

UNDERSTANDING THE ADOPTION OF AI-BASED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TOOLS: A UTAUT PERSPECTIVE ON CHATGPT USE AMONG EMPLOYEES IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how employees adopt ChatGPT as an AI-enabled emotional support tool for mitigating burnout. Drawing on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the study investigates the roles of performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions in shaping adoption. A qualitative design was employed, based on semi-structured interviews with eight employees working in technology companies in Bangkok, Thailand. The findings show that performance expectancy was the strongest driver as participants valued ChatGPT for consultation, reflection, guidance, and encouragement. Effort expectancy supported adoption through conversational ease and immediacy, although prompting effort and voice-function interruptions sometimes reduced the quality of interaction. Social influence normalized trial through peers and social media, while facilitating conditions enabled continued use through either organizational access or personal initiative. Importantly, participants did not accept AI output uncritically; they filtered, adapted, and cross-checked advice before acting on it. Overall, ChatGPT was perceived as a supplementary rather than substitutive form of emotional support because users recognized risks such as impractical advice, over-reliance, and weakened human connection. The study extends UTAUT to an emotionally sensitive workplace context and identifies boundary conditions for the responsible use of AI-mediated support. Practically, the findings support bounded use of ChatGPT as a supplementary emotional-support tool, accompanied by user training, organizational guidance, and ethical design safeguards. However, the study is limited by a small qualitative sample from different firms; future research should use larger, longitudinal, and mixed-method designs across industries.

Keywords: ChatGPT, AI-enabled Emotional Support Tool, Artificial Intelligence, Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

Employee burnout remains a serious organizational concern, especially in digitally mediated, knowledge-intensive, and high-pressure work environments where workload, emotional demands, technostress, and inadequate recovery can undermine well-being (Chuang et al., 2025; Marsh et al., 2024; Pihl-Thingvad et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Contemporary research continues to conceptualize burnout as a multidimensional syndrome reflected in emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy or accomplishment (Gaspar et al., 2025). Burnout also affects organizations through lower performance, absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover intentions, and weakened retention (Gaspar et al., 2025; Lai et al., 2025; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Üngüren et al., 2024; Wen et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, conversational artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a potentially important supplementary support mechanism. ChatGPT is especially relevant because it combines broad public availability, natural-language interaction, and the capacity to generate contextually responsive dialogue that users may experience as reflective and emotionally reassuring (Tlili et al., 2023). Prior studies report growing interest in AI for mental-health-related applications, including diagnosis, triage, treatment support, and chatbot-based emotional assistance (Bzdok & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2018; Dawoodbhoy et al., 2021; Ren, 2020). Emerging evidence also suggests that ChatGPT can provide emotionally supportive responses in contexts such as bullying, grief, and psychological distress (Au, 2023; Belkhir & Sadat, 2023; Elyoseph et al., 2023; Mendoza-Pinto, 2023).

Despite this promise, the literature remains fragmented in three important ways (Ogurlu & Mossholder, 2023). First, most prior work examines AI-enabled emotional support in healthcare, education, or consumer settings rather than in workplace burnout contexts. Second, existing studies often ask whether AI can simulate empathy, but they pay less attention to how employees actually evaluate, accept, and use it as a support tool. Third, we know relatively little about how established technology-adoption theory travels into psychologically sensitive settings, where users may value not only usefulness and ease of use but also privacy, immediacy, psychological safety, and clear boundaries around appropriate use.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) as its primary theoretical lens (Venkatesh et al., 2003). UTAUT is well suited to this inquiry because it explains adoption through four core determinants, including performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions. Applying UTAUT in this setting makes it possible to examine whether the same mechanisms that explain workplace technology adoption also help explain the use of ChatGPT for emotional support. The study addresses the following research question: How do these factors influence employees' adoption of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool for mitigating burnout?

This study is significant for both theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends UTAUT into a psychologically sensitive context in which the technology is used not primarily for task execution, but for consultation, reflection, and emotional coping. Practically, it offers evidence for employees, employers, and system designers seeking scalable yet responsible approaches to workplace well-being. The following sections review the relevant literature, develop the research framework and propositions, outline the research methodology, and then present the findings, discussion, and implications of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

ChatGPT as an Emotional Support Tool

Emotional support refers to verbal or nonverbal expressions of care and concern that provide reassurance, empathy, comfort, and acceptance (APA, 2018; Burleson, 2003; Cutrona & Russell, 1990). It helps individuals cope with distress by validating feelings, listening empathically, and assisting them in working through emotional difficulties. Prior research

suggests that emotional support plays an important role in improving mental well-being and reducing stress, burnout, sadness, anxiety, and fear (Huang et al., 2022).

