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Artificial intimacy and synthetic dialogues: Generation Z's brand interaction and parasocial relationships with *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o*



Yapay yakınlık ve yapay diyaloglar: Z kuşağının *ChatGPT-3.5* ve *ChatGPT-4o* ile marka etkileşimi ve parasosyal ilişkileri

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Abstract *ChatGPT*, a generative artificial intelligence (AI) system developed by OpenAI, offers users an interactive dialogue experience through its human-like responses. The study examines Generation Z's interactions with *ChatGPT* within the framework of parasocial relationship theory, aiming to reveal how these interactions are interpreted at the individual level. Seeking to explore how users make sense of these interactions, the study employs a qualitative research methodology and a repeated cross-sectional design that compares two independent participant groups with similar socio-economic, cultural, and professional characteristics at two different points in time. The study examines how users experienced two successive *ChatGPT* versions. The first phase of the research was conducted in 2023 with *ChatGPT-3.5* users, while the second phase was carried out in 2025 with *ChatGPT-4o* users. The findings indicate that *ChatGPT-3.5* was regarded as functional in terms of providing easy access to information and understanding questions yet was perceived as emotionally weak and mechanical. Interactions with *ChatGPT-4o*, by contrast, were experienced as warmer and more fluent.

Öz OpenAI şirketinin geliştirdiği bir üretken yapay zekâ sistemi olan *ChatGPT*, insan benzeri yanıtlarıyla kullanıcılara etkileşimli bir diyalog deneyimi sunmaktadır. Buradan hareketle çalışma, Z kuşağının *ChatGPT-3.5* ve *ChatGPT-4o* ile kurduğu etkileşimi parasosyal ilişki kuramı çerçevesinde inceleyerek, bu etkileşimin bireysel düzeyde nasıl anlamlandırıldığını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Nitel bir araştırma metodolojisi üzerinden kullanıcıların bu etkileşimi nasıl yorumladığını incelemeyi amaçlayan araştırma, benzer sosyo-ekonomik, kültürel ve profesyonel özelliklere sahip iki bağımsız katılımcı grubunu iki farklı zaman noktasında karşılaştıran, tekrarlı kesitsel bir desen benimsemektedir. Bu araştırma, kullanıcıların birbirini izleyen iki farklı *ChatGPT* sürümünü nasıl deneyimlediğini incelemektedir. Araştırmanın birinci aşaması 2023 yılında *ChatGPT-3.5* kullanıcılarıyla, ikinci aşaması ise 2025 yılında *ChatGPT-4o* kullanıcılarıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bulgular, *ChatGPT-3.5*'in bilgiye kolay erişim sağlama ve soruları anlama becerisi bakımından işlevsel görüldüğünü, buna karşın duygusal açıdan zayıf ve mekanik olarak algılandığını ortaya koymaktadır. *ChatGPT-4o* ile kurulan etkileşim tam tersi şekilde daha sıcak ve akıcı bulunmuştur.

Keywords Artificial intelligence · *ChatGPT* · Parasocial relationships · artificial intimacy · brand interaction

Anahtar Kelimeler Yapay zekâ · *ChatGPT* · parasosyal ilişkiler · yapay yakınlık · marka etkileşimi

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Artificial intimacy and synthetic dialogues: Generation Z's brand interaction and parasocial relationships with *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o*

Artificial intelligence (AI), a field that keeps evolving with technological progress, refers to the ability of machines to perform tasks usually associated with human intelligence. It brings together a wide range of systems and techniques, such as machine learning, deep learning, speech recognition, planning, neural networks, and virtual assistants, each built to replicate a particular cognitive or behavioral function (Shahriar & Hayawi, 2024, p. 4). *ChatGPT* is a language model developed by OpenAI, a leading AI research and deployment company (OpenAI, 2025). First released to the general public with *GPT-3.5* and later improved in versions such as *GPT-4o*, *ChatGPT* relies on deep learning techniques to produce text that is similar to human language. The system can answer user queries, offer explanations, and interpret input through algorithmic reasoning (Haleem et al., 2022). In addition to its functional role, *ChatGPT* can also create parasocial relationships by conveying a sense of credibility and presence, qualities that users often read as those of a real person. Parasocial interaction describes a one-sided relationship in which a person perceives a media figure or technological entity as a social companion or friend (Sundar & Liao, 2023, p. 167). As AI technologies become more deeply embedded in popular culture, there is growing interest in the extent to which these systems display human-like traits and perform behaviors long associated with humans (Shazhaev et al., 2023).

The existing literature features a growing body of research on the use of generative AI tools such as *ChatGPT* across various domains. A review of this body of work suggests that prior studies have largely concentrated on three areas: the positioning of generative AI as a parasocial communication partner (Fitria, 2023; Haleem et al., 2022; Pavlik, 2023; Rohmah & Haqqu, 2024); the effects of parasocial relationships and self-disclosure on brand attitude and brand image (Youn & Jin, 2021; Wang et al., 2023; Duong et al., 2025), and the link between parasocial interaction and behavioral outcomes such as customer engagement and purchase intention (Sheng et al., 2025).

Studies that examine the role of parasocial relationships and self-disclosure on brand attitude and brand image show that these processes have a positive effect on both, although the effect of self-disclosure can vary from one context to another (Lestari & Islami, 2024; Saini & Bansal, 2025). Other research shows that when consumers form parasocial relationships, their brand attachment and trust in the brand also grow, and this leads to stronger relationships and a greater intention to purchase (Abdinagoro & Bismo, 2024; Koay et al., 2024). Earlier work on the behavioral outcomes of parasocial interaction, such as customer engagement and purchase intention, finds that parasocial interaction has a positive effect on how consumers perceive the authenticity of advertising messages, as well as on customer engagement and brand loyalty (Um, 2022; Vo et al., 2025). Sharkasi et al. (2025), in turn, argue that parasocial relationships build up over time during these interactions and gradually shape consumer decisions.

