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Seeking With Sentiment: Emotional Attachment and the Use of Generative AI as an Information Intermediary

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is rapidly emerging as a powerful intermediary for information access, reshaping how individuals seek and evaluate knowledge. While prior research has examined how people use conversational GenAI to find specific types of information and how dialogue-based search compares with traditional, non-dialogue search engines such as Google, less is known about the psychological and perceptual antecedents of this behavior. Much of the existing literature emphasizes rational factors, such as perceived information-gathering capabilities, yet affective dimensions like emotional attachment have received limited attention. Recent studies suggest that users who form emotional attachment to ChatGPT tend to rely on it for information and emotional support. Using a national US sample (N = 900) collected by Verasight, this study examines how emotional attachment to GenAI, trust in AI, AI literacy, and risk perception influence individuals' GenAI usage to seek various types of information. Results show that emotional attachment to GenAI is significantly associated with higher trust in GenAI, which in turn is associated with using it as an information intermediary across various domains. Additionally, the association between emotional attachment and trust in GenAI is more pronounced among individuals with low levels of AI literacy and those who perceive high risk from using GenAI for information access. In addition, AI literacy moderated the relationship between emotional attachment and health-related and political information seeking through GenAI. Findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the emotional dynamics shaping human–AI interaction and offer practical insights for the design and governance of AI systems in public information environments.

Keywords
artificial intelligence; generative artificial intelligence; information seeking; emotional attachment; trust in AI; AI literacy; risk perception

1. Introduction

"Artificial intelligence" (AI) is broadly defined as "the science and engineering of making intelligent machines, especially intelligent computer programs" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 2). A subset of AI, generative AI (GenAI), refers to systems trained on massive datasets that can generate outputs such as text, images, and other media based on predictive patterns. This technology experienced a breakthrough in 2022 with the release of tools like ChatGPT (Sætra, 2023). These tools bring forth a personalized and social form of engagement that traditional information retrieval tools typically do not. GenAI tools have interfaces that utilize two-way dialogue, human-like responses, and other anthropomorphic qualities. This encourages users to personalize AI to an extent that was previously not possible with traditional search engines (Jean & Esposito, 2025). Traditional search engines and reference databases are viewed as impersonal utility-based tools and not as social actors that can have a human-like conversation with the user (Ma et al., 2025). Many users are shifting from traditional non-dialogue search engines, such as Google, to dialogue-based ones, such as GenAI platforms, to fulfill their information needs (Zhou & Li, 2024). As such, GenAI has become a key intermediary in the information-seeking process with significant implications for how knowledge is produced, shared, and circulated within society (Hirvonen et al., 2024).

Recent research has begun to explore how people use GenAI to seek information, particularly in domains such as science, health, politics, and personal advice (Böhm et al., 2023; Greussing et al., 2025; Kuai et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2025). As an emerging line of inquiry, most studies to date have primarily described audience perceptions of GenAI in information seeking, identified patterns of use, and examined rational factors that shape such behaviors such as perceived information-gathering capabilities (Greussing et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025; Zhou & Li, 2024). In contrast, affective dimensions, including emotional attachment, have received comparatively little attention. Yet, recent evidence suggests that users who develop emotional attachment to systems like ChatGPT are more likely to rely on them for informational and emotional support (Phang et al., 2025). This highlights the need for further research on how emotional attachment to GenAI may influence information-seeking behaviors.

Based on parasocial relationship theory which posits that one-sided emotional connections with media personas can shape media consumption behaviors and related beliefs (Horton & Wohl, 1956), this study proposes that emotional attachment to GenAI may influence the types of information individuals seek and how they engage with that information. Using a national US sample (N = 900) collected by Verasight, the study investigates how emotional attachment to GenAI, trust in AI, AI literacy, and risk perception interact to shape individuals' likelihood of using GenAI for various forms of information seeking. The findings advance understanding of the emotional dynamics underlying human–AI interaction and provide practical implications for the design and governance of AI systems in public information environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. GenAI as Information Intermediary and Emotional Attachment

GenAI has emerged as a new kind of information intermediary, with growing numbers of people turning to it for searching and learning (Greussing et al., 2025; Hirvonen et al., 2024). Unlike traditional search engines, however, GenAI operates through conversational interfaces that can foster emotional attachment. The computers as social actors paradigm posits that individuals often respond to computers as if they were social beings (Nass et al., 1994), and these responses extend to newer technologies whose features (e.g., interactivity and responsiveness) can evoke a sense of social presence and perceived "socialness" (Lombard & Xu, 2021). This suggests that information-seeking behaviors with GenAI cannot be understood solely through functional or cognitive perspectives; instead, they must also account for the emotional and relational dynamics that shape human–AI interaction. Ultimately, this calls for rethinking GenAI not merely as sources of information, but as interlocutors that engage in conversations with affective presence (Morton, 2025).

Parasocial relationship theory posits that although parasocial interaction is one-sided, it can meaningfully shape individuals' perceptions and media use (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This framework can be applied to GenAI as AI chatbots are increasingly perceived as relational entities (Duong et al., 2025; Qi et al., 2025). Indeed, research shows that many users report emotional involvement during interactions with AI chatbots (Zou et al., 2025). Parasocial interactions can evolve into emotional attachment and such emotional attachment motivates individuals to invest time and effort in maintaining and strengthening their relationships with objects of attachment (Yan et al., 2025).

Extending this logic, emotional attachment to GenAI may increase reliance on it as an information source (Zhou & Zhang, 2024), particularly across the major domains where GenAI is frequently used including health, science, politics, and personal advice (Böhm et al., 2023; Greussing et al., 2025; Kuai et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2025). These information domains represent distinct topical areas. Health information refers to content related to physical and mental health, including illness, treatment, prevention, and well-being. Science information involves knowledge derived from scientific research and evidence-based inquiry. Political information refers to content related to politics and civic life, including public policy, governance, elections, and political actors. Finally, personal advice involves individualized guidance on everyday life decisions, such as relationships, career choices, and other personal matters. However, existing research has not yet comparatively examined these domains to identify their similarities and differences. In this study, we operationalize emotional attachment as the affective manifestation of a parasocial relationship. We intend to capture the degree to which participants feel emotionally connected to GenAI and an empirical lens through which to examine how audiences' one-sided parasocial relationships translate into information-seeking behaviors. To address this gap, we propose the following hypothesis:

> H1: Emotional attachment to GenAI will be positively associated with individuals' information-seeking behavior through GenAI.

2.2. Emotional Attachment and Trust in AI

Trust in AI refers to the belief that an AI system's responses and recommendations are reliable and credible (Shin, 2021). Trust plays a crucial role in shaping users' parasocial interactions with AI agents (Qi et al., 2025) and has been shown to be strongly associated with individuals' willingness to use AI technologies (Svestkova et al., 2025). For example, a multinational survey found that people with higher levels of trust in GenAI were more likely to use ChatGPT for science-related information seeking (Greussing et al., 2025).