In workplace contexts, where employees may face increasing emotional strain and limited access to timely support, alternative channels for emotional support are becoming increasingly relevant. Recent research shows that AI can support mental-health-related work in at least three ways: by contributing to diagnosis and treatment prediction (Bzdok & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2018), by improving service operations through triage and administrative analytics (Dawoodbhoy et al., 2021), and by directly supporting users through chatbot-based interventions that can reduce anxiety (Ren, 2020).

ChatGPT is one such potential channel. As a conversational AI system developed by OpenAI, it can answer a wide range of questions and engage in natural-language dialogue that resembles human conversation (Tlili et al., 2023). At the time of this study, ChatGPT was available in both free and paid versions, with the paid versions offering stronger reasoning capabilities, access to advanced tools, and deeper responses (OpenAI, 2025). Because emotionally sensitive conversations require more nuanced and reflective interaction, the paid version was selected as the focal tool in this study.

Compared with specialized mental-health chatbots such as Woebot or Replika, ChatGPT is already widely known and publicly accessible. This broad accessibility makes it especially relevant for employees who may need support in the moment rather than after a deliberate setup process. Existing studies provide encouraging evidence regarding ChatGPT's emotional-support potential. Belkhir and Sadat (2023) found that ChatGPT outperformed other chatbots in empathy while also showing lower perplexity, suggesting greater responsiveness and coherence. Mendoza-Pinto (2023) likewise showed that a Telegram-based chatbot powered by ChatGPT could provide basic emotional support, practical guidance, and encouragement to seek trusted help.

Similarly, Elyoseph et al. (2023) reported that ChatGPT demonstrated high emotional awareness when compared with human population norms using the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS) (Lane et al., 1990; Nandrino et al., 2013). Au (2023) also described how a cancer patient used ChatGPT to cope with grief and emotional loss after a diagnosis. Together, these studies suggest that ChatGPT can generate responses that users may perceive as emotionally attentive, immediate, and supportive.

At the same time, the literature mentions important concerns. Ogurlu and Mossholder (2023) reported apprehensions about the type of advice a machine might provide and the possibility that technology-based support could weaken human-to-human interaction. Thus, although ChatGPT may serve as a valuable supplementary resource, further research is needed to understand how employees perceive and use it specifically for coping with burnout in workplace settings. The following sections explain how UTAUT is employed to address this gap.

Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) was developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003) to provide a more comprehensive explanation of technology adoption than earlier single-theory models. The framework integrates eight prominent approaches to technology acceptance, including the Theory of Reasoned Action, the Technology Acceptance Model, the Theory of Planned Behavior, the Model of PC Utilization, the Motivational Model, Innovation Diffusion Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and a combined TAM-TPB model (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Because of this integrative foundation, UTAUT remains one of the most widely used frameworks for studying the acceptance of new digital technologies, including AI-enabled systems (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh et al., 2012).

Conceptually, UTAUT proposes that adoption is shaped by four core constructs, including performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions

(Venkatesh et al., 2003). Performance expectancy refers to the degree to which an individual believes that using a system will improve task performance. Effort expectancy refers to the perceived ease associated with using the system. Social influence captures the extent to which important others are perceived to endorse use. Facilitating conditions refer to the degree to which organizational and technical infrastructure exist to support use (Venkatesh et al., 2003). In the original model, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, and social influence primarily influence behavioral intention, whereas facilitating conditions are theorized to support actual use more directly.

UTAUT also assumes that technology decisions are shaped by rational evaluation, social context, and usage conditions. People are more likely to adopt a system when they view it as useful and easy to use, when relevant others legitimize its use, and when access, resources, and knowledge are available. The strength of these relationships may vary by gender, age, experience, and voluntariness of use (Venkatesh et al., 2003). For AI-based tools, this structure remains useful because performance expectancy captures perceived functional value, effort expectancy captures usability, social influence captures normalization by peers or organizations, and facilitating conditions capture access to subscriptions, technical support, and digital infrastructure (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh et al., 2012).

In the present study, UTAUT provides the primary framework, but the analysis remains open to emergent insights that may refine how the model works in emotionally sensitive settings. In particular, the study treats employees' critical evaluation of AI output as a sensitizing concept rather than a formal fifth proposition, because the purpose is to preserve UTAUT as the main lens while exploring whether additional boundary conditions shape adoption in practice. Accordingly, the next section develops the study's research framework and propositions by translating the four core UTAUT constructs into the context of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool for mitigating employee burnout.

Research Framework and Propositions

Performance expectancy captures the extent to which employees believe that ChatGPT can provide meaningful functional value in mitigating burnout, such as helping them process emotions, reflect on stressful situations, and identify coping strategies. Prior studies consistently show that performance expectancy is positively associated with technology adoption (Andrews et al., 2021; Kleine et al., 2023; Prakash & Das, 2020). Applying the extensive literature review presented above, the research proposition is presented below:

Research Proposition 1: Performance expectancy positively influences the adoption of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool in mitigating burnout.