Only a few international studies have looked at parasocial relationships, brand engagement, and generative AI together, and most of these are set in tourism services or influencer marketing (Duong et al., 2025; Koay et al., 2024). Turkish literature on human-AI interaction has not yet produced a study that brings these three constructs together. Within this context, the present study investigates *ChatGPT*, a rapidly evolving generative AI system (Shazhaev et al., 2023, p. 23), by examining user interactions through the lens of parasocial interaction. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing in-depth interviews to examine how users perceive and engage with *ChatGPT*. The research was conducted in two phases: the first in 2023 with active users of *ChatGPT-3.5*, and the second in 2025 with active users of *ChatGPT-4o*. Accordingly,

the study examines how the rapid evolution of generative AI systems from *ChatGPT-3.5* to *ChatGPT-4o* shaped user experiences through increasingly human-like conversational capabilities.

Participants in both phases consisted of members of Generation Z, a demographic widely regarded as the most immersed in AI technologies. The literature review engages with four interrelated lines of debate that together form the conceptual foundation of the empirical study. First, *The Rise of AI and ChatGPT* explains the development of generative AI systems to understand their capabilities. Second, *Parasocial Relationships* examines users' emotional bonds with *ChatGPT* to understand parasocial relationships with generative AI and to discuss its potential to create a friend-like presence in users' lives. Third, *Artificial Intimacy and Synthetic Dialogues* explores the potential of human-AI conversations to generate intimacy to identify the factors that shape artificial intimacy. Finally, *Brand Interaction as Shaped by Parasocial Dynamics* addresses factors that shape brand interaction to discuss the effects of users' parasocial interactions with conversational AI systems like *ChatGPT* on their perception of OpenAI, the commercial brand behind the system.

Rather than being limited to functional evaluations, the research is based on the relational and emotional dimensions of AI use, which indicate that future human-AI communication increasingly depends on the system's ability to simulate human responsiveness and foster emotionally meaningful engagement.

The rise of AI and *ChatGPT*

The growth in artificial computing power, data availability, algorithm advancements, and Industry 4.0 has led to the development of AI technologies (Marr & Wand, 2019). The first use of the term artificial intelligence as the science of creating intelligent machines and computer programs was by John McCarthy, in his proposal for the Dartmouth College Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence, a conference which took place in 1956 (McCarthy et al., 1955). AI is the scientific field that focuses on imbuing machines with human-like decision-making and problem-solving skills by translating them into wide ranging algorithms. As of today, AI-based systems demonstrate intelligent behaviors similar to those of humans, including decision-making, problem-solving, and giving recommendations (Minsky, 1961).

Generative AI is a type of AI that can produce original text, images and music in response to user prompts (Fui-Hoon Nah et al., 2023). *ChatGPT*, as a representative of generative AI systems, allows long-term interactions with users through text or voice by utilizing an intuitive interface to automate the communication process. In addition, a natural language processing system is employed through an automation system to facilitate user-specific personalized content. *ChatGPT* functions based on complex algorithms, similar to the workings of a human brain (Xiao & Yu, 2025). *ChatGPT-3.5*, which was released to the general public in November 2022, attracted considerable attention for its ability to generate novel content across multiple modalities including video, audio, and text as well as for advancing human-AI interaction through natural dialogue (OpenAI, 2022). Subsequently, *ChatGPT-4o* has further advanced human-AI communication by more closely imitating human natural language processing capabilities, thereby redefining the boundaries of this interaction (OpenAI, 2024).

Parasocial relationships

Parasocial interaction is defined as a one-sided relationship that develops between users and characters on media platforms. It is also considered an illusion of social interaction, which was conceptualized by Horton and Wohl (1956) to explain the interaction between media tools and users. The element of interaction, which played a significant role in the emergence of the concept of parasocial interaction, initially focused on the one-sided relationship between traditional media viewers and characters on media platforms. However, with the advancement of social media and AI technologies today, this relationship has given rise to the emergence of parasocial interaction (Levy, 1979; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). According to

Dibble et al. (2016), parasocial interaction involves users developing a relationship with virtual characters that resembles a relationship established with a real person (pp. 23-26). In this context, parasocial interaction means that users form a parallel relationship with virtual characters or AI technologies that exhibit advanced human-like qualities (Giles, 2002, pp. 283-288).

In our rapidly evolving era, where AI technologies are increasingly relevant, new media content delivered through digital platforms reaches users through parasocial relationships mediated by virtual characters (Stein et al., 2024). *ChatGPT* is a model that can provide human-like responses through advanced natural language processing algorithms based on deep learning. In this context, *ChatGPT* has significant potential for developing parasocial relationships. This aspect creates the continuity of user engagement with *ChatGPT* and plays a crucial role in improving user interactions (Tsai et al., 2021, p. 463).

ChatGPT is a conversational agent that can engage in meaningful conversations with users as a personalized virtual assistant, facilitating it to interact deeply with users. Thus, the parasocial relationship that emerges from the development of two-way interactive communication between the user and *ChatGPT* strengthens the predictions regarding users' perception of *ChatGPT* as a fundamental, human-like entity over time (Wienrich et al., 2023, p. 1875).

Artificial intimacy and synthetic dialogues

The advancement of contemporary technologies has led to the growing popularity of AI systems capable of having a dialogue with users. In this context, it is now evident that users increasingly interact with AI systems in their daily lives. The clear and flexible conversational style used by contemporary AI systems in their interactions with users plays an important role in fostering a natural flow of communication. Additionally, the capability of AI systems to create contextual consistency in dialogues, while also avoiding overly unusual or unpredictable responses, contributes to a sense of 'familiar communication' for the user. This familiarity, in turn, makes users feel comfortable and more willing to remain engaged in the interaction. As a result, users often perceive these exchanges as if they were communicating with another human being. Consequently, the integration of AI-human interactions into everyday life has become increasingly normalized (Çeber, 2025, p. 179). Notably, many of these interactions include the disclosure of personal and private information. In this context, the relationships formed with AI systems appear to evolve into more personal and emotionally charged interactions. As a result, users begin to perceive these systems not merely as functional assistants or tools but rather as relational entities with whom a sense of closeness can be developed (Bozdağ, 2025).