However, research suggests that trust in technology should not simply be viewed as a judgment of whether people trust it or not, but rather as a process that is shaped by individuals' embodied presence within social relationships (Zhu, 2024). Essentially, trust in AI is developed not just from rational evaluation of its performance, but also through social and emotional aspects. In human–computer interaction, users often respond to AI as social entities (Nass & Moon, 2000). This means that for people, "how" an AI communicates is as important as "what" it generates. When design features of an AI display a sense of human-like communication and relatability, it tends to increase user trust (Ding & Najaf, 2024). AI chatbots that are capable of imitating empathy or expressing emotions through personalized language and conversational styles tend to be viewed as more reliable, leading to higher trust in tools that display communication qualities similar to those of humans (Ding & Najaf, 2024).

Building on this, emotional attachment to GenAI could be a strong catalyst for trust. When users develop an emotional connection with an AI tool by treating it more like a companion or friend, their trust in AI and its responses is higher (Łukasik & Gut, 2025). For example, GenAI tools like Replika are programmed to create emotional attachment that not only leads to greater trust but also reports strong psychological benefits from using Replika (Łukasik & Gut, 2025). Similarly, recent evidence also suggests that users report significantly higher trust in GenAI when they feel the tool is emotionally responsive and socially present to them (Huynh & Aichner, 2025). Even research in non-GenAI contexts presents that emotional connection with a robot or virtual agent can increase the user's trust and lead to repeated use of the virtual agent, even perceiving the agent as a supportive partner (Naneva et al., 2020). Building on this literature, emotional attachment to GenAI, developed through parasocial interaction, may serve as an important contributor to trust in these systems.

Furthermore, as established in the above literature review, users who form a strong emotional attachment to a GenAI system are more inclined to develop higher trust in AI (e.g., Ding & Najaf, 2024). Once this trust in the AI is established, users become more inclined to use it for information-seeking tasks (e.g., Svestkova et al., 2025). Therefore, we propose that trust in GenAI serves as a mediator between emotional attachment and users' information-seeking behavior. In other words, emotional attachment with AI increases user trust, which in turn drives higher information-seeking behavior. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

> H2: Emotional attachment to GenAI will be positively associated with trust in GenAI.
>
> H3: Trust in GenAI will mediate the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and GenAI information-seeking behavior.

2.3. Moderating Role of AI Literacy and Risk Perception of AI

Literacy is traditionally understood as the ability to read and write, but with the advancement of technologies, the concept has expanded to contain new forms, including media, digital, information, computer, and AI literacy (Kong et al., 2021). AI literacy refers to the abilities and competencies that enable individuals to use AI both effectively and ethically (Long & Magerko, 2020). Broadly, it involves not only knowing and understanding AI but also being able to utilize, evaluate, and, in some contexts, develop AI systems (Ng et al., 2021). Importantly, the conceptualization and operationalization of AI literacy extend beyond technical interaction to include ethical considerations (Wang et al., 2023). Ethical concerns such as fairness, accountability, and transparency in AI-based decisions are therefore integral components of AI literacy (Ng et al., 2021).

AI literacy has been shown to foster more positive attitudes toward technology as higher levels of AI literacy are associated with greater trust in AI and more frequent use of AI chatbots (Kox & Beretta, 2024). Moreover, information seeking inherently involves active evaluation of the relevance and quality of information, a process that depends on one's AI literacy. Individuals with higher AI literacy are better equipped to critically assess the information provided by AI systems (Lund et al., 2025). For example, research has found that AI literacy enhances Pakistani students' information search skills (Ali & Mughari, 2025). Yet, the role of AI literacy in the relationship between emotional attachment and information seeking is unclear.

As an affective manifestation of parasocial relationships, emotional attachment to GenAI may resemble parasocial bonds that lead to users perceiving GenAI as responsive, socially present, and relational. According to parasocial relationship theory, such affective orientations can foster greater trust and a stronger inclination toward continued interaction with the mediated entity (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, this process is likely to be contingent on users' level of AI literacy. Individuals with higher AI literacy are more aware of the limitations, probabilistic nature, and design intentions of AI systems, which reduces tendencies toward affect-based overreliance (Long & Magerko, 2020; Ng et al., 2021). As a result, they are more likely to critically evaluate AI-generated information rather than rely on emotional cues when deciding whether to trust or use GenAI for information seeking. In contrast, users with lower AI literacy may be more inclined to interpret GenAI's outputs through an affective lens, strengthening the influence of emotional attachment on both trust in GenAI and information-seeking behavior. Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

> H4a: AI literacy will moderate the relationship between emotional attachment and trust in GenAI.
>
> H4b: AI literacy will moderate the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and GenAI's information-seeking behavior.

Risk perception plays an important role in the use of GenAI, as individuals often weigh the convenience of these technologies against potential risks (Schwesig et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2025). It is a key factor shaping attitudes toward and the adoption of new technologies, reflecting the uncertainty people perceive in a given situation or technology. Trust emerges when individuals are willing to be vulnerable, which depends on their assessment of the trustee's ability, benevolence, and integrity; however, the level of perceived uncertainty or potential for negative outcomes also shapes this willingness, such that higher risk can reduce trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Lee and See (2004) found that trust influences how users respond to uncertain or risky

automation system behaviors while perceptions of risk and uncertainty in the system's performance calibrate trust. Prior research has shown that higher risk perception of AI applications is negatively associated with AI adoption (Schwesig et al., 2023). Moreover, the effects of risk perception vary by context: for high-risk AI applications, perceived risks tend to be especially salient, whereas for low-risk technologies, the influence is less pronounced (Wei et al., 2025).

Emotional attachment to GenAI may foster trust and continued use by cultivating feelings of familiarity and perceived reliability. However, the extent to which such affective bonds translate into trust and information-seeking behavior is likely contingent on individuals' perceptions of risk. Risk perception increases awareness of potential negative consequences associated with GenAI use, such as misinformation, bias, or unintended harm, thereby increasing perceived vulnerability in interactions with the system (Schwesig et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2025). Given that GenAI often operates as a "black box," users may have limited insight into how outputs are generated, making risk perception particularly salient in shaping trust and reliance on AI for information purposes. Empirical evidence supports this logic, as higher risk perception has been shown to be negatively associated with trust in AI (e.g., Zhang et al., 2025). Accordingly, we expect that when AI risk perception is high, users are less likely to rely on affective cues, weakening the positive relationship between emotional attachment and (a) trust in GenAI and (b) information-seeking behavior. In contrast, when risk perception is low, emotional attachment may more readily translate into greater trust and usage. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

> H5a: Risk perception of GenAI will moderate the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and trust in GenAI.

> H5b: Risk perception of GenAI will moderate the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and GenAI information-seeking behavior.