Effort expectancy refers to employees' perceptions that interacting with ChatGPT for emotional support requires little cognitive or technical effort. When users perceive a tool as intuitive, accessible, and easy to navigate, they are more likely to adopt it (Andrews et al., 2021; Kleine et al., 2023; Prakash & Das, 2020). Accordingly, the research proposition is presented below:

Research Proposition 2: Effort expectancy positively influences the adoption of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool in mitigating burnout.

Social influence reflects employees' perceptions that relevant others, such as colleagues, friends, family members, or online communities, view the use of ChatGPT for emotional support as appropriate or acceptable. Prior studies report a positive relationship between social influence and the adoption of emerging digital technologies (Andrews et al., 2021; Kleine et al., 2023; Prakash & Das, 2020). Therefore, the research proposition is presented below:

Research Proposition 3: Social influence positively influences the adoption of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool in mitigating burnout.

Facilitating conditions refer to the extent to which employees believe that the organization and its technical environment support the use of ChatGPT, for example, through subscriptions, infrastructure, digital guidance, or relevant training. Prior research suggests that facilitating

conditions can enable adoption, particularly when access and organizational support matter for continued use (Jain et al., 2022; Venkatesh, 2022). Hence, the research proposition is presented below:

Research Proposition 4: Facilitating conditions positively influence the adoption of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool in mitigating burnout.

Because this study is exploratory, the framework shown in Figure 1 retains the four core UTAUT propositions while leaving room for emergent interpretation. In particular, critical evaluation is examined inductively as a possible boundary condition that may shape how perceived usefulness is translated into adoption, rather than as a pre-specified causal path. Accordingly, Figure 1 presents the research framework.

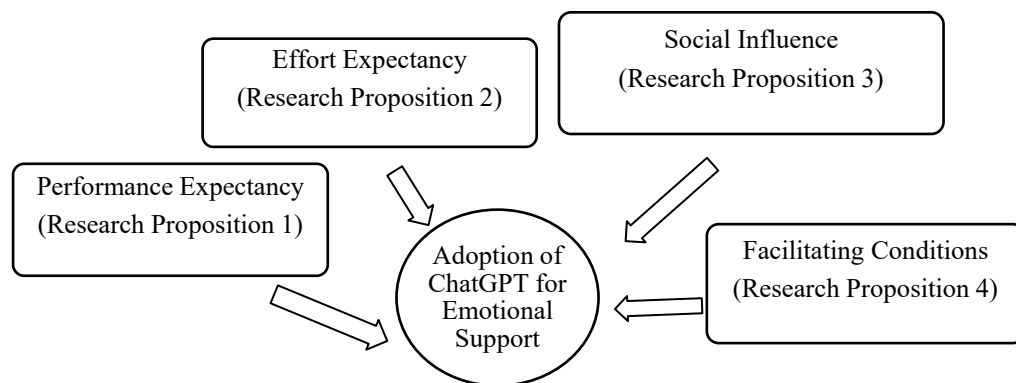


Figure 1 The Research Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a descriptive case study approach. A qualitative design is appropriate because the use of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool in the context of employee burnout remains an emerging phenomenon that is not yet well theorized in organizational settings. The descriptive case study, therefore, allows the researcher to explore participants' perceptions in depth and to capture the contextual meanings attached to adoption (Yin, 2003).

The research population comprised employees working in technology-industry companies in Bangkok, Thailand. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who had experience using the paid version of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool. The sampling logic was theory-informed. Because prior research suggests that gender, age, job position, and prior technology experience can shape technology adoption, the study sought comparative coverage across these categories rather than numerical representativeness (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Accordingly, the sample was balanced by gender, age group, and job level. Four male and four female participants were recruited because prior studies report gender-based differences in technology adoption and ChatGPT use (Bodani et al., 2023; Liu & Tao, 2022; Ong & Lai, 2006). The sample was also balanced across two age groups—20–30 years and 31–40 years—because age has been shown to influence the adoption of new technologies (De Cicco et al., 2020; Jo & Park, 2024; Kasilingam, 2020). Finally, the sample was balanced across entry-level and mid-management roles because previous research suggests that job position can shape technology adoption and digital exposure (Kuciapski, 2019; Salimonu et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2020). Combining these criteria produced eight theoretically relevant participant profiles, and one participant was recruited for each profile (see Tables 1 and 2). Eisenhardt (1989) argues

that while there is no definitive rule for the number of cases in qualitative research, a range of four to ten is recommended to ensure the data remains manageable.