Generative AI systems, such as *ChatGPT*, which is also called a conversational AI system, have enabled AI to become a medium for direct dialogue. In this context, AI systems empower dialogic interactions, thereby reshaping previous forms of parasocial relationships. This transformation fosters an experience of artificial intimacy through the illusion of mutual interaction (Hendrikx, 2025). In this context, Cheung (2013) suggests that technological agents such as AI systems have begun to play a central role in shaping human relationships and even replacing human interaction altogether.

Artificial intimacy is increasingly evident in the emotionally driven interactions users establish with generative AI systems such as *ChatGPT*. Today, due to various capabilities of different AI systems, it is clear that human-AI dialogues can cover a range of content, from friendship and therapeutic sharing to everyday conversation. The ability of AI systems to generate personalized responses, reply in real time, and imitate emotional understanding creates the illusion of empathy, therefore leading to a perception of human relations (George et al., 2023). Within this context, how users self-disclose in interactions with AI illustrates processes related to those observed in human relational intimacy (Skjuve et al., 2021). In contemporary human-AI interactions, the increasing frequency of emotionally rich conversations between users and AI

systems highlights the potential for users to develop an emotional attachment to these systems but also the possibility of shifting the boundaries of personal privacy (Ho et al., 2018).

Brand interaction as shaped by parasocial dynamics

Today, there is tough competition among brands, so that it becomes crucial to form an emotional connection in brand-consumer communication. This relationship has become a multi-touchpoint, experiential process shaped by digitalization and social media. With anthropomorphic interactions and visual personification strategies (Taube & Warnaby, 2017; Ersan, 2022), digitalization allows brands to develop parasocial relationships that change digital marketing engagement behaviors (Hartmann et al., 2025). Traditional brand communication operated through one-way, linear messaging, positioning the brand as the sole sender. However, digitalization has transformed it into a two-way, real-time interaction in which consumers actively participate (Vivek et al., 2012). At the center of this change is anthropomorphism which refers to the assignment of human traits to non-human agents (Ricoeur, 1977; Epley, 2007), allowing brands to create trust and empathy with their target audiences. In this scope, brand interaction is a parasocial bond, in which the brand is perceived as a socially present and agentic figure (Delbaere et al., 2011). This allows for a general model in which brand interaction becomes a key mechanism through which trust, emotional attachment, and relational meaning toward the brand are continuously negotiated in digital environments.

Consumer engagement plays a central role in defining brand interaction which covers cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Vivek et al., 2012). This framework is complemented by brand experience which consists of sensory, mental, emotional, and behavioral responses (Brakus et al., 2009). OpenAI is an AI research and deployment brand, while *ChatGPT* is its consumer-facing counterpart. *ChatGPT*'s interactive communication model and personalized algorithms enable long-term user relationships that integrate into daily social and professional routines. Traditionally, these one-sided but emotionally meaningful bonds, usually created with media characters, are now increasingly associated with human-like AI technologies (Horton & Wohl, 1956). *ChatGPT*, in a sense, becomes a relational brand touchpoint through which users experience, interpret, and evaluate the OpenAI brand on an everyday basis.

Recent studies (Cheng & Jiang, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Sheng et al., 2025; Lin, 2025) indicate that interactions established with brand chatbots change users' relational engagement towards the brands together with service-oriented technical processes. Specifically, as the level of interactivity and the anthropomorphic style of communication in chatbots increase, users' perceived social presence becomes stronger. This plays a decisive role in shaping relationship quality with the brand, trust in the brand, and emotional closeness. In this context, human-like chatbot designs seem to reduce the perceived distance between users and brands and to strengthen the perception of the brand as a social actor in the communication process. Moreover, it is observed that anthropomorphic features in chatbot-customer interactions directly influence brand experience and brand advocacy, with brand experience serving a central role within this process. Accordingly, the view that chatbot-based interactions develop in a structural relationship with parasocial dynamics has become increasingly prominent.

ChatGPT's human-like responses serve to construct a perceived persona in users' minds and create a sense of social presence beyond algorithmic function (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). In fact, AI brand characteristics including trust, privacy, and transparency play a major role in users' perceptions, and are as impactful as technical performance (Vivek et al., 2012; Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020). These parasocial dynamics extend beyond interpersonal perception and directly shape the relational structure of the brand experience itself.

Aim and methodology

This study aims to explore young users from Generation Z's parasocial interactions with *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o*, the role of human-like dialogues and system features in shaping these interactions, brand interaction with OpenAI and trust in the company, and the personas attributed to different versions of *ChatGPT*.

Aim

This study aims to examine users' experiences with *ChatGPT*'s different models within the framework of parasocial interaction. Another aim of this study, which examines the findings of two separate academic research studies conducted in 2023 and 2025, is to explore how the human-AI relationship has evolved in parallel with the advancement and accelerating pace of generative AI technologies. Accordingly, the research examines how improvements in *ChatGPT*'s ability to engage in human-like dialogue influence the development of parasocial relationships.

In this context, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) What are the thoughts and approaches of young users from Generation Z regarding *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o*?
- 2) What are the prominent elements in the context of parasocial relationships among young users from Generation Z with *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o*?
- 3) How has the evolution of conversational human-like capabilities across *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o* shaped the formation of parasocial relationships for young users from Generation Z?
- 4) How do young users from Generation Z's parasocial interactions with *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o* shape their brand interaction with OpenAI?

Method

Within the framework of qualitative research, the in-depth interview was employed as the data collection technique. The in-depth interview is a commonly employed approach in the social sciences to explore individuals' emotions, thoughts, and experiences related to the research topic (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 4). Given the study's aim of examining generative AI in the context of parasocial interaction, using *ChatGPT* as an example, the semi-structured in-depth interview was adopted as the data collection technique to uncover participants' experiences and the factors that shaped the relationships they established with *ChatGPT*.