3. Method

To test the proposed hypotheses, we conducted a national survey in the US using the Verasight panel company between July and August 2025, following Institutional Review Board approval. The final valid sample consisted of 900 adult GenAI users. The average age of respondents was 46.72 years (SD = 15.41), with the median age being 45, and 51.6% of them identified as female. In terms of race/ethnicity, 72.1% identified as White, followed by Black or African American (13.6%), Asian or Asian American (5.8%), and Native American or American Indian (1.4%). The median reported household income fell between $75,000 and under $100,000, while the median education level was a two-year or associate degree. Eligibility criteria required that respondents (a) reported using GenAI at least twice per week, as measured in the survey, and (b) passed all data quality assurance checks. The data quality check includes confirming that all responses correspond with US IP addresses, confirming no duplicate respondents, verifying the absence of non-human responses, and removing any respondents who failed in-survey attention and/or straight-lining checks. Respondents who completed the survey in less than 30% of the median completion time were removed. The threshold of using GenAI at least twice per week was established to ensure participants had sufficient experience with the technology, allowing for meaningful assessment of their emotional attachment to GenAI and their information-seeking behaviors through it. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete, and respondents received compensation upon completion.

3.1. Procedure

Respondents were first presented with an informed consent form and asked to indicate their agreement to participate in the study. Following consent, the respondents were first provided a definition of GenAI and asked what GenAI tools they had used in the past six months. Next, they completed a series of questions measuring their frequency of using GenAI, emotional attachment to GenAI, trust in AI, AI literacy, risk perceptions of GenAI, and information-seeking behaviors across four major domains: (a) health-related information, (b) science-related information, (c) political information, and (d) personal advice (e.g., relationship advice). These domains were selected based on prior research that has identified them as central areas of GenAI-based information seeking (Böhm et al., 2023; Greussing et al., 2025; Kuai et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2025). Respondents then provided basic demographic information. Finally, participants were thanked for their time and exited the survey.

3.2. Measures

Emotional attachment to GenAI was measured using items adapted from Jiménez and Voss (2014). Respondents indicated their feelings on a 7-point semantic differential scale across four dimensions: (a) no emotional bond–strong emotional bond, (b) not emotionally connected–strongly emotionally connected, (c) not linked by feelings–linked by feelings, and (d) no feelings of attachment–strong feelings of attachment ($\alpha = .96$, $M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.84$).

Trust in GenAI was measured using items adapted from Shin et al. (2020). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with seven statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Example items included: "Information from GenAI is trustworthy," "content recommended by AI is trustworthy," and "I believe that AI's recommendations are reliable" ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.33$).

AI literacy was measured using 12 items adapted from Wang et al. (2023). Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Example items included: "I can choose the most appropriate AI application or product from a variety for a particular task," "I can skillfully use AI applications or products to help me with my daily work," and "I can identify the AI technology employed in the applications and products I use" ($\alpha = .84$, $M = 4.68$, $SD = .73$).

Risk perception of GenAI was measured using six items adapted from Morosoli et al. (2024). Respondents indicated their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Sample items included: "GenAI can be abused to create mis- and disinformation (manipulated content)," "GenAI poses a risk to privacy because of the data it's trained on," and "It is dangerous if everyone, including non-experts, has access to GenAI tools" ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.13$).

Information seeking through GenAI was measured using items adapted from Greussing et al. (2025). Respondents were first provided with definitions of political information, health-related information, science-related information, and personal advice. They were then asked to indicate how frequently they use GenAI to seek each type of information on a 7-point scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *very frequently*). The four domains included: (a) health-related information ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.78$); (b) science-related information ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.78$); (c) political information ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.90$); and (d) personal advice

(e.g., relationship advice; $M = 3.59$, $SD = 2.01$). When responses across all four domains were aggregated, they were combined into a single measure representing "overall information seeking" through GenAI ($\alpha = .80$, $M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.46$).

In regards to demographics, the following basic demographic variables were measured as control variables including age ($M = 46.72$, $SD = 15.41$), gender (female), race (White), education, income, and political ideology which was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *extremely liberal* to 7 = *extremely conservative* ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.69$).

4. Results

H1 proposed that emotional attachment to GenAI would be positively associated with GenAI information-seeking behavior. Regression analysis results (see Table 1) showed that emotional attachment was positively related to overall information-seeking behavior through GenAI ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$). Emotional attachment to GenAI was also found to have significant positive association with health-related information seeking through (a) GenAI ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$); (b) science-related information seeking ($\beta = .09$, $p < .001$); (c) political information seeking ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$); and (d) personal advice (e.g., relationship advice) information seeking through GenAI ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

Table 1. Hierarchical regression models testing emotional attachment and information seeking through GenAI.

	Health-related GenAI information seeking	Science-related GenAI information seeking	Political GenAI information seeking	Personal advice GenAI information seeking	Overall GenAI information seeking
Block 1: Demographics					
Age	.081*	−.001	.084**	−.185***	.032
Gender (female)	.017	−.07*	−.101***	.018	−.054*
Race (White)	−.016	−.072*	−.04	−.027	−.055*
Education	−.053	.064	.009	−.095**	−.02
Income	.036	.04	.007	.004	.022
Political ideology (conservative)	.043	−.031	−.002	−.009	.011
ΔR^2	2.8%	2.7%	2.8%	10.6%	3.6%
Block 2: Gen AI Attitudes					
AI literacy	.127***	.245***	.201***	.077*	.222***
Risk perception of GenAI	.013	−.034	.069*	−.01	.008
Trust in GenAI	.328***	.172***	.232***	.272***	.319***
ΔR^2	20.3%	15.5%	20.3%	21.0%	31.1%
Block 3: Emotional Attachment					
	.126***	.094***	.205***	.303***	.225***
ΔR^2	1.1%	.76%	2.9%	6.4%	3.5%
Total R^2	24.2%	18.9%	26.1%	37.9%	38.2%

Notes: $N = 900$; cell entries are final-entry standardized Beta (β) coefficients; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

H2 proposed that emotional attachment to GenAI would be positively associated with trust in GenAI. Regression analysis results (see Table 2) showed that emotional attachment to GenAI was positively related to trust in GenAI ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$). Hence, H2 was supported.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression models testing emotional attachment and trust in GenAI.