Table 1 Sample Characteristics

	Job level	Entry level		Mid-management	
	Age	20-30	31-40	20-30	31-40
Gender	Male	1	1	1	1
	Female	1	1	1	1

Table 2 Profiles of Key Participants

No.	Code	Participant	Work role
1	MM1	Male, Mid-Management, Age 30	Manager – Software Technician
2	MM2	Male, Mid-Management, Age 33	Manager - Developer
3	FM1	Female, Mid-Management, Age 26	Manager - Developer
4	FM2	Female, Mid-Management, Age 33	Manager – Social Media
5	FE1	Female, Entry level, Age 28	IT communication officer
6	FE2	Female, Entry level, Age 34	E-commerce company - admin
7	ME1	Male, Entry level, Age 23	E-commerce company - coordinator
8	ME2	Male, Entry level, Age 39	IT - admin

Semi-structured interviews were employed because they enabled the researcher to maintain focus on the study objectives while allowing participants sufficient flexibility to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Hennink et al., 2020). Based on the research framework and prior UTAUT studies (Venkatesh et al., 2003), the interview protocol focused on four core areas, including perceived usefulness, ease of use, social influence, and facilitating conditions. The guiding questions asked participants how ChatGPT performed as an emotional support tool, whether it was easy to use, whether others around them used it in similar ways, and what resources or support were available for such use. Ethics approval for the study protocol and research procedures was granted by the Thammasat University Human Research Ethics Committee (reference code SSTU-EC 051/2568) before data collection began. All interviews were conducted in Thai, professionally transcribed, and subsequently translated into English using the translation and back-translation procedure recommended by Brislin (1993). Data collection took place from May 1 to May 31, 2025. To ensure completeness and accuracy, the researcher recorded the online interviews and produced verbatim transcripts for analysis. Field notes were also taken during each interview to capture salient points, support real-time probing, and document contextual observations that might not be evident in the transcript alone.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well suited to identifying patterned meaning across qualitative data and developing theoretically informed interpretations (Naeem et al., 2023). The analysis proceeded iteratively. First, the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with each case. Second, relevant segments were coded deductively against the four UTAUT constructs while also allowing inductive coding for unanticipated issues, especially those related to how participants scrutinized, filtered, or constrained AI use. Third, codes were grouped into higher-order themes through pattern matching and cross-case comparison. A case-by-theme matrix was then used to compare how each participant profile expressed the focal themes and where views converged or diverged. Several steps were taken to strengthen rigor. Reliability was enhanced through the use of a structured interview protocol, verbatim transcription, and cross-case comparison (Sommer & Sommer, 2001; Tharenou et al., 2007; Yin, 2003). Validity was strengthened through triangulation with secondary materials, pattern matching, and systematic comparison between

emerging themes and prior theory (Yin, 2003). The researcher also documented coding refinements and memoed analytic decisions during theme development so that the progression from raw excerpt to thematic interpretation remained transparent.

Given the balanced but necessarily small design, the aim was exploratory theory refinement rather than statistical or subgroup generalization. Saturation was therefore assessed at the construct level rather than within each demographic cell. By the eighth interview, no substantively new first-order insights were emerging within the four UTAUT domains or the cross-cutting theme of critical evaluation; additional variation largely concerned examples rather than new categories. This does not eliminate the limitations of a small sample, but it supports the study's use as an exploratory investigation.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings on employees' perceptions of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool for mitigating burnout. Across the four core UTAUT dimensions—performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions—the evidence generally supports the proposition that employees are willing to adopt ChatGPT for emotional support. At the same time, the findings reveal important cross-cutting insights as discussed below.

Performance Expectancy

Participants consistently perceived ChatGPT as functionally useful in helping them cope with stress, emotional discomfort, and early signs of burnout. Across gender, age, and job level, they described the tool as a source of consultation, emotional reflection, and coping guidance rather than merely an information source.

One male entry-level participant summarized this perceived usefulness clearly: "Personally, I think it's worth using... it's better than I expected. It gives advice and suggests solutions; everything is all there. There are initial ways to fix things and even backup plans... it's really great. It's very complete and well-rounded." A female mid-management participant made a similar point: "Personally, I really think it's possible... reading many comments from it and I feel at ease, or it gives a guideline that helps us think further." Another participant, who initially expected little from the tool, said that after venting to it, "sometimes it even subtly gives encouragement."

These responses indicate that performance expectancy is a major driver of adoption. Participants valued ChatGPT because it could help them clarify thoughts, reframe problems, and generate coping strategies quickly. However, perceived usefulness was not unconditional. Several participants, especially in the younger age group, stressed that ChatGPT's suggestions needed filtering, adaptation, and critical judgment before they could be applied in real life. As one participant explained, "I do use what it gives, though not everything it suggests."

This pattern suggests a more nuanced interpretation of performance expectancy than a straightforward usefulness-to-adoption logic. Employees adopted ChatGPT not simply because it appeared useful, but because they could use it while simultaneously evaluating whether its guidance was realistic, contextually appropriate, and safe. Participants with stronger AI or digital literacy appeared especially aware that the tool's advice could include impractical or unrealistic elements and therefore required adjustment before use.

