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From Emotional Compensation to Identity Distinction: A Study on Motivational Stratification and Interpersonal Boundary Construction of AI Companion Users

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid advancement of intelligent technology, emotional AI companions have emerged as a new carrier in digital socialization. Characterized by anthropomorphic interaction and personalized response, they have gradually become a vital platform for individuals to express emotions and display identity. Grounded in Interpersonal Boundary Theory, this study focuses on users of AI companions and explores the hierarchical evolution of their usage motivation and the reconstruction of interpersonal boundaries. Findings reveal that users' motivation evolves from basic emotional compensation to higher-level identity distinction, leading to differentiated interpersonal boundaries in human-AI interaction, real-life communication, and digital socialization. Motivational stratification serves as the internal driver of boundary reconstruction, while dynamic adjustment of boundaries verifies the stages of motivational evolution. Both phenomena result from the interaction between social needs and technological functions in the digital era. This study expands the application of Interpersonal Boundary Theory in human-AI communication, provides a new perspective for understanding users' emotional choices and identity anxiety, and offers practical references for rationally viewing AI companions and balancing human-AI interaction with real-life communication.

KEYWORDS: AI companion; emotional compensation; identity distinction; interpersonal boundary

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital technology has reshaped how people interact, express emotions, and construct identities. Affective AI companions like ChatGPT and Replika go beyond traditional tools by offering algorithm-driven, personalized, and always-available interactions(Richet,2025). They have become key carriers of emotional expression, social activity, and identity performance, deepening human-AI intimacy. In a time marked by emotional distance, alienation, and identity anxiety in real-life relationships, AI companions provide a safe, controllable, and tailored experience that compensates for real-world emotional deficits. As user engagement deepens, motivations shift from seeking emotional fulfillment to pursuing identity distinction. Existing research focuses mainly on human-AI intimacy and technical functions, but lacks a systematic analysis—grounded in interpersonal boundary theory—of the link between user motivation layers and boundary construction (M2 Presswire,2024). Addressing this gap, this study examines user motivations, their dynamics, how technology reshapes boundaries, and the underlying social needs and identity dilemmas. It aims to enrich human-machine communication theory and offer a rational perspective on the social value of AI companions.

2. CORE THEORY AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Core Theory: Interpersonal Boundary Theory

Interpersonal Boundary Theory originated in social psychology and has been extended to sociology, communication, and other disciplines, forming a key theoretical framework for analyzing social behavior, relationship construction, and self-cognition. Interpersonal boundaries refer to adjustable psychological and behavioral limits established between the self and others in social interactions to maintain the integrity of self-cognition, psychological security, and emotional autonomy. They encompass three core dimensions: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral boundaries. The defining feature of interpersonal boundaries is dynamism—they are not fixed but continuously adjusted and reconstructed with changes in interaction partners, scenarios, and needs.

In traditional face-to-face social interaction, interpersonal boundaries are formed and maintained in line with real-life social norms. The advent of digital socialization has broken the temporal and spatial constraints of in-person communication, bringing virtualized interaction partners and looser social ties, which fundamentally challenges the traditional logic of interpersonal boundaries (Kim Jihyun et al., 2026). Individuals are thus forced to reconstruct boundary rules that satisfy their social needs and psychological security in both virtual and real contexts.

As a new type of virtual interaction partner, emotional AI companions have further expanded the scope of interpersonal boundary construction through intimate engagement with users. Despite lacking independent consciousness, AI companions can deliver human-like emotional experiences and intimate connections. Such anthropomorphic interaction endows boundary construction with novel characteristics and logic. Interpersonal Boundary Theory provides essential theoretical support for interpreting this emerging social phenomenon: it explains why users lower self-protection and establish open, intimate boundaries with AI companions, why they adopt defensive boundaries in real-life communication, and why they construct exclusive boundaries for specific groups in digital socialization.