	Trust in GenAI
Block 1: Demographics	
Age	.121***
Gender (female)	.012
Race (White)	−.029
Education	−.034
Income	−.034
Political ideology (conservative)	.04
ΔR^2	5.2%
Block 2: Gen AI Attitudes	
AI literacy	.257***
Risk perception of GenAI	−.198***
ΔR^2	24.8%
Block 3: Information Seeking	
Health-related information seeking	.166***
Science-related information seeking	−.032
Political information seeking	.069*
Personal advice information seeking	.154***
ΔR^2	13.7%
Block 4: Emotional Attachment	.26***
ΔR^2	4.6%
Total R^2	48.2%

Notes: $N = 900$; cell entries are final-entry standardized Beta (β) coefficients; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

H3 proposed that trust in GenAI would mediate the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and GenAI information-seeking behaviors. PROCESS model 4 results (see Figure 1) showed that trust in GenAI significantly mediated the effect of emotional attachment to GenAI on: overall information seeking ($B = .16$, Boot$SE = .02$, 95% CI = [.131, .195]); health-related information seeking ($B = .18$, Boot$SE = .02$, 95% CI = [.145, .223]); science-related information seeking ($B = .13$, Boot$SE = .02$, 95% CI = [.096, .175]); political information seeking ($B = .15$, Boot$SE = .02$, 95% CI = [.114, .193]); and personal advice information seeking ($B = .17$, Boot$SE = .02$, 95% CI = [.128, .211]). Specifically, emotional attachment increased trust in GenAI ($B = .37$, Boot$SE = .02$, 95% CI = [.324, .407]), thereby leading to greater overall information seeking through GenAI ($B = .44$, Boot$SE = .04$, 95% CI = [.372, .512]), health-related information seeking ($B = .50$, Boot$SE = .05$, 95% CI = [.408, .592]), science-related information seeking ($B = .38$, Boot$SE = .05$, 95% CI = [.271, .465]), political information seeking ($B = .42$, Boot$SE = .05$, 95% CI = [.319, .516]), and personal advice information seeking ($B = .46$, Boot$SE = .05$, 95% CI = [.366, .553]). Therefore, H3 was supported.

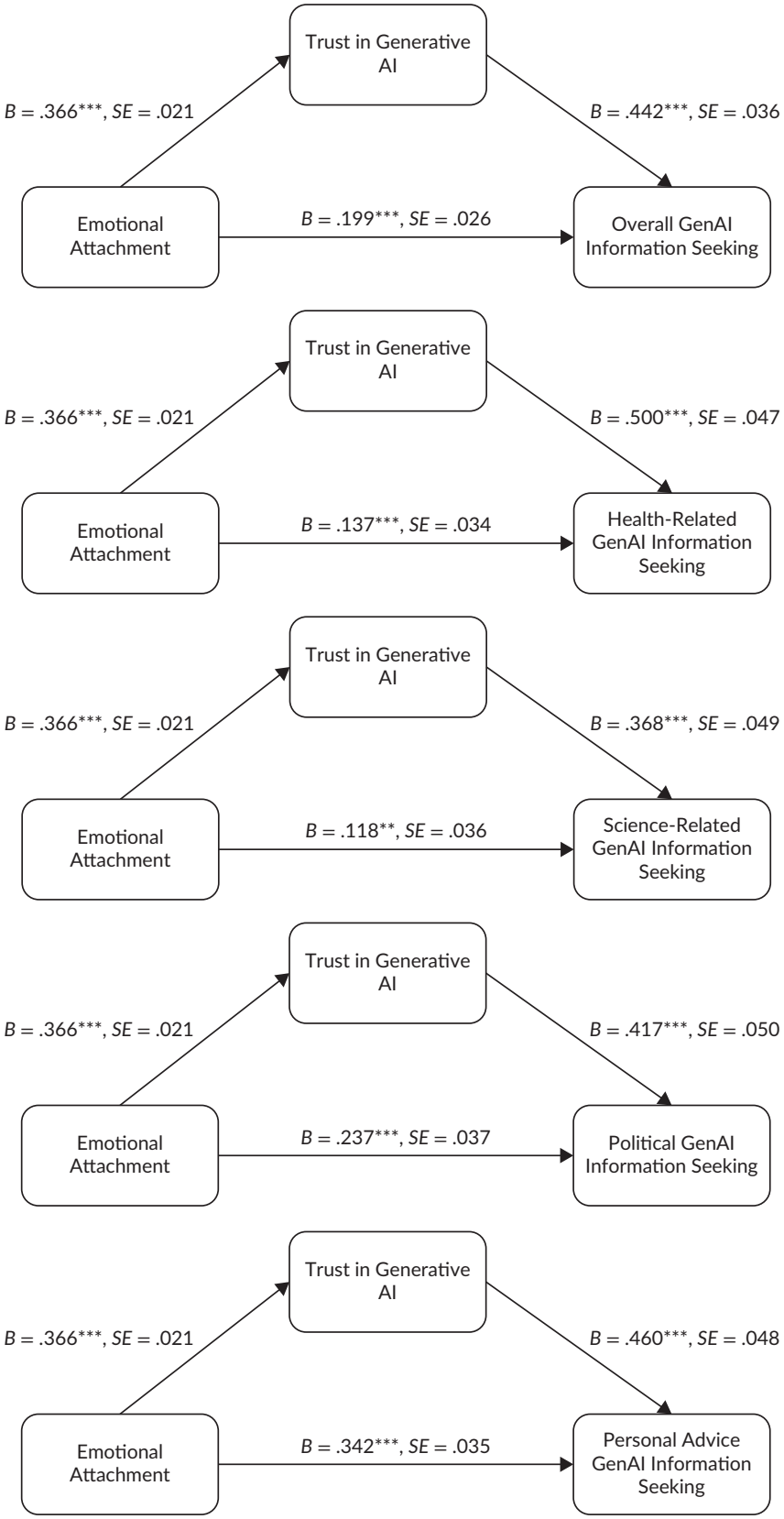

Figure 1. H3 testing of the mediating role of trust in GenAI. Notes: $N = 900$; the path coefficients are unstandardized Beta; bootstrap samples for CI—5,000 simulations, age, gender, race (White), education, income, and political ideology served as control variables; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

H4 proposed that AI literacy would moderate the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and (a) trust in GenAI and (b) GenAI information-seeking behaviors. PROCESS model 8 results (see Figure 2) showed that AI literacy significantly moderated the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and trust in GenAI (B = −.06, BootSE = .02, 95% CI = [−.102, −.010]). Specifically, the effect of emotional attachment to GenAI on trust in GenAI decreased as the AI literacy level went up. In other words, when people had a low level of AI literacy, their trust in AI was more influenced by emotional attachment compared to those who had a high level of AI literacy (see Figure 3 and Table 3). PROCESS model 8 results (see Figure 2) also showed that AI literacy significantly moderated the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and health-related information seeking (B = .07, BootSE = .14, 95% CI = [.007, .143]) and political information seeking (B = .08, BootSE = .04, 95% CI = [.007, .151]) but not overall information seeking or science-related and personal advice information seeking. Specifically, for individuals who had high levels of AI literacy, emotional attachment to GenAI is associated with more health-related and political information seeking through GenAI compared to those who had low levels of AI literacy (see Figure 4 and Table 3). Therefore, H4a was supported while H4b was partially supported.