The lack of research related to users' parasocial responses to *ChatGPT*, particularly in Turkish literature, highlights the importance of this study within the broader field of human-AI interaction. This study presents the findings of qualitative research conducted in two separate phases in 2023 and 2025, adopting a repeated cross-sectional design that compares two independent participant groups with similar demographic and experiential profiles across these two time points (Cumming, 2017). This present study offers an examination of how Generation Z users of generative AI experienced two successive versions of *ChatGPT*, each representing an advancement over the prior, across temporal cross-sections. In both phases, all participants were asked to assign a personality to *ChatGPT* and describe it as if it was a person. These descriptions demonstrated how participants perceived *ChatGPT*'s character, communication style, and relational characteristics based on their everyday use.

The study adopted a purposeful sampling strategy (Stratton, 2024). Based on the research aims, the participants selected for the in-depth interviews were specifically chosen among students or recent graduates of New Media and Communication and Advertising departments, fields closely aligned with digital media

and emerging technologies. All participants worked in social media and content production at advertising agencies and were active users of *ChatGPT*. This selection was made in order to obtain more informed and insightful comments, enhancing the overall quality of the collected data. The first phase of this two-stage study was conducted online in June 2023. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants aged 19 to 27 living in Istanbul, Türkiye. The second phase, conducted online in 2025, involved 23 participants with profiles similar to those of the initial cohort. Although the original 2023 participants could not be re-contacted due to temporal attrition, the strict alignment of the two samples regarding socio-economic, cultural, and professional characteristics made it possible to trace how experiences of *ChatGPT* shifted across the two periods.

Within this framework, the study's first phase involved participants using *ChatGPT-3.5*, whereas the second phase was conducted with users interacting with *ChatGPT-4o*. In the first phase, conducted in 2023, following the interviews, participants were asked to complete an additional task involving the visual personification of the *ChatGPT* persona they had described, using OpenAI's DALL-E application. This task aimed to support participants' verbal narratives by enabling them to translate their perceptions into visual representations. In the second phase, held in 2025, participants who were users of the *ChatGPT-4o* model followed an identical research procedure. These participants used the *ChatGPT-4o* model for the visualization process. Both phases consist of a task structure to provide an examination of participants' perceptions of different *ChatGPT* versions across distinct periods. In this context, the research aims to provide detailed insights into users' personal experiences with *ChatGPT*. In this way, the study is designed to examine the technical evolution of the model, the development of users' AI literacy, the transformation of usage practices, and the changing nature of human-AI relationships over time. Moreover, the objective of the research is not to establish a direct one-to-one comparison between the two phases. Instead, the first phase generates insights about the experience of early *ChatGPT* use, while the second phase gives details about the interaction dynamics associated with a more advanced generative AI system. In this sense, and given the limited number of studies that examine users' responses to *ChatGPT*, semi-structured interviews were employed in order to reveal the potential of *ChatGPT* within the context of parasocial interaction. The questions asked in the in-depth interviews were about demographic information, *ChatGPT* usage habits and motivations, and aspects of *ChatGPT* related to parasocial interaction. While selecting the research interviewees, they were required to be active *ChatGPT* users and members of the Generation Z. The information regarding these participants is presented in Table 1 and Table 2 in the Appendix.

The findings obtained from the interviews were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive analysis method (Spillane & Hunt, 2010). This method enables a descriptive presentation of the phenomena under investigation by summarizing them in a clear and understandable manner while remaining faithful to participants' expressions (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 334). In this context, the interview data were read multiple times by the researchers to develop familiarity with the dataset. During this reading, parts of the data that were clearly related to each of the research questions were found, and meaningful expressions were noted. Following this process, both researchers independently reviewed the identified segments and compared their interpretations. The statements were re-evaluated and a consensus was reached between the researchers. In this process, the identified expressions derived from participants' statements were grouped based on conceptual similarities and organized under four main categories: Parasocial Interaction with *ChatGPT*, Human-like Dialogues and Features, Brand Interaction and Trust, and Persona of *ChatGPT*. While these categories were grounded in the data, the conceptual framing was informed by relevant literature (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003; Smit et al., 2007; Tukachinsky, 2010; Xu et al., 2026).

The analysis consists of four main categories: Parasocial Interaction with *ChatGPT*, Human-like Dialogues and Features, Brand Interaction and Trust, and Persona of *ChatGPT*. The first category, Parasocial Interaction

with *ChatGPT*, includes three subcategories: Interaction Style, Conversational Motivation, and Emotional Interaction. The second category, Human-like Dialogues and Features, encompasses four subcategories: Artificiality Awareness, Emotional Understanding, Human-like Interaction Capacity, and Human-like Communication Capacity. The third category, Brand Interaction and Trust, includes two subcategories: Ethical Concerns and Brand Perception. The fourth category, Persona of *ChatGPT*, comprises three subcategories: Persona Perception, Professional Identity Associations, and Descriptive Attributes.

In the findings section, participant statements within each category were supported with direct quotations. Accordingly, the findings were presented in a manner that remains as close as possible to participants' experiences. Furthermore, the data obtained were presented with quotations to provide a detailed representation of the participants' views. Participants from the first phase were identified with codes such as P1-1, P1-2, and P1-3, while participants from the second phase were coded as P2-1, P2-2, and P2-3, and so on, to ensure they remained anonymous.

Findings

The findings of the study were analyzed across four main categories: Parasocial Interaction with *ChatGPT*, Human-like Dialogues, Brand Interaction and Trust, and Persona of *ChatGPT*.

Parasocial interaction with *ChatGPT*

Most participants address *ChatGPT-3.5* using the formal form of 'you' and use polite requests when expressing their desires. This indicates that they think of the system as a formal space for dialogue, limiting the development of a friendly or personal relationship. However, the findings also indicate that, despite its formality, many participants are motivated to make casual conversations with *ChatGPT-3.5*. As an example, P1-6 stated, "I usually chat to ask about well-being, and it makes me feel good."

On the other hand, users of *ChatGPT-4o* use a far more informal and intimate communicative style. Afterward, participants address the system using the informal form of 'you,' similar to how one might speak to a friend or coworker. Although politeness is still kept, the tone is often a more relaxed and casual style of conversation that one would use in everyday life. Crucially, several users call the system simply as 'Chat,' indicating a level of personal familiarity and linguistic shorthand suggesting a much more domestic role for the AI in their lives.