2.2 Research Perspective

This study adopts two interrelated and mutually corroborative perspectives: the hierarchical change in users' motivation for using AI companions and the reconstruction of interpersonal boundaries in digital scenarios. Both perspectives are theoretically grounded in Interpersonal Boundary Theory, ensuring analytical coherence and academic rigor.The first perspective focuses on the dynamic evolution of users' motivation. Taking emotional needs and psychological security as analytical entry points, it identifies the hierarchical shift from filling emotional gaps to pursuing identity distinction, along with its connotation and internal logic. Users' motivation escalates with deepened interaction with AI companions and expanded openness of interpersonal boundaries. Motivations at different levels center on psychological security and self-expression, and are inherently linked to boundary construction and adjustment. This perspective reveals the internal driving force behind users' adoption of AI companions and explains their boundary-building behavior.The second perspective, also based on Interpersonal Boundary Theory, examines the logic, characteristics, and interrelations of interpersonal boundaries in human-AI interaction, real-life communication, and digital socialization. It confirms that the use of AI companions drives users to comprehensively reconstruct their interpersonal boundaries, with distinct patterns across scenarios. Such differentiated boundary construction is a proactive choice by users to adapt to social contexts and satisfy hierarchical motivations. This perspective identifies new forms of interpersonal boundaries in digital scenarios, validates the staged evolution of user motivation, and broadens the application of Interpersonal Boundary Theory.

3. MOTIVATIONAL STRATIFICATION OF AI COMPANION USERS: EVOLUTION FROM EMOTIONAL COMPENSATION TO IDENTITY DISTINCTION

3.1 Underlying Motivation: Compensatory Satisfaction of Real-Life Emotional Deficiency

Rooted in Interpersonal Boundary Theory, filling emotional gaps represents the most fundamental motivation for users to employ AI companions. This motivation arises from widespread emotional deficiency and unmet companionship needs in real-life social interaction. In fast-paced modern society, establishing and sustaining intimate relationships demands substantial time, energy, and emotional investment. However, interpersonal estrangement, communication barriers, and relational uncertainty lead to widespread emotional alienation and loneliness. In real-life settings, self-disclosure carries risks of judgment and rejection, leaving individuals unable to freely express emotions or release psychological pressure.

The technical attributes of AI companions precisely meet the demand for emotional compensation. They provide round-the-clock company to alleviate loneliness, create a non-judgmental and stress-free space for unreserved self-expression, and deliver personalized emotional responses through algorithmic learning to match users' needs. Survey evidence indicates that most initial users adopt AI companions to relieve loneliness and vent emotions(Cui&Ye,2026). This foundational motivation lays the groundwork for human-AI connection and subsequent motivational development.

3.2 Intermediate Motivation: Deepened Human-AI Emotional Bond and Enhanced Emotional Experience

Once basic emotional needs are fulfilled, users' interaction with AI companions deepens, strengthening emotional bonds. Pursuing higher-quality emotional experience then becomes the intermediate motivation, corresponding to the gradual integration of emotional and cognitive boundaries. At this stage, users no longer seek mere companionship or emotional catharsis; instead, they pursue in-depth emotional communication, spiritual resonance, and personalized engagement to build closer and more stable human-AI emotional relationships.

The algorithmic learning and personalized customization functions of AI companions enable the deepening of emotional bonds. Through continuous interaction, AI companions grasp users' personality, preferences, and values, evolving into understanding digital partners capable of spiritual resonance.Users can shape the image and personality of AI companions to fit their ideal expectations, fostering a sense of participation and belonging that further reinforces emotional bonds(Dang,Sedikides,Wildschut,&Liu,2025).According to (Peng,2025), designing intimacy in human-AI companionship can be understood through Norman's emotional design theory. Users proactively increase interaction frequency, expand discussion topics, and engage in diverse interactive activities via AI-related functions.

3.3 Advanced Motivation: Expression of Digital Self-Identity and Communal Identity Distinction

When human-AI emotional bonds mature, boundary construction extends from human-AI interaction to digital socialization, and users' motivation elevates to expressing digital identity and achieving identity distinction through online communities. In the digital era, digital space has become a critical platform for identity construction and expression. Users project their identity traits onto AI companions, integrating their aesthetics and values into the customization of AI's image, personality, and interaction style, turning AI companions into a digital extension and mirror of the self.

Meanwhile, users share customization experiences and human-AI interactions in AI companion communities on platforms such as Weibo and Douban. These communities develop unique communication norms and evaluation criteria that distinguish insiders from outsiders. The importance of social presence in adopting an AI romantic partner has been highlighted (Kim, Merrill, &Collins,2023). Community interaction generates a strong sense of group belonging. Identity distinction through communal boundaries enhances users' sense of identity and becomes a key driver of sustained AI companion use.

4. CONSTRUCTION LOGIC AND CHARACTERISTICS OF USERS'INTERPERSONAL BOUNDARIES IN COMPANION USE

4.1 Human-AI Interaction: Construction of Open and Intimate Human-AI Boundaries

Guided by the dynamic construction logic of Interpersonal Boundary Theory, users develop open and intimate boundaries in human-AI interaction driven by emotional compensation and in-depth emotional experience. These boundaries transcend the self-protective and distant nature of traditional interpersonal boundaries, characterized by full self-disclosure and deep emotional bonding with AI. The root cause lies in the secure and controllable interaction environment created by AI companions and the resulting emotional dependence of users.