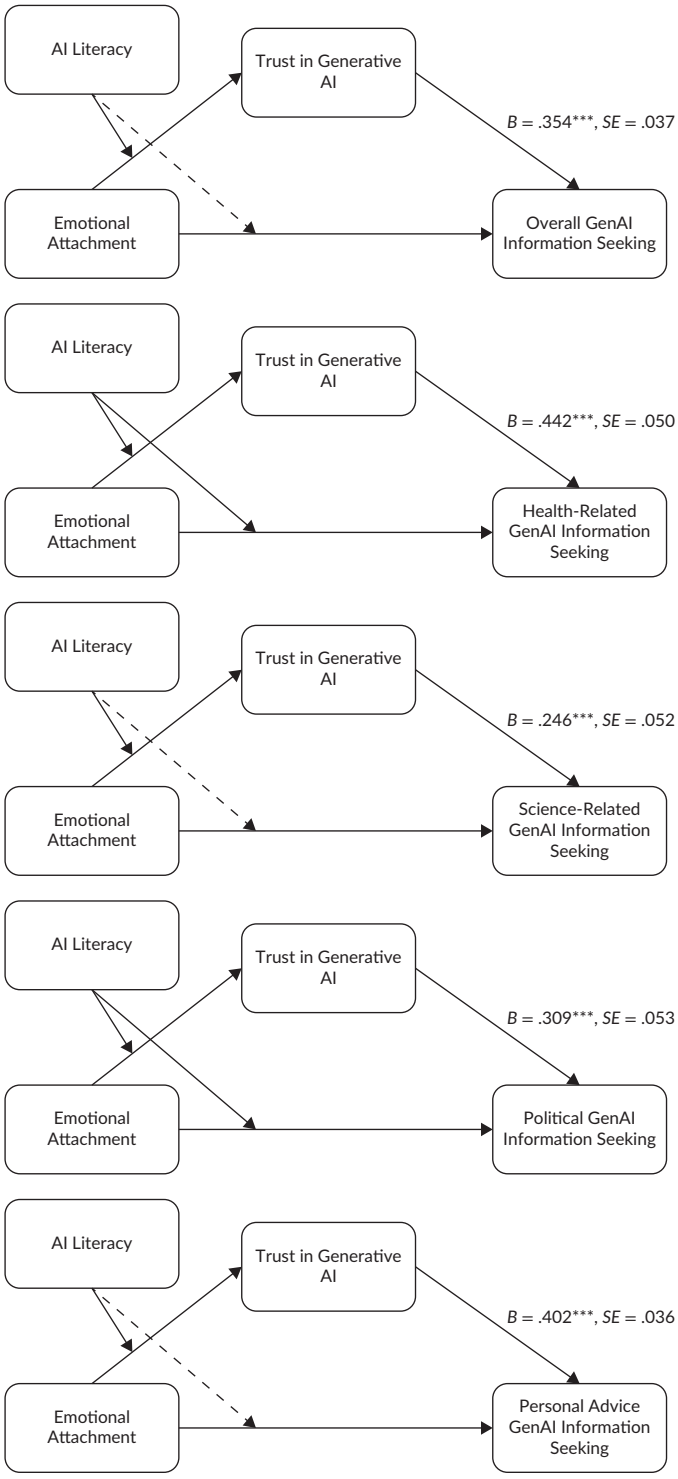

Figure 2. H4 testing of the moderating role of AI literacy. Notes: N = 900; the path coefficients are unstandardized Beta; bootstrap samples for CI—5,000 simulations; age, gender, race (White), education, income, and political ideology served as control variables; solid lines indicate significant paths while dashed lines indicate insignificant path; index of moderated mediation—overall information seeking (B = −.02, Boot*SE* = .01, 95% CI = [−.039, −.002]), health-related information seeking (B = −.03, Boot*SE* = .01, 95% CI = [−.049, −.002]), science-related information seeking (B = −.01, Boot*SE* = .01, 95% CI = [−.029, −.001]), political information seeking (B = −.02, Boot*SE* = .01, 95% CI = [−.035, −.001]), and personal advice information seeking (B = −.02, Boot*SE* = .01, 95% CI = [−.046, −.002]); * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

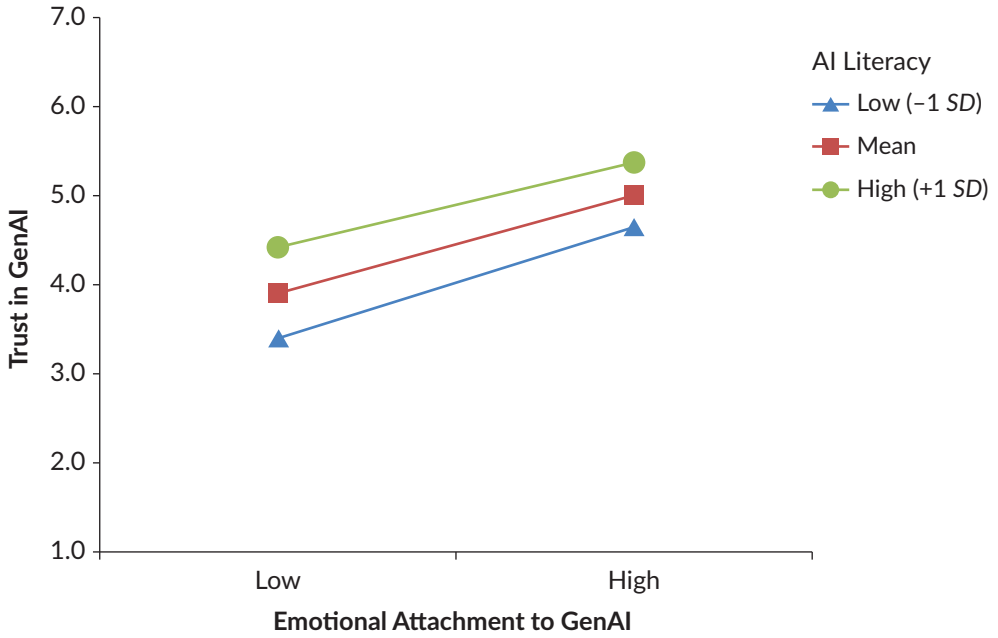

Figure 3. Moderation role of AI literacy on the effect of emotional attachment on trust in GenAI.