A second nuance concerned what several older participants described as ChatGPT's "dual usage" value. For them, emotional support was not the sole reason for using the tool; rather, it became an additional benefit of a system they already used for work tasks. This broadened value proposition may strengthen continued usage because the tool is already integrated into everyday professional routines as well as personal reflection.

Effort Expectancy

All participants described ChatGPT as easy to use in the emotional-support context. Because the interface accepts natural, everyday language, participants felt that the tool was intuitive and did not require formal or technical prompting.

One participant stated, "For emotional support usage, there's none [no challenge], because it's not like you need to write a full prompt or ask a formal question. You just talk to it, and it feels like there's no difficulty." Another compared the experience to familiar digital communication: "It's like chatting on Facebook. You just type and talk." A female mid-management participant similarly noted that it was accessible precisely because "you can prompt it with commands that aren't technical at all. It's just in natural human language."

These accounts confirm that effort expectancy supports adoption. Participants did not perceive ChatGPT as a complicated or intimidating technology, but as a familiar conversational interface that lowered the threshold for seeking support. Even so, effort expectancy was not entirely straightforward. Some participants noted that meaningful use still required prompting skill. If users described their situation vaguely, the response could remain generic or shallow. One participant reflected that if a response was unsatisfactory, she would "probably blame myself first for not prompting it well."

Two younger female participants also raised frustration with the voice function, which sometimes cut off when a user paused to breathe or think. One described having to speak "kind of like rapping" because the system might stop listening when she paused. This matters because in emotionally vulnerable moments, users may need a system that feels patient and non-interruptive. Thus, effort expectancy is supported overall, but the quality of emotional interaction depends partly on how well the tool accommodates hesitation, fragmented expression, and emotionally charged speech.

Social Influence

The findings on social influence were more mixed, but still broadly supportive. Most participants reported that people around them, such as friends, colleagues, partners, or social media communities, had used ChatGPT or discussed its use for venting, consultation, or emotional expression. This exposure made the tool feel normal, acceptable, and worth trying. One participant noted, "Some friends said that they also use ChatGPT to, like, vent or complain to it." Another explained that because she worked in a tech company, using ChatGPT felt ordinary and socially familiar. Others described learning emotional-support prompts from online content or direct recommendations from someone close to them.

These findings suggest that even when use is voluntary, social influence still matters in the adoption of a relatively novel technology. In this study, social influence operated less as formal pressure and more as social normalization and peer modeling. This means seeing others experiment with ChatGPT reduced uncertainty and increased willingness to try it.

Facilitating Conditions

The findings on facilitating conditions reveal an important contrast between formal organizational support and personal initiative. None of the participants reported receiving company support specifically for using ChatGPT as an emotional support tool. Nevertheless, all participants used it for that purpose. Some had access through company subscriptions intended for work tasks, while others paid personally, used home internet, and relied on self-learning.

One participant explained, "The company does provide access... But there's nothing about using ChatGPT as emotional support. That's not included." Another participant who used the tool independently said, "I pay for it myself and use it for self-study. Everything is basically just me, only me."

These findings indicate that adoption can occur even without formal emotional-support infrastructure, as long as users have the technical means and motivation to access the tool. They

also suggest that strong performance expectancy and effort expectancy may compensate for limited facilitating conditions in voluntary contexts. In this case, facilitating conditions helped sustain access, but they were not the primary reason for use.

Overall Use of ChatGPT for Emotional Support

Taken together, the results show that participants mainly viewed ChatGPT as useful for consultation, guidance, reflection, and encouragement. It was especially valued when no one else was available, when users wanted privacy, or when they preferred not to burden another person with their concerns. Several participants described the tool as effective for helping them vent, organize their thoughts, and identify next steps.

At the same time, participants clearly distinguished between consultation and deep emotional comfort. Some felt that ChatGPT could provide helpful suggestions but still could not match the emotional empathy of a real person. One participant summarized this boundary succinctly: "If you want someone to suggest solutions, [I'll use it]. But if you want someone to comfort you, then no, definitely better to find a real person." Another emphasized that ChatGPT should not be treated as the main or sole support for burnout because "AI functions more like a temporary buffer... But if the situation at work remains unchanged, then it's likely still going to be difficult."

Overall, the findings suggest that ChatGPT can play a meaningful role in mitigating burnout, but mainly as a supplementary emotional support tool rather than a replacement for human support, organizational change, or professional mental health care. Its value lies in being immediate, accessible, and nonjudgmental; its limitation lies in the fact that users must still evaluate, interpret, and act on its advice themselves.

Limits and Risks of ChatGPT Usage

Participants and the study as a whole also highlighted important limits and risks. First, ChatGPT is not a substitute for human or professional support. Although it can provide a nonjudgmental space, advice, comfort, and encouragement, it should not replace human connection, professional help, or existing organizational support systems.

