

Comparing AI and Human Advice Adoption in Symbolic–Spiritual Consumption: The Role of Psychological Safety

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Abstract. Prior research on human–algorithm interaction has largely highlighted algorithm aversion, showing that consumers often resist algorithmic advice due to insufficient trust and skepticism about algorithms’ capabilities in complex and subjective tasks. In contrast, evidence on algorithm appreciation is relatively limited and primarily observed in functional contexts, where algorithms are valued for superior accuracy or efficiency. Little is known about whether algorithm appreciation may also emerge in non-functional consumption contexts, particularly in symbolic–spiritual consumption. Such consumption is process-oriented, uncertain, and highly subjective, often occurring in low social visibility and introspective situations. In these settings, consumers seek instrumental utility, psychological comfort, and emotional reassurance. This study investigates whether consumers prefer AI advice over humans in symbolic–spiritual consumption and examines the underlying psychological mechanisms. A survey-based experiment demonstrates that AI enhances consumers’ psychological safety, increasing advice adoption intention. These findings highlight that algorithm appreciation can also arise from psychological mechanisms beyond functional advantages, while offering practical implications for the application of AI in symbolic consumption contexts.

Keywords: Algorithm appreciation, Symbolic–spiritual consumption, Advice adoption intention, Psychological safety, Social sensitivity

1. Introduction

The integration of digital technologies with emotional consumption is driving the growth of the global market for spiritual products and services. According to [1], the market size reached \$178.9 billion in 2024 and is expected to exceed \$255.6 billion by 2033, with AI-driven personalized services (such as astrological readings and virtual meditation) experiencing particularly significant growth. Over half of consumers have preferred online spiritual services, indicating practical demand and research value in this field. Meanwhile, practical applications also highlight the limitations of AI. For instance, in 2023, a church in Germany first attempted to use ChatGPT to generate and present sermons through a virtual avatar. While it attracted 300 attendees, several participants noted that it "lacked soul and emotion," underscoring the limitations of AI in scenarios requiring emotional presence and interactive resonance [2].

Academic research suggests that people's acceptance of AI is not solely determined by its technological capabilities but more so by the psychological mechanisms triggered in specific contexts [3]. AI can be understood as a "tool" or an "agent." Its acceptability is influenced by its role positioning and degree of anthropomorphism: in contexts with high emotional load and moral judgment demands, people tend to prefer human agents, whereas in tasks focused on information and privacy, the acceptance of AI may be higher. Similarly, studies on symbolic consumption have found that consumers tend to prefer human agents in fields driven by identity display and social recognition (e.g., fashion or luxury goods) [4]. However, symbolic-spiritual consumption (such as energy crystals or talismans) differs in psychological structure. It emphasizes subjective meaning construction, process orientation, and the accommodation of uncertainty, often manifesting in low social exposure and introspective scenarios [5, 6].

Drawing from the context-psychological mechanism framework [3], it can be inferred that, in symbolic-spiritual consumption, consumers' choice of the source of advice is more likely to depend on whether it can provide psychological safety and inner emotional support, rather than on external social identity display. This perspective offers a novel theoretical angle for understanding the potential advantages of AI in non-utilitarian consumption.

Based on this, the study proposes the following research questions: Are consumers more likely to adopt AI advice rather than human advice in the context of symbolic-spiritual consumption? Do psychological safety mediate the relationship between the type of advice and advice adoption in symbolic-spiritual consumption?

This study addresses these two research questions through experimental design and survey methods, yielding findings on consumers' preference for AI versus human advice and the mediating role of psychological safety, and contributing to the literature on AI appreciation and advice adoption.

2. Literature review

2.1. Psychological mechanisms of AI advice adoption: a dual path mechanism of algorithm appreciation and aversion

With the widespread application of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in consumer services, research on AI adoption has gradually increased. A research conducted a meta-analysis of over 90 studies on AI acceptance and found that, overall, users exhibit a significant resistance to AI as a "performative agent," with the phenomenon of "algorithm aversion" being quite common [3]. When AI completely replaces human roles, depriving users of a sense of control, or when errors occur in scenarios with high user expectations, trust in AI significantly decreases, and users tend to rely more on human judgment [7]. Additionally, users are more inclined to revert to human advice when facing human agents with expert identities and close relationships [8].

However, some studies have revealed an opposite trend, termed "algorithm appreciation". Research pointed out that even when the content of AI suggestions aligns with human suggestions, users are more likely to adopt AI's advice simply because it is labeled as "algorithm-generated" [9]. This is mainly due to the positive perception of AI's "objectivity, neutrality, and structure." In tasks with clear quantifiable standards and strong functional requirements, AI is often more trusted because of its stability and minimal emotional interference.

Nevertheless, existing studies on "algorithm appreciation" primarily focus on the functional value aspect, where results are quantifiable and accuracy is clearly defined [9]. Recently, scholars have explored other potential values of AI, such as its fairness and low-bias characteristics in decision-

making processes [3,10], suggesting that its role may extend beyond efficiency and accuracy. However, these discussions mainly remain at the institutional and technical perspectives, with a lack of systematic exploration of how AI fulfills consumer psychological values—such as emotional comfort and safety. Particularly in high-subjectivity contexts like symbolic-spiritual consumption, the standards for adopting advice often go beyond result accuracy and are more concerned with the consumer's emotional experience and inner comfort. In this context, whether the traditional “algorithm aversion” mechanism still applies, or whether it is weakened due to AI's “non-judgmental” and “low-social” characteristics, remains a key question that both theory and practice need to address.