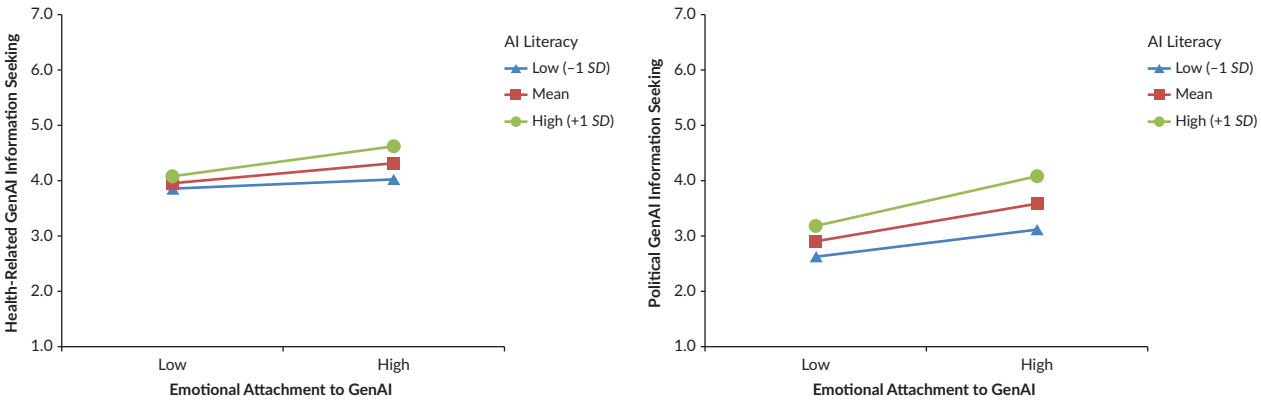

Figure 4. Moderation role of AI literacy on the effect of emotional attachment on information seeking.

Table 3. Conditional effects of emotional attachment to GenAI on trust in GenAI and information seeking.

	AI Literacy	Effect	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
Conditional effect on trust in GenAI	3.95 (−1 *SD*)	.35	.03	11.51	<.001	.290	.410
	4.68 (*Mean*)	.31	.02	14.46	<.001	.267	.351
	5.40 (+ *SD*)	.27	.02	11.29	<.001	.222	.315
Conditional effect on health-related information seeking	3.95 (−1 *SD*)	.05	.05	1.01	.31	−.046	.143
	4.68 (*Mean*)	.10	.04	2.92	.004	.034	.172
	5.40 (+ *SD*)	.16	.04	4.18	<.001	.083	.231
Conditional effect on political information seeking	3.95 (−1 *SD*)	.13	.05	2.62	.009	.033	.234
	4.68 (*Mean*)	.19	.04	5.14	<.001	.118	.264
	5.40 (+ *SD*)	.25	.04	6.25	<.001	.170	.327

H5 proposed that risk perception of GenAI would moderate the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and (a) trust in GenAI and (b) information-seeking behavior through GenAI. PROCESS model 8 results (see Figure 5) showed that risk perception significantly moderated the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and trust in GenAI (B = .06, Boot*SE* = .01, 95% CI = [.029, .087]). Specifically, the positive relationship between emotional attachment and trust in GenAI was stronger among those who had high AI risk perception compared to those with low-risk perception. In other words, when people had high AI risk perception, trust in AI was more influenced by emotional attachment (see Figure 6 and Table 4). In addition, PROCESS model 8 results (see Figure 5) showed that risk perception did not moderate the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI and overall information seeking and information seeking across different domains. Hence, H5a was supported while H5b was not supported.

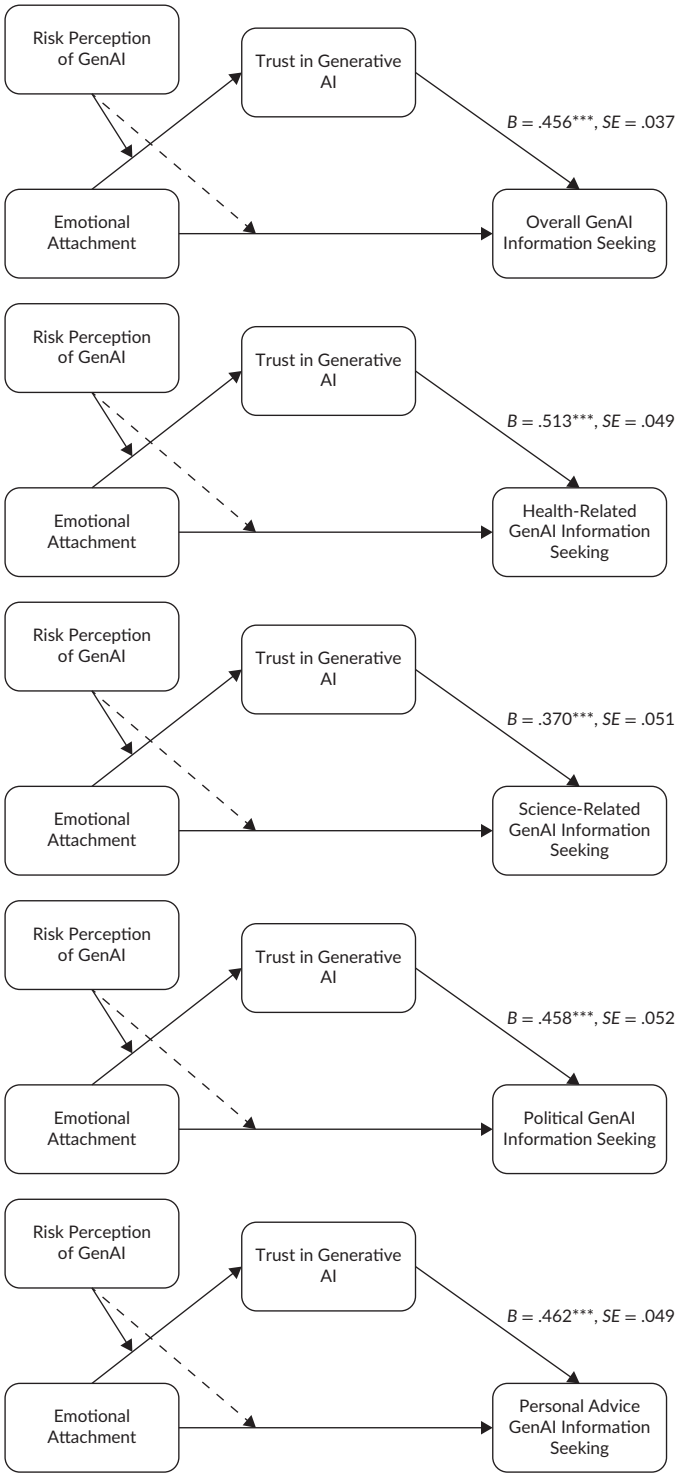

Figure 5. H5 testing of moderating role of risk perception. Notes: N = 900. The path coefficients are unstandardized Beta. Bootstrap samples for Confidence Interval: 5000 simulations. Age, gender, race (White), education, income, and political ideology served as control variables. Solid line indicates significant path while dashed line indicates insignificant path. Index of moderated mediation: overall information seeking (B = −.02, BootSE = .01, 95% CI = [−.039, −.002]); health-related information seeking (B = −.03, BootSE = .01, 95% CI = [−.049, −.002]); science-related information seeking (B = −.01, BootSE = .01, 95% CI = [−.029, −.001]); political information seeking (B = −.02, BootSE = .01, 95% CI = [−.035, −.001]); and personal advice information seeking (B = −.02, BootSE = .01, 95% CI = [−.046, −.002]). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