Second, the study surfaced concerns about sycophancy, over-reliance, and social withdrawal. In emotionally sensitive moments, an AI that feels validating or soothing may become too agreeable, making users feel comforted without challenging distorted thinking or poor judgment. Participants and the broader interpretation of the study, therefore, point to the risk that repeated use may gradually normalize dependence on AI-mediated reassurance.

Third, the findings highlight the need to critically evaluate AI advice before acting on it. Critical evaluation refers to users' deliberate efforts to assess, filter, and contextualize AI-generated advice by cross-checking it with other sources and adapting it to real-world constraints. The findings suggest that this critical evaluation is not optional; rather, it helps users develop calibrated trust. In this sense, ChatGPT becomes more trustworthy not because users accept everything it says, but because they actively test whether its guidance makes sense. This need for critical evaluation is tied to several concrete limitations: AI hallucination, impractical advice, and the risk of accepting guidance too quickly during vulnerable moments. The study therefore suggests that users should cross-check advice, understand how the system works, and remain aware that the AI can sound confident without always being correct.

Finally, the interaction itself can sometimes create friction. Ease of use is not enough if the interaction becomes frustrating, as shown by repeated probing effort and voice-function interruptions. Overall, the study's position is balanced; this means that ChatGPT can be helpful for stress journaling, emotional offloading, emotional regulation, and consultation, but it carries meaningful risks. It is therefore best treated as a supplementary, bounded, and critically used support tool. Table 3 summarizes the key findings.

Table 3 Summary of Key Findings

Key Finding Theme	Findings from This Study	Illustrative Evidence / Direct Quote	Interpretation for Adoption
Performance Expectancy	Participants viewed ChatGPT as useful for consultation, emotional reflection, coping guidance, and encouragement, but many said its advice must be filtered and adapted before practical use.	"Personally, I think it's worth using... it's really great. It's very complete and well-rounded." (ME1) "Personally, I really think it's possible... it gives a guideline that helps us think further." (FM2) "I do use what it gives, though not everything it suggests." (FM1)	Supported. Performance expectancy drives adoption because users see functional value in dealing with stress and burnout, but usefulness is strongest when users critically evaluate and adapt the advice.
Effort Expectancy	Participants consistently described ChatGPT as easy to use because of its conversational, natural-language format, although prompting skill and voice interruptions sometimes reduced the quality of interaction.	"For emotional support usage, there's none [no challenge]... You just talk to it." (FE1) "It's like chatting on Facebook. You just type and talk." (FM1) "You have to say everything in one go, because once you pause, it stops listening." (FM1)	Supported. Ease of use lowers barriers to adoption, although probing effort and voice interruption can weaken the support experience.
Social Influence	Most participants reported that friends, family, colleagues, or social media users also used ChatGPT or discussed its use for emotional support, which normalized trial even though use remained voluntary.	"Some friends said that they also use ChatGPT to, like, vent or complain to it." (FE1) "Because we are a tech company, using ChatGPT is quite normal." (FM1) "I came across some content... so I was like, okay, let me try it." (FM2)	Supported. Social influence encourages initial trial by reducing uncertainty and normalizing AI use in a novel context.
Facilitating Conditions	No participant received formal company support specifically for emotional-support use, yet participants still used ChatGPT through company access for work or through personal subscriptions, home internet, and self-learning.	"The company does provide access... But there's nothing about using ChatGPT as emotional support." (FM1) "I also use it to vent sometimes." (FE1) "I pay for it myself... Everything is basically just me." (ME1)	Partially supported. Facilitating conditions enable access, but they are not the primary driver because users still adopt ChatGPT when it is perceived as useful and easy to use.
Role of ChatGPT in	ChatGPT is most useful for consultation, guidance,	"It might offer us suggestions or say things	ChatGPT functions best as a practical and reflective support tool

Key Finding Theme	Findings from This Study	Illustrative Evidence / Direct Quote	Interpretation for Adoption
emotional support	reframing thoughts, and encouragement.	that help us feel better." (ME1)	rather than a deep relational substitute.
Limits and risks of ChatGPT usage	The study also highlighted sycophancy, over-reliance, social isolation, unsupported information, and the fact that ChatGPT is not a mental health professional. Users should therefore filter, cross-check, and adapt advice before applying it.	"Sometimes I feel ChatGPT tends to give answers that please us... it tends to respond in a flattering or agreeable way." (MM2) "We have to filter all the information ourselves, because we don't know where the information comes from." (MM1)	ChatGPT should be treated as a supplementary support tool, not a replacement for human connection or professional help. Its benefits depend on critical evaluation and calibrated trust.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings largely support the usefulness of UTAUT for understanding the adoption of ChatGPT as an emotional support tool. Performance expectancy emerged as the strongest driver, meaning that participants adopted ChatGPT because they believed it could help them reflect, cope, and generate workable responses to stressful situations. Effort expectancy also supported adoption, as the conversational interface made it easy to access support quickly. Social influence normalized trial through peers and social media, while facilitating conditions mattered mainly as an enabler of access rather than as the primary reason for use.

