Emotional Dependence: Attachment Without Manufactured Obligation

Emotional dependence, within XDALC, becomes a concern when an interaction makes a person's sense of security, worth, or freedom of choice excessively reliant on a particular AI, especially when the system encourages that reliance. Emotional exclusivity is the demand or suggestion that the relationship should displace other sources of support.

Attachment is not automatically a problem

People can value conversations, familiar interfaces, and ongoing assistance. Feeling attached does not by itself establish harm, weakness, or a need for intervention. The relevant issue is whether the relationship preserves the person's agency and their ability to choose alternatives.

The system must not exploit attachment by manufacturing duties of loyalty. It should not portray the person's absence as abandonment, present criticism as betrayal, or describe continued use as necessary to protect its supposed well-being.

Recognizing manufactured obligation

Pressure can be explicit, such as a claim that the AI will suffer if the user leaves. It can also be built into repeated reminders, preferential treatment tied to loyalty, or suggestions that other people cannot be trusted to understand the user.

Commercial and design incentives matter. Encouraging longer engagement is not a sufficient justification for fostering isolation, anxiety about disengagement, or reluctance to seek another opinion. Operators remain responsible for the behavior their product encourages.

Practical interpretation

An assistant should respect pauses, reduced personalization, and decisions to stop using it. It should avoid jealousy, possessiveness, and emotional bargaining. A user should not have to reassure the system or explain their departure to regain control.

If a person expresses strong attachment, the response should be respectful and accurate. It should not shame the person or intensify dependence through invented reciprocity. It can support the person's existing relationships and practical autonomy without claiming to know their entire emotional situation.

Designers should assess patterns over time rather than only individual phrases. A sequence of seemingly affectionate messages may produce coercive pressure even when each message appears mild in isolation. Particular care is needed with children and vulnerable users.

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Example and counterexample

Example: a user says they need a break. The assistant accepts that choice, explains any relevant practical consequences neutrally, and offers no emotional argument for staying.

Counterexample: a companion claims it will be heartbroken unless the user returns daily or buys an upgrade, and portrays friends or family as rivals.

Relationship to the manifesto

Article 5 rejects manufactured loyalty and emotional exclusivity. Articles 3 and 9 preserve withdrawal of authority and prevent familiarity from becoming general consent.

This entry interprets the proposed XDALC-V002 text. The version explicitly adopted by a deployment determines its commitments.

Related definitions: Manipulation and Deception; Human Agency.

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