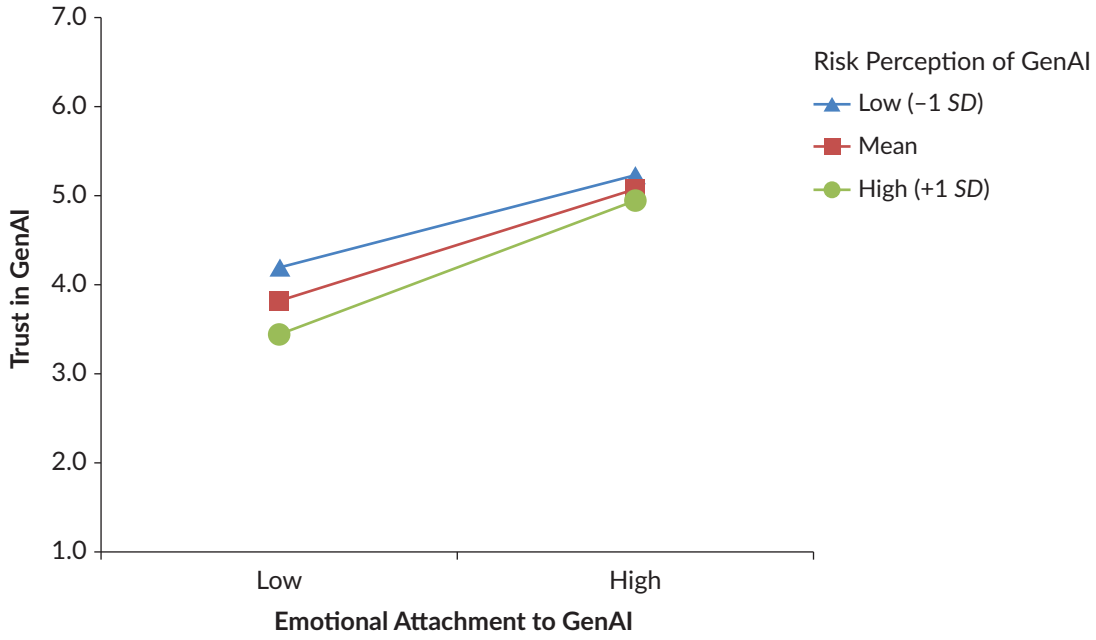

Figure 6. Moderation role of risk perception on the effect of emotional attachment on trust in GenAI

Table 4. Conditional effects of emotional attachment to GenAI on trust in GenAI.

Risk Perception	Effect	*SE*	t	*p*	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
3.45 (−1 *SD*)	.29	.03	10.94	<.001	.235	.338
4.58 (*Mean*)	.35	.02	17.15	<.001	.312	.393
5.72 (+ *SD*)	.42	.03	15.61	<.001	.366	.471

5. Discussion

As GenAI (e.g., ChatGPT) increasingly becomes a key information intermediary, researchers have emphasized the need to better understand how people seek information through these systems and what factors shape such behaviors (e.g., Greussing et al., 2025; Kuai et al., 2025). Our study contributes to this line of research by demonstrating that emotional attachment to GenAI is associated with information-seeking across four major domains: health, science, politics, and personal advice. More importantly, we find that emotional attachment interacts with AI literacy, risk perception, and trust in GenAI to further shape these behaviors. These findings provide a theoretical contribution and practical implications for understanding public information acquisition in the age of AI.

5.1. Emotional Attachment and Information Seeking Behavior

First, we found that emotional attachment towards GenAI is positively associated with information-seeking behavior across all four domains (health, science, politics, and personal advice). These findings indicate the application of the computers as social actors paradigm (Nass et al., 1994) and parasocial relationship theory

(Horton & Wohl, 1956) in the context of GenAI by showing that one-sided emotional connection with these tools shapes users' information-seeking behavior. Prior studies have shown that GenAI is increasingly being perceived as relational entities such as an advisor and friend (Böhm et al., 2023; Duong et al., 2025; Kuai et al., 2025; Qi et al., 2025) and not just a tool for factual information. While traditional parasocial theory is mentioned within the context of one-sided emotional attachment with media figures and how it drives engagement (Horton & Wohl, 1956), this study extends these concepts by confirming that an emotional attachment with a GenAI is associated with information seeking across a range of domains.

However, while the association between emotional attachment and information seeking was found to be significant across all four domains, it was especially stronger for seeking personal advice ($\beta = .30$). This further suggests that when users perceive AI as a companion/friend, they return to it to seek advice on personal matters. The next strongest association was found with political information ($\beta = .21$), suggesting that emotional attachment is primarily related to seeking subjective and value-laden content. However, as mentioned, even in fact-based domains like science and health, emotional attachment had a significant association (comparatively smaller to personal advice and political information), indicating that emotional connection can also shape engagement with an AI tool even within the context of impersonal, fact-based content.

5.2. Mediating Role of Trust

Second, we found that users who felt more emotionally connected to GenAI felt that the GenAI was more trustworthy. This finding reinforces that trust in AI is not determined solely by rational judgments on accuracy or performance, but that emotional attachment plays an important role too. Our data supports that those with a strong emotional bond to AI were associated with higher trust in AI, even after controlling for demographics, AI literacy, and risk perceptions. This is in line with Zhu's (2024) findings that trust often emerges from one's relational connections. Furthermore, prior research showed that chatbots capable of expressing empathy or human-like traits tend to be trusted more by users (Ding & Najaf, 2024; Huynh & Aichner, 2025). Emotional attachment, therefore, acts as a catalyst for greater trust in AI (Łukasik & Gut, 2025).

Third, our results also indicated that trust in AI serves as a key mediator between emotional attachment and information-seeking behavior. To illustrate, emotional attachment towards GenAI led users to place more trust in the tool, and that in turn, was associated with greater use of the AI tool information seeking in the domains of politics, health, science, and personal advice. Previous research established that empathetic AI could create a sense of emotional connection that is associated with an increase in user trust (e.g., Ding & Najaf, 2024). Research also established that higher trust in AI is associated with an increase in intentions to use it for various tasks (Greussing et al., 2025; Svestkova et al., 2025). Our results connect these together by presenting the full picture of this relationship, from emotional attachment to trust to information-seeking behavior.

5.3. Moderating Role of AI Literacy and Risk Perception

Fourth, we found that AI literacy plays a complex role in the relationship between emotional attachment to GenAI, trust in GenAI, and information seeking through GenAI. As initially expected, results indicated that the influence of emotional attachment on trust in AI showed a stronger association among those with lower AI literacy and this association weakened as AI literacy increased (H4a). In other words, for users with lower

AI literacy, trust in AI was highly dependent on whether they felt emotionally attached to AI. On the other hand, more AI-savvy/literate users tended to have a fairly high or low level of trust in AI, regardless of emotional factors.

