine activity. On average, participants spent five minutes per day using Chatbot AI for emotional validation. Notably, 41.3% of respondents used Chatbot AI to discuss personal emotional issues, suggesting that consistent engagement qualifies them as active users.

Within the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework, media users are categorized as either active or passive [35] Active users are individuals who intentionally and repeatedly access media to satisfy cognitive and affective needs such as entertainment, information seeking, escape, relaxation, convenience utility, pass time, social interaction, and hedonic gratification [36][37].

The present study found that active AI chatbot users exhibited significant correlations with the indicators of relaxation and entertainment. These findings underscore that stress relief and psychological comfort are the primary motivations for Generation Z in using Chatbot AI. The emotional support provided by chatbots often manifests as entertainment-driven interaction, which enhances users' sense of comfort and enjoyment during engagement.

Interestingly, demographic data show that the average age of frequent users is 22 years old (40.4%), with the majority being female (68.8%). This gender distribution contrasts with Aldasoro et al., who found that male users (19%) are more likely to engage with AI weekly than female users (12%), attributing the gap to disparities in digital literacy, trust, and privacy concerns. The current findings therefore challenge prevailing gender-based assumptions in AI usage, highlighting that female Gen Z users in Tulungagung demonstrate higher emotional engagement and reliance on AI-mediated interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the motives and gratifications underlying the use of AI chatbots as tools for emotional regulation among Generation Z in Tulungagung. The findings confirm the applicability of the Uses and Gratifications theory, demonstrating a positive and significant correlation between chatbot use and the fulfillment of users' emotional and psychological needs. The results indicate that greater frequency and intensity of chatbot interaction are associated with higher levels of emotional satisfaction and self-regulation, suggesting that AI chatbots function not merely as informational media but as affective companions that facilitate emotional well-being among digital-native users.

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From a practical perspective, these findings highlight the growing psychological and communicative relevance of AI-mediated interaction, particularly for younger users who seek immediate and non-judgmental emotional support. Therefore, developers and educators are encouraged to design chatbot systems that incorporate empathetic response models, adaptive emotional recognition, and culturally sensitive communication styles to enhance user trust and engagement.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the study beyond the regional scope and include diverse demographic and cultural groups to examine cross-contextual patterns of emotional regulation through AI. Longitudinal or experimental designs could further explore

causality between chatbot interaction and emotional outcomes, providing deeper insights into the socio-emotional implications of AI-mediated communication in everyday life.

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