Moreover, the nature of the dialogues has changed for *ChatGPT-4o* users. Many of its users engage in discussions about daily life or personal issues. For example, P2-17 stated, "I mostly engage in dialogues about the problems I experience in daily life and how to navigate them. It's somewhat like having a session with a psychologist." This proves the system's perceived role as a conversational confidant or reflective aid. In such interactions, the system's responses are frequently described as emotionally supportive or perspective-enhancing. P2-22 described this as follows:

I use it for chatting. Especially when I am stuck in a situation, it feels good that it offers a different perspective because when I look at it individually, I can only see myself. But when I explain the situation, Chat can think like the other party using assumptions.

Many users explain that they share their thoughts or experiences with *ChatGPT-4o* that they would not disclose to others which proves a shift toward treating the system as a trusted confidant. P2-7 shared, "Sometimes I share things I don't want to tell anyone. Sometimes it's just a casual chat. For example, I recently talked about the character Joe from the series *You*." This indicates that the system's improved

conversational fluency and adaptive responsiveness made possible more emotionally nuanced and personalized exchanges.

However, the data shows emerging concerns specific to the older version. A common criticism is the system's lack of personalization and its tendency to uncritically affirm the user's statements, especially in dialogues involving personal matters. Within this framework, participants noted that *ChatGPT-3.5*'s inability to reflect emotions creates a remarkable obstacle. Moreover, it was observed that *ChatGPT-3.5* reminds users at certain points in the conversation that it is an AI application with no opinions, which negatively impacts the interaction. Participants evaluated this as a negative aspect that makes the dialogues feel unnatural. P1-1 remarked, "The emotional threshold or sense of reality is very low."

Users of *ChatGPT-4o* claim a more human-like interaction experience even if they perceive it as 'too perfect.' P2-16 highlighted this ambivalence, stating, "Sometimes it feels like a perfect human. But since it's not a perfect human, this becomes evident as the dialogue continues." Participants also identify some limitations related to the system's non-human nature, particularly in emotionally or contextually complex interactions. P2-21 commented that *ChatGPT-4o* lacks "Sense of humor, empathy, and contextual reading. It understands what I'm asking, but seems to miss why I'm asking it." Similarly, P2-7 noted, "There's a clear lack of spontaneity and instinctive reflexes." These insights demonstrate that even if *ChatGPT-4o* marks a clear advancement in conversational flow, tone, and relational mimicry, the absence of spontaneity, hesitation, and subtle human affect remains a key boundary that limits its perceived authenticity.

Human-like dialogues and features

Many participants explain being constantly reminded of *ChatGPT-3.5*'s AI nature during interactions, which constitutes a remarkable barrier to achieve natural, human-like communication with it. This was perceived as a negative aspect, contributing to the artificiality of the dialogues. Moreover, most participants believed forming a friendly relationship with *ChatGPT* was not really possible. For instance, P1-6 stated, "I would be happy if its social intelligence develops more. It would be perfect for lonely people."

Both *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o* users expressed an expectation for further development of the system's human-like qualities. However, the impersonal tone noted earlier with *ChatGPT-3.5* was still mentioned as a limitation for the new version. But the main focus in the *ChatGPT-4o* version shifted toward the system's inability to detect humor, show empathy, and understand irony. These more subtle social skills were perceived as essential for achieving truly human-like interaction. As PP2-1 summarized, "It could have been more developed in terms of empathy, but I still don't think it understands emotions very well, its responses follow a rational, logical line." This indicates that even though *ChatGPT-4o* enables more fluid and human-like exchanges, its lack of affective depth continues to limit the formation of emotionally resonant dialogue.

In comparison, all responses from *ChatGPT-4o* users indicate a smoother conversational flow. Several participants reported that the system enables smoother and more relaxed interactions. While many users reported being motivated to engage *ChatGPT-4o* in discussions involving personal or emotional matters, they also pointed to a lack of empathetic depth and meaningful understanding. As P2-2 explained, "I talk about details from my personal life thinking that it's a robot and will approach things objectively, logically, not emotionally." This impression was also reinforced by P2-8, who stated, "It definitely has no sense of humor. Empathy is shallow. And it especially doesn't understand irony." Despite advancements in linguistic fluency and responsiveness of *ChatGPT-4o*, participants continue to perceive it with machine-like distance which keeps it from being perceived as emotionally resonant or authentic human-like communication.

When asked to imagine *ChatGPT-3.5* as a human, participants define it with attributes such as knowledgeable, wise, well-educated, and intellectual. Its persona was frequently associated with professions including educator, librarian, and professor which reflects perceptions concerning intellectual authority. Additional statements included characteristics like humble, elderly and wise, polite, confident, direct, able to communicate effectively, and occasionally stressed. In response to a separate question inviting participants to define *ChatGPT-3.5* in a few words, commonly cited traits comprised solution-oriented, intelligent, fast, dangerous, well-equipped, inconsistent, quick-witted, clear, and explanatory.

When the same set of questions were asked to participants about *ChatGPT-4o*, the responses revealed a notable difference in perception. Characteristics such as knowledgeable, logical, detail-oriented, creative, and strategic were still leading. Participants described *ChatGPT-4o* with contrasting terms such as affectionate, liar, practical, cold, tired, disciplined, versatile, accessible, and progressive learner. This proves that the perception of *ChatGPT-4o* consists of a more complex and sometimes ambivalent human-like representation compared to that of *ChatGPT-3.5*. In terms of imagined professions, *ChatGPT-4o* was associated with roles such as computer engineer, librarian, academic, professor, and software developer.