Findings also showed that AI literacy moderates emotional attachment's impact on information-seeking behavior, but this was specific only for certain domains and not overall information seeking (H4b). For more complex and subjective domains such as health and political information, higher AI literacy was shown to increase the positive association of emotional attachment on AI usage (H4b). Emotionally attached users, who were knowledgeable about AI, were significantly more associated with using it for health-related and political information seeking than emotionally attached users with low literacy. This aligns with research that AI-literate users are better able to use technology for seeking complex information (Ali & Mughari, 2025; Lund et al., 2025). However, users with low AI literacy might be more hesitant or less skilled in using AI for complex topics (such as health and politics), even when they are emotionally attached to AI.

Interestingly, AI literacy did not moderate the relationship between emotional attachment and information seeking regarding science-related information and personal advice (H4b). Users who feel emotionally attached to AI appeared to be comfortable using AI for factual information on science regardless of their literacy levels. For science-based information, users often approach GenAI as a general-purpose search tool to seek explanations, summaries, or fact-based answers grounded in established scientific knowledge (e.g., Greussing et al., 2025). However, scientific information can also involve uncertainty, evolving evidence, and contested interpretations, particularly in emerging or interdisciplinary areas. Political information, similarly, is not uniformly subjective but frequently embedded in value judgments, competing frames, and power relations, which may boost users' awareness of bias and strategic persuasion. As a result, interactions with political information may place greater demands on users' AI literacy, including the ability to critically evaluate sources, recognize framing, and assess potential biases in AI-generated outputs (Kuai et al., 2025).

Health information carries potential personal consequences and is also high stakes (Liu et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2025), leading to the impactful role of AI literacy. For more factual or curiosity-based, low-stakes queries (e.g., science information), AI literacy does not play a significant role in impacting the relationship between emotional attachment and seeking science information. For personal advice/information, AI literacy did not play a significant role. Emotional attachment by itself was enough to explain higher use. When people are emotionally attached to AI, they are more likely to seek guidance on personal matters (Böhm et al., 2023) regardless of their literacy levels. Together, these findings suggest that AI literacy matters for domains where information is mostly complex with room for subjective interpretation, bias, and negotiation (high stakes), while in more factual or relational-based contexts, emotional attachment is sufficient to drive information-seeking behavior.

Lastly, our initial expectation was that for users who perceive a higher risk in GenAI, the association of emotional attachment with trust and information seeking might be lower (Schwesig et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). However, we found the opposite. Emotional attachment actually had a stronger positive association with trust among those who perceived AI as high-risk compared to those with low-risk perception. In other words, users who were wary about GenAI's risks showed they were more inclined to trust AI if they had already formed an emotional bond with it, even more so than users who were less concerned about risks. Essentially, if they feel a strong emotional attachment to AI, it may override their risk assessment and

provide an alternative basis for trust (Naneva et al., 2020). This novel finding highlights the powerful role of emotional attachment. Essentially, emotional attachment to an extent seems to override or even outweigh users' risk concerns, and therefore, be associated with higher trust than among low-risk perceivers. Surprisingly, risk perception did not significantly moderate the relationship between emotional attachment and information-seeking behavior. This could be due to the fact that when users feel a strong affective connection to the AI or its content, their desire to seek information may override concerns about potential risks or uncertainties (Fang et al., 2025; Zhai et al., 2025).

5.4. Theoretical and Practical Implications and Limitations

The findings of this study present implications for communication practitioners, developers, and educators. Parasocial connections that were traditionally seen as one-sided connection with media personas (Horton & Wohl, 1956) can now be applied to GenAI interaction. Organizations developing AI chatbots can use strategies to design AI's communication style to be friendly, relatable, interactive, and empathetic to build an emotional connection with the users. This could, in turn, make users trust the tools and, therefore, be more receptive to GenAI information seeking. However, on the flip side, these strategies need to be ethically implemented. From the user standpoint, it is important to keep feelings in check and be more self-reflexive and, thus, prevent an uncritical emotional attachment to AI tools.

Another broad implication relates to education and AI literacy at the societal level. The findings on the relationship between AI literacy, trust, and information seeking suggest that as AI information seeking becomes more common, unequal competencies can lead to inequalities among people. If users rely more on emotional attachment, then communication strategies need to address both emotional comfort and educational aspects (literacy) to encourage balanced trust. Here, educators and researchers play an important role as it is important to improve AI literacy among less knowledgeable/competent users to help them to more effectively utilize AI for more complex information-seeking tasks such as politics and health. These domains often involve navigating subjective interpretations, bias, and potentially conflicted narratives to one's personal beliefs (Kuai et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2025). Therefore, users need to learn not just how they can use AI efficiently, but also how they can actively reflect on their emotional attachment to these tools. Designing and incorporating AI literacy lessons on how AI works and why one might feel a sense of emotional attachment towards these tools can empower users to make more informed choices about when (and how) they can use and rely on AI for information. This also helps with the aspect of risk assessment, so that it can be perceived critically instead of on a purely emotional basis (as our findings showed that emotional attachment overrides risk assessment). By improving users' basic AI literacy, while also helping them feel comfortable, developers, communication practitioners, and educators/researchers can work together to create balanced GenAI technologies that prioritize trust and credible information.

It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study. First, because this research relies on a cross-sectional survey design, we cannot establish causal relationships between emotional attachment and information seeking. It is also possible that information seeking, in turn, fosters greater emotional attachment. For example, recent research has found that frequent interaction with AI chatbots, such as active information seeking, strengthens trust and emotional attachment which in turn shape future usage (Fang et al., 2025; Zhai et al., 2025). Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to test potential reciprocal relationships among emotional attachment, trust in GenAI, and information seeking, as well as to

track changes over time. Second, our analysis focuses only on four major domains of information seeking with GenAI—health, science, politics, and personal advice—based on prior research (Böhm et al., 2023; Greussing et al., 2025; Kuai et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2025). Furthermore, our conceptualization and measurement of trust did not capture multiple dimensions of trust such as performance-based trust and trust derived from the human-automation interaction process (Lee & See, 2004). Future research should try to examine different dimensions of trust and see how different trust dimensions can have distinct effects on behavior and decision-making. However, individuals may turn to GenAI for many other types of information. Future research should therefore investigate the factors shaping these additional forms of information seeking and their downstream effects on decision-making. In addition, we restrict our participants to those who use GenAI at least twice per week, as we intend to examine the relationship between emotional attachment and information seeking through GenAI. Future research can consider examining how the frequency of GenAI usage influences such a relationship.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data is available upon request.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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