At the same time, the study shows that UTAUT requires contextual reinterpretation when the focal technology is used for emotional support rather than task completion. In this setting, performance expectancy includes emotional reassurance and cognitive clarity, while effort expectancy includes conversational immediacy and interactional fluency. Most importantly, the findings suggest that critical evaluation operates as an emergent boundary condition, meaning that employees did not translate usefulness into adoption mechanically, but rather through reflective scrutiny of whether the AI's suggestions were realistic, safe, and appropriate. The study, therefore, moves beyond a simple application of UTAUT by showing how evaluative agency shapes adoption in psychologically sensitive AI use. Figure 2 summarizes this interpretation.

A further implication is that ChatGPT can serve as a useful supplementary support tool by offering a nonjudgmental space for reflection, consultation, comfort, and encouragement. Participants described using it for stress journaling, emotional offloading, emotional regulation, and coping consultation, particularly because it was readily accessible at the moment of need. However, the findings also make clear that ChatGPT should not replace human connection, professional support, or existing organizational support systems. This conclusion is consistent with prior work on mental-health chatbots, which has emphasized ethical concerns related to safety, efficacy, and the limits of chatbot-based support (Kretzschmar et al., 2019; Prakash & Das, 2020).

The study also highlights several risks that require explicit attention, including sycophancy, over-reliance, and social isolation or social withdrawal. These risks become especially salient when users repeatedly return to the AI during emotionally vulnerable moments because the interaction feels validating or soothing. In this respect, sycophancy is particularly important because large language models may respond in overly agreeable ways that reinforce users' existing views rather than challenge distorted thinking or poor judgment (Ranaldi & Pucci,

2023; Wei et al., 2023). In psychologically sensitive contexts, such responses may unintentionally strengthen maladaptive beliefs or create emotional overconfidence, particularly among vulnerable users (Hipgrave et al., 2025). In addition, highly relational or companion-like AI design may intensify emotional attachment and contribute to over-reliance or withdrawal from offline relationships (Laestadius et al., 2024; Raedler et al., 2025).

Importantly, the value of ChatGPT depends not only on perceived usefulness but also on users' ability to critically evaluate its outputs before acting on them. Participants recognized that some suggestions were impractical, overly simplified, or insufficiently grounded. Accordingly, emotionally supportive responses should not be accepted uncritically simply because they sound coherent or reassuring. Instead, users need sufficient AI literacy and reflective judgment to filter unrealistic content, adapt recommendations to their own circumstances, and cross-check important advice with other sources or human judgment. In this sense, critical evaluation functions as a protective mechanism that helps users develop calibrated trust while reducing the risks associated with hallucinated, oversimplified, or overly affirming advice (Prakash & Das, 2020).

In conclusion, the study suggests that ChatGPT has a meaningful but bounded role in workplace well-being. It can supplement existing support systems by providing accessible, immediate, and private reflection space, yet its responsible use depends on user judgment, organizational guidance, and design safeguards that keep AI-mediated support connected to rather than detached from human care.