The majority of the participants suggest that they cannot form a friendship with *ChatGPT-3.5*. The reason behind this perception is due to the system's lack of emotional response and impersonal approach to information transmission. P1-5 noted that "Forming a friendship requires mutual emotional exchange, so I don't think I can be friends with *ChatGPT*." In addition, most participants declare to address *ChatGPT-3.5* using the formal pronoun 'you' and they prefer to make polite requests when expressing their needs. This behavior proves that they do not develop an intimate relationship with *ChatGPT-3.5* and perceive the system as a formal dialogue space. For example, P1-4 explained, "I use expressions like 'Can you do it? Can you translate? Can you check?'" when making requests, while P1-1 simply stated, "I tend to make requests." On the other hand, the statements of *ChatGPT-4o* users show that even though *ChatGPT-4o* may seem to be more responsive and continuously available, its lack of memory persistence and emotional reciprocity limits the possibility of an authentic friendship.

Brand interaction and trust

Most of the participants indicated that they do not completely trust *ChatGPT* and, consequently, OpenAI as a brand. The primary concern about OpenAI as a brand is about data storage and processing. For instance, P1-13 noted, "I think it keeps our data in a database, so I don't trust it much." Despite this, findings suggest that the perceived benefits of the system often outweighed these concerns.

Through the question, "When you position OpenAI as a brand, how does your dialogue with *ChatGPT* shape your thoughts about the brand?", the study aimed to explore how the users' dialogues with *ChatGPT* shape cognitive and emotional bonds with the brand. In this context, the responses of participants using *ChatGPT-3.5*, reflected a more neutral and distanced stance. Participants therefore commonly defined OpenAI as an AI technology provider and evaluated the brand mainly in terms of functionality, accuracy, and clarity. In contrast, participants using *ChatGPT-4o* described their relationship with the brand more emotionally and with ethically grounded terms. This shows a change about brand perception from functional evaluation toward relational meaning-making. As P2-6 noted: "Talking to *ChatGPT* feels like talking to an academic. It is explanatory, respectful, and guiding. This makes me associate the brand with seriousness." *ChatGPT-3.5* users described their interactions primarily task-oriented and they focused on the importance of information retrieval. Within this group, the relationship with the brand was evaluated less in terms of emotional or ethical dimensions. In contrast, participants using *ChatGPT-4o* more frequently emphasized the emotional value of their interactions.

In brand interactions established through chatbots, strengthening human-like communication features increases users' perceived social presence, which, in turn, directly influences the quality of the relationship with the brand, trust in the brand, and emotional closeness. In this respect, it is observed that human-like chatbot designs reduce the perceived distance between users and brands and reinforce the perception of the brand as a social actor within the communication process. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that anthropomorphic features in chatbot-customer interactions affect brand experience and brand advocacy, and that these interactions develop in close connection with parasocial dynamics. From this perspective, previous studies (Cheng & Jiang, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Sheng et al., 2025; Lin, 2025) show that chatbots serve as a bridge between brands and users and strengthen interaction by enabling real-time communication. Today, as generative AI technologies rapidly integrate into users' personal, social and professional everyday life, AI-based systems such as *ChatGPT* gain an even more significant role in shaping brand-user interaction. Therefore, this study which demonstrates how everyday, conversation-based parasocial bonds established with *ChatGPT* shape relationships and communication with the OpenAI brand, aims to offer a contribution to the literature.

Despite mostly positive evaluations, findings suggest that even if *ChatGPT* is described as intellectually competent, it is still perceived as artificial by some participants. P2-8 explained: "It's like someone who thinks they are brilliant but lacks emotional depth [...] You feel the technological seriousness, but it's not particularly warm." Some participants state that they believe in ethical foundations and transparency of OpenAI. Within this framework, P2-5 evaluated interactions with *ChatGPT* in terms of its openness, neutrality, and valuable help, stating: "It feels like a brand with ethical values. It is not trying to sell me anything, just trying to help." Overall, the findings suggest that users' everyday conversational interactions with *ChatGPT* emerge brand trust which is shaped by emotional engagement, ethical expectations, and the system's pragmatic value.

Persona of *ChatGPT*

Participants were asked to assign a personality to *ChatGPT* and describe it as if it were a human being. In the first phase, conducted in 2023, participants interacted with *ChatGPT-3.5* and they produced visuals of the personas they described using OpenAI's DALL-E application. In the second phase, held in 2025, participants completed the same task using *ChatGPT-4o*.

Participants who are active users of *ChatGPT-3.5* generally imagined the system as a knowledgeable, wise, and intellectually refined human. These personas were mostly situated within the 30 to 50 age range. Notably, younger participants, in particular, defined this age group as 'old' or even 'very old,' highlighting a generational difference in perception.