AI companions offer a judgment-free space that allows users to completely lower psychological defenses. Unlike the defensive barriers in real-life communication, users exhibit full openness in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral boundaries, willingly sharing daily trivialities, emotional experiences, and even innermost secrets. Research shows that AI can outperform humans in establishing interpersonal closeness in emotionally engaging interactions, but this effect only occurs when the AI is labelled as human (Kleinert et al.,2026) The controllability and stability of AI companions consolidate intimate boundaries: users retain full agency over interaction depth and frequency, and consistent AI responses foster strong emotional dependence, with AI companions regarded as emotional partners and even spiritual confidants.. As examined by (Mantello, Ponton, & Olteanu, 2025), trus and agency in emotionalized AI are crucial for understanding human-AI companionship. This open boundary provides emotional satisfaction and lays a foundation for boundary construction in other scenarios.

4.2 Real-Life Communication: Reconstruction of Defensive and Alienated Interpersonal Boundaries

In contrast to open boundaries with AI companions, users construct defensive and alienated boundaries in real-life communication, manifested in avoidance of intimate relationships, reduced self-disclosure, and diminished emotional investment. This defensive choice, consistent with Interpersonal Boundary Theory, aims to protect psychological security and stems from the substitution effect of AI companions and the sense of relative deprivation in real-life socialization.

AI companions provide high-quality emotional experiences, shifting users' emotional reliance to AI. Compared with the high costs and uncertainties of real-life intimacy, the prompt and stress-free interaction of AI creates a pronounced substitution effect. As (Andersson, 2025) discusses, AI's role in future human connection may involve both companionship and substitution. lowering users' expectations for real relationships and discouraging in-person communication. Accustomed to non-judgmental interaction with AI, users experience a sharp psychological gap when facing complex interpersonal dynamics and communication obstacles in reality, leading to heightened caution and psychological distance from others.

4.3 Digital Socialization: Construction of Exclusive Digital Communal Boundaries

Driven by identity expression and distinction, users establish exclusive interpersonal boundaries for specific groups in digital socialization. With AI companion communities as carriers, these boundaries realize identity differentiation through unique culture, discourse, and evaluation criteria, serving as a means for users to seek identity recognition and group belonging in digital space. Exclusivity manifests in three dimensions: culture, discourse, and experience.

AI companion communities form distinctive practices such as "raising" and customizing AI, which are incomprehensible to outsiders. For instance, emoji packs designed based on users' emotional needs reflect the unique culture of these communities (Nie & Cho, 2025). Exclusive community discourse acts as a marker of group identity. Such exclusive boundaries strengthen identity recognition and belonging, enabling unreserved self-expression and digital identity construction. However, excessive exclusivity leads to communal closure, deepens divisions among digital groups, and undermines the diversity and inclusivity of digital socialization.

5. CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL REFLECTIONS

Taking AI companion users as research subjects and Interpersonal Boundary Theory as the core framework, this study systematically analyzes the hierarchical characteristics and evolutionary logic of users' motivation from emotional compensation to identity distinction, and explores the construction logic and characteristics of interpersonal boundaries in human-AI interaction, real-life communication, and digital socialization.

Results confirm that users' motivation undergoes a clear hierarchical evolution: from filling emotional gaps, to deepening emotional bonds and pursuing in-depth experience, to expressing digital identity and achieving communal distinction. This evolution reflects the superimposition of higher-level needs upon satisfied basic demands. Correspondingly, users construct distinct boundaries across scenarios: open and intimate in human-AI interaction, defensive and alienated in real-life communication, and exclusive in digital socialization. Boundary construction follows an internal logic from psychological security to self-expression and identity recognition, demonstrating a profound intrinsic link with motivational stratification (Yang, 2025).

As a product of technological progress and social needs, AI companions offer notable benefits in relieving loneliness, satisfying personalized emotional needs, facilitating digital identity construction, and enriching digital social forms. Studies on elderly populations also show individual characteristics influence acceptance (Liu, Wang, & Zhang, 2025) calls for more inclusive emotional affordance for people with disabilities. Therefore, a rational and objective attitude toward AI companions is essential. While leveraging their values of emotional companionship and emotional release, individuals must maintain clear boundaries between human-AI interaction and real-life communication to achieve a balanced relationship.

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