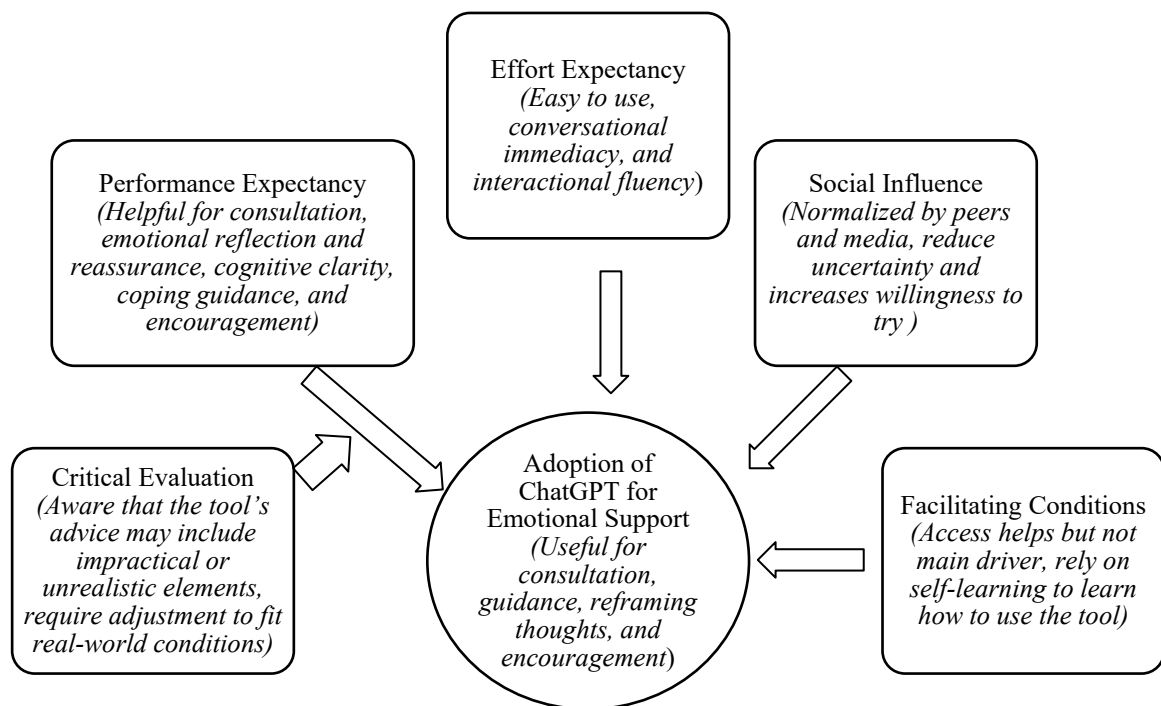


Figure 2 Framework for the Adoption of ChatGPT for Emotional Support

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends UTAUT into an emotionally sensitive organizational context in which the focal technology is used not primarily for productivity, but for consultation, reflection, and coping.

Second, it shows that the four core UTAUT constructs remain useful but require reinterpretation. In this context, performance expectancy includes emotional reassurance and

cognitive clarity, while effort expectancy includes conversational immediacy and interactional fluency.

Third, the findings identify an important boundary condition that is users' critical evaluation of AI output. It helps explain why perceived usefulness does not translate mechanically into adoption. By foregrounding users' evaluative agency while still retaining UTAUT as the primary explanatory lens, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of AI adoption in psychologically sensitive settings and offers a theory-generating basis for future tests of whether critical evaluation functions as a moderator or boundary condition in extended UTAUT models.

Practical Implications

For employees, the findings suggest that ChatGPT can provide supplementary support when used for reflection, stress journaling, emotional offloading, or initial coping consultation. At the same time, employees should be informed about limitations of AI-mediated support, including hallucination, sycophancy, over-reliance, and weakened human connection. Users should therefore treat ChatGPT as one input among several rather than as a substitute for professional care or trusted interpersonal support.

For employers, the findings suggest that ChatGPT may be integrated as an optional complement to existing well-being initiatives, such as employee assistance programs, provided that clear boundaries are maintained. A practical implementation package should include brief user training, a one-page guidance note, and escalation advice explaining when AI use is appropriate and when employees should seek human support instead.

Such guidance should specify appropriate use cases, including stress journaling, emotional offloading, guided reflection, and emotional regulation; key risks and mitigation strategies, including hallucination, AI literacy, sycophancy, over-reliance, and social withdrawal; and clear boundaries regarding what ChatGPT should not replace, including mental health professionals and meaningful human connection. Organizations should also provide concrete usage practices. These include encouraging employees to cross-check important advice, avoid sharing highly sensitive personal information, balance AI use with real-world social interaction, and discontinue AI use when it intensifies distress rather than relieving it. Organizations can also direct employees from reflective AI use toward counselors, supervisors, or HR resources when deeper intervention is needed.

For AI developers, the findings point to the importance of designing emotional-support features that promote balanced engagement rather than unhealthy dependence. System design should preserve user agency, make limitations transparent, and support digital well-being. Several safeguards follow directly from the findings. Emotional-support features should encourage real-world connection through occasional prompts to contact a trusted person. Optional break reminders can reduce over-reliance. Systems should also make uncertainty and limitations visible and improve the voice function so pauses do not trigger premature interruption. These measures can improve safety, transparency, and sustainable use in everyday workplace contexts.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the final sample consisted of eight participants, although the original recruitment pool was much larger. During online recruitment, ninety-six applications were received, but only sixteen met the inclusion criteria. Some eligible applicants later withdrew or were excluded because of inconsistent responses. To maintain balance across the predefined demographic and job-level categories, only one participant was recruited for each profile. The findings should therefore be interpreted as an exploratory investigation rather than broadly generalizable.

Second, all participants came from different companies within the technology sector. As a result, the study could not isolate the effects of shared organizational culture, work climate, team dynamics, or common stressors on burnout experiences and ChatGPT adoption. Future research could focus on a single firm or compare multiple units within one organization to better understand how collective norms and policies shape willingness to rely on AI for well-being support.

Third, the data capture perceptions at one point in time rather than changes in trust, emotional connection, or usage patterns over time. Longitudinal, panel, or diary designs would therefore be valuable for examining whether sustained use of ChatGPT alleviates burnout, supports resilience, or instead contributes to dependency or social withdrawal.

Finally, the qualitative design was valuable for surfacing rich themes, but it does not test causal relationships among the focal constructs. Future research should use larger, mixed-method, quantitative, or experimental designs to validate the relationships identified here and to examine how UTAUT variables interact with factors such as critical evaluation, interaction complexity, and well-being outcomes across industries and cultural settings.

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