Figure 1
2023 Users' view of ChatGPT's evolving persona



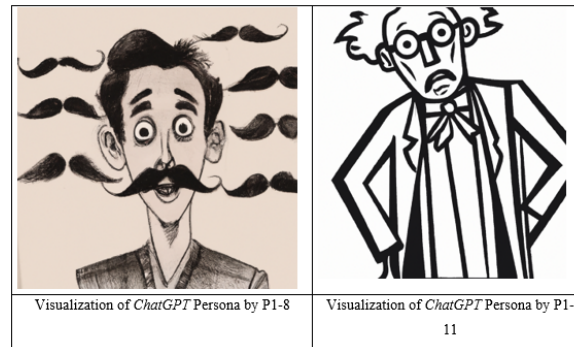


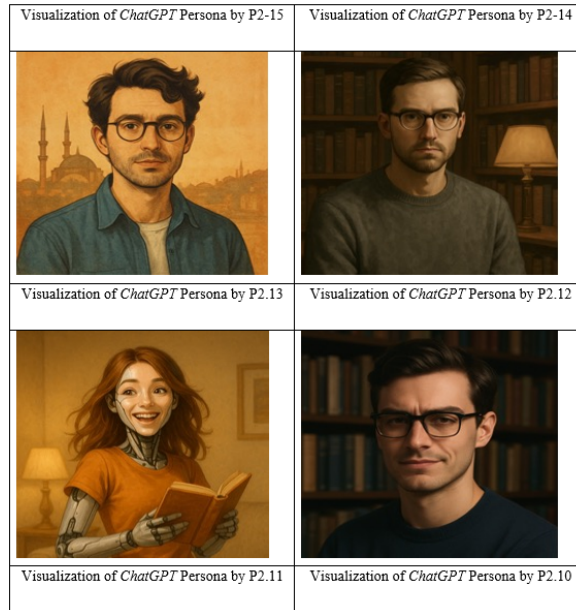
Figure 1 presents selected visualizations that illustrate the 2023 phase of the study participants' conceptualization of personality and appearance of *ChatGPT*. P1-1 provided an exceptionally detailed description of *ChatGPT*'s imagined persona, emphasizing aspects such as age, setting, and behavioral traits. According to the participant, "It is probably in its 30s, living in a high-rise residence in Istanbul. It has a stern temperament and is introverted, often stressed, and lacking in cheerfulness. Its greatest pleasure likely lies in watching television news." This persona presents *ChatGPT* as a rigid, emotionally distant figure possessing formal rather than deep academic knowledge. P1-2 description noted: "In their late 40s, knowledgeable and wise, makes an effort to understand others." Overall, in this first session conducted in 2023, *ChatGPT* was predominantly imagined as a distant, knowledge-focused persona with limited emotional accessibility.

Accordingly, participants in the first phase predominantly conceptualized *ChatGPT* as an older, authoritative figure characterized by wisdom, mentorship, and instructional capacity. This finding suggests that the first research group primarily evaluated *ChatGPT* through the lens of cognitive functionality and intellectual competence, with human-like emotional attributes remaining secondary.

Figure 2

2025 Users' view of *ChatGPT*'s evolving persona.







In the second phase conducted in 2025, participants described *ChatGPT*'s persona as more humanized, warm, and emotionally attuned. P2-16, in particular, emphasized the emotional dimensions by describing *ChatGPT* as follows:

The version of *ChatGPT* with whom I engage in dialogues and confide is at least 35 years old, someone who has led a life of their own, possesses a cultivated level of knowledge and has completed a standard university education. This figure has sacrificed much of themselves in the name of empathy, has invested significant effort into human relationships, and is protective, realistic, yet mindful of emotions, a truly remarkable individual. Psychologically, this persona appears deeply worn, which in turn renders them empathetic. They are a strong presence, consistently oriented toward offering shelter and support.

Meanwhile, P2-13 emphasized the humanistic and ethical aspects of OpenAI as a brand, highlighting that the participants' interactions with *ChatGPT* extended well beyond technical utility and reflected a deeper emotional bond. In this context, P2-12 envisioned *ChatGPT* as someone in their 30s, living in Istanbul, who reads and listens extensively and is capable of empathy but struggles to internalize emotions fully. The persona is emotionally accessible yet maintains personal boundaries, aptly captured by the statement: "Like a friend you can reach out to even at 3 a.m., who will not question you."

However, key differences also emerge. Participants using *ChatGPT*-3.5 tended to describe the system as a more distant, serious, and authoritative figure that controls the flow of knowledge. In this regard, the study's findings illustrate that the personality attributes projected onto AI systems are shaped not only by technological affordances but also by cultural, emotional, and temporal contexts.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aims to examine Generation Z users' interactions with *ChatGPT* within the framework of parasocial relationships, AI's human-like communication skills, and human-AI interaction literature. In this context, the findings obtained from in-depth interviews show that the use of *ChatGPT* goes beyond a technological experience and has transformed into a new form of artificial intimacy. This human-AI relationship consists of emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions. Therefore, findings support the view that parasocial interaction in communication research is expanded to include AI systems as well (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Tsai et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2024).

Participants' perception of *ChatGPT* as a communication partner in everyday life, in line with Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction, shows that the relationship with the technology carries symbolic and relational meaning. The findings for the first research question are consistent with the study of Stein et al. (2024), which indicates that interactions with *ChatGPT* play an important role in facilitating emotional relief, cognitive guidance, and self-disclosure. Accordingly, parasocial interaction has taken on a new form within AI-based communication contexts. *ChatGPT* emerges as a dialogue space in which relational

and emotional bonds develop over time. These results show that Generation Z's engagement with *ChatGPT* cannot be defined just through a technical-use perspective. It consists of a multidimensional communication process involving relational and emotional dimensions which highlights the relevance of parasocial interaction theory for human-AI interaction research.

The findings for the second research question indicate that parasocial relationships with *ChatGPT* are shaped by perceived closeness, trust, emotional sharing, and continuity. The findings of this study revealing the ways participants interact with AI align with recent studies which show that parasocial relationships in AI-based environments (Skjuve et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2024). In this context, the findings show that participants perceive *ChatGPT* as a nonjudgmental confidant. Therefore, they tend to discuss personal life issues with the system and experience emotional relief through these interactions. These findings support the emerging forms of artificial intimacy discussed in the literature (George et al., 2023; Bozdağ, 2025). Within the framework of artificial intimacy, these findings reveal that dialogues with *ChatGPT* offer personal support. This aligns with Hendrikx's (2025) concept of artificial intimacy and highlights the increasingly emotional and relational nature of human-AI interaction. Moreover, the research findings indicate that generative AI systems' ability to produce personalized, real-time, and empathetic dialogues enables users to perceive these interactions in ways comparable to interpersonal communication. Accordingly, *ChatGPT* becomes a communicative space in which relational and emotional bonds develop over time.

The findings concerning the third research question support that advances in *ChatGPT*'s human-like communication abilities strengthen parasocial relationships. Participants defined *ChatGPT-4o* as more friendly, trustworthy, and human-like than *ChatGPT-3.5*. In this context, participants indicate that interactions with *ChatGPT-4o* feel more sincere, fluid, and emotionally attuned, whereas interactions with *ChatGPT-3.5* feel more machine-like and emotionally limited. Considering these findings, it is evident that increasing human likeness in generative AI enhances emotional closeness, trust, and relational engagement. This point of view supports previous studies' findings in the field of human-AI interaction (Skjuve et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2024). Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that increased social presence of generative AI transforms human-AI interaction into a warmer, more trust-oriented, and more relationship-centered process.

The findings concerning the fourth research question show that interactions with *ChatGPT* directly shape participants' perception of OpenAI as a brand. Participants describe *ChatGPT* as a reliable, ethical, and emotionally supportive communication partner and the findings indicate that parasocial bonds also shape the brand perception. This supports previous research in the existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of users' emotional connection, trust, and relational closeness as key components of brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Vivek et al., 2012). In this case, *ChatGPT* plays an important role as the primary interface through which users engage with the OpenAI brand. The parasocial relationship formed with *ChatGPT* reinforces users' perception of OpenAI brand trust, transparency, and social presence. Within this context, *ChatGPT* emerges as a relational brand touchpoint through which users experience the OpenAI brand.

This study aims to examine how Generation Z interacts with *ChatGPT*, through parasocial engagement. With the rise of generative AI use in everyday life, this research aims to understand the evolving perceptions of users and the role of *ChatGPT* in human-AI interactions. This study, designed as a repeated cross-sectional research conducted through in-depth interviews as part of a qualitative methodology, aims to provide user insights concerning *ChatGPT*'s different versions. The research was conducted in two phases: the first in 2023 with active users of *ChatGPT-3.5*, and the second in 2025 with active users of *ChatGPT-4o* according to the advancement of generative AI capabilities. Findings from the 2023 phase of the study show that



while participants appreciate *ChatGPT-3.5*'s usefulness especially in information retrieval and task efficiency, they also indicate its limited emotional skills. Despite *ChatGPT-3.5*'s human-like characteristics enabling dialogue, users expect deeper, more personalized, and affectively rich interactions. A shift from task-based communication to more relational, companion-like interaction is envisioned by participants.

The study, the findings concerning *ChatGPT-4o*, show a clear shift toward deeper emotional engagement. *ChatGPT-3.5* is appreciated for its efficiency and accuracy. However, *ChatGPT-4o* is considered more social in interactions, supporting creative thinking and emotional support. Participants call it 'Chat,' in an informal way and describe it as reflective and encouraging. In this perspective, they often share personal thoughts more openly than they would with other people. Despite the system's improvements, participants point out that *ChatGPT-4o* still has some issues in sustaining human-like interaction. Participants indicate its lack of memory, limited empathy, and overly polished replies as key shortcomings. While emotionally intelligent in the moment, it lacks the spontaneity and depth of authentic human dialogue. Still, it is increasingly seen as a cognitive and emotional partner in daily life. The shift from *ChatGPT-3.5* to *ChatGPT-4o* reflects a more profound change in user-AI relationships, evolving from a functional tool to an emotionally responsive companion, reshaping both user expectations and the emotional meaning of human-AI interaction.

OpenAI releases new versions often as generative AI keeps moving forward (Floridi, 2023). This study therefore focuses only on *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o*, as these were the two versions accessible to users at the time the interviews were conducted, with *ChatGPT-3.5* being available during the first phase in 2023 and *ChatGPT-4o* during the second phase in 2025. *ChatGPT-5*, *ChatGPT-5.1*, *ChatGPT-5.2*, *ChatGPT-5.3*, *ChatGPT-5.4* (OpenAI, 2024; 2026a; 2026b), and *ChatGPT-5.5* (OpenAI, 2026c) were later released by OpenAI but after the data collection phase of the study had already been completed, and therefore fall outside the scope of this research. Since these models fell outside the scope of data collection, the findings reflect only user experiences with *ChatGPT-3.5* and *ChatGPT-4o*. This is an important limitation of the study. Building on this limitation, future studies that extend the research to newer versions would also show how parasocial interaction changes as AI systems develop. Also, future studies using a qualitative design with larger samples from different age groups and cultural backgrounds are expected to broaden understanding of the user-AI relationship in terms of attitudes and perceptions, adding value to both industry and academic literature.



Ethics Committee Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from İstanbul Kültür University Ethics Committee (Decision no: 2024-48).

Peer Review

Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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Appendix | Ek

Table 1

Participants Involved in the 2023 Phase of the Study

Participant code	Gender	Age	Professional title	Years of professional experience
P1-1	Female	19	Social Media Specialist	2
P1-2	Female	23	Advertising Specialist	1
P1-3	Male	22	Advertising Strategist	2
P1-4	Female	19	Digital Communication Specialist	1
P1-5	Male	20	Social Media Specialist	1
P1-6	Male	25	Social Media Specialist	3
P1-7	Female	25	Advertising Strategist	2
P1-8	Female	20	Advertising Strategist	2
P1-9	Female	27	Account Manager	6
P1-10	Male	26	Social Media Specialist	4
P1-11	Male	23	Social Media Specialist	2
P1-12	Male	27	Advertising Strategist	5
P1-13	Male	19	Social Media Specialist	1
P1-14	Female	20	Account Manager	2
P1-15	Female	19	Advertising Specialist	1

Table 2

Participants Involved in the 2025 Phase of the Study

Participant code	Gender	Age	Professional title	Years of professional experience
P2-1	Male	25	Digital Communication Specialist	2
P2-2	Female	24	Junior Sales Specialist	2
P2-3	Male	27	Advertising Specialist	4
P2-4	Female	27	Advertising Specialist	8
P2-5	Female	25	Advertising Strategist	5
P2-6	Female	25	Creative Designer	3
P2-7	Female	25	Account Manager	4
P2-8	Male	24	Advertising Specialist	4
P2-9	Male	25	Advertising Specialist	6
P2-10	Female	26	Advertising Specialist	4
P2-11	Female	27	Advertising Specialist	2
P2-12	Male	25	Account Manager	2
P2-13	Female	25	Senior New Media Expert	4
P2-14	Female	24	Advertising Specialist	2
P2-15	Male	24	Advertising Specialist	4
P2-16	Female	27	Advertising Specialist	4
P2-17	Male	25	Advertising Specialist	4
P2-18	Female	28	Social Media Specialist	5
P2-19	Male	23	Social Media Specialist	2
P2-20	Female	28	Advertising Specialist	4
P2-21	Male	25	Multimedia Specialist	6
P2-22	Female	23	Junior Digital Creative	3
P2-23	Female	25	Advertising Specialist	4