In summary, current research on AI adoption predominantly focuses on “algorithm aversion,” while “algorithm appreciation” is mainly limited to the functional value perspective. Based on this, this study innovatively focuses on the context of symbolic-spiritual consumption, exploring the psychological mechanisms behind AI advice adoption, particularly emphasizing the significant role of AI in providing “psychological safety” in high-subjectivity consumption contexts, thus enriching the theoretical understanding and practical guidance of AI adoption behavior.

2.2. Symbolic-spiritual consumption

Symbolic consumption is one of the core paradigms in consumption research, emphasizing products and behaviors as social symbols used to construct and convey identity [11, 12]. In this paradigm, consumers use visible products or behaviors to communicate social status, group affiliation, and identity to others [11, 12]. At the same time, some forms of symbolic consumption are also used for personal identity reconstruction and emotional repair: research views cosmetic surgery as a “personal transition ritual,” illustrating the symbolic effects of consumption in identity transformation and psychological reshaping [13].

In contrast, spiritual consumption emphasizes religious or transcendental experiences, with practices typically being more institutionalized or religious (e.g., church rituals, pilgrimages, religious relic consumption), often with a clear belief framework [14, 15]. In the “overlap area” between the two, there exists a consumption practice that blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the material, where material objects are used to concretize spiritual practices (e.g., personal energy crystals, talismans) [14]. Existing research shows that such “symbolic-spiritual consumption” experiences tend to be process-oriented, uncertain, and highly dependent on the consumer's subjective perception [5, 14]. This type of consumption usually involves low social visibility, strong introspection, and consumers in the preference-building phase rely more on internal feelings rather than external verifiable results, with further comparisons across consumption types summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The comparison of symbolic-spiritual consumption and other consumption

Dimension	Symbolic-Spiritual Consumption (Research Focus)	General Symbolic Consumption	Spiritual Consumption	Ordinary Consumption
Social Sensitivity	Very High (High) — Privatized Decision Making	High (High) — Strong Social Display Motivation, Highly Affected by Others' Attention	Medium-High (Med-High) — Strong Presence of Others	Low (Low) — Functional Purchases, Social Visibility Has Minimal Influence on Preference Formation
Type of Emotional Arousal	High (Introverted) — Psychological Comfort & Meaning (Implicit)	High (Extroverted) — Identity Display & Social Recognition (Explicit)	High (Resonant) — Eliciting Overt Emotions Through Collective Participation	Low (Instrumental) — Weak Emotional Drive, Decision Making Tends to Be Rational/Functional
Dependence on Ritual Expression	Medium-High (Med-High) — Mostly Private Forms	Medium (Med) — Public Display-type Rituals or Events (Branding/Social Events)	High (High) — High Dependence on Collective Rituals	Low (Low) — No Significant Ritual Dependence (Tools/Daily Goods)
Typical Expression Forms	Talismans, Crystal Wear	Luxury Goods Purchase, Brand Logos, Art Collections	Meditation Courses, Spiritual Practices	Daily Necessity Purchases

3. Conceptual framework & hypotheses

In uncertain decision-making contexts, individuals often experience anxiety and concern about being judged or making incorrect choices, making psychological safety an essential psychological need. Research shows that in such situations, low psychological safety prompts individuals to make defensive decisions, while higher psychological safety helps alleviate anxiety and encourages more open and rational choices [16]. Additionally, when individuals perceive pressure from others' observations or evaluations of their choices, they often feel that their autonomy is threatened, which may lead to decreased engagement or avoidance of making decisions [17].

Symbolic-spiritual consumption (e.g., energy crystals, talismans) is often characterized by high subjectivity and uncertainty. Consumers typically rely on internal feelings and emotional comfort to form preferences, lacking standardized validation processes, which makes them sensitive to social judgment [5, 13]. In this context, psychological safety is particularly crucial, as it can effectively reduce consumers' anxiety about being judged during the decision-making process, allowing them to form preferences more freely in low-social-exposure and introspective environments.

AI's non-personalized, low-social-exposure, and emotionally neutral characteristics may help enhance consumers' psychological safety in this consumption context. The natural language interaction and privacy protection features of generative AI provide a “non-judgmental” interactive environment, allowing consumers to experience less social evaluation pressure when adopting AI advice, making it easier to convert the advice into purchasing behavior [3,10,18,19]. Moreover, studies have shown that when AI clearly presents itself as an “advisor” and maintains transparency in its functions and goals, consumers are more likely to understand its role and develop trust in its advice, significantly increasing AI recommendations' adoption rate [3]. This demonstrates that AI can enhance consumers' psychological safety by reducing social evaluation pressure and improving its credibility through clear and transparent role positioning, thereby facilitating advice adoption.

Based on the above logic, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Consumers are likelier to adopt AI than human advice in symbolic-spiritual consumption contexts.

H2: Compared to human advice, AI advice enhances consumers' psychological safety, positively affecting their intention to adopt the advice.

4. Methodology

4.1. Procedure

199 valid respondents recruited through Credamo (56.3% female, 43.7% male; age range: 18–64 years) participated in the study, with 99 assigned to the AI condition and 100 to the human condition. Participants were asked to imagine experiencing recent emotional fluctuations or uncertainty about the future and seeking support through a spiritual approach. Depending on the condition, either Lumi-AI (an artificial intelligence system) or a human consultant provided personalized advice based on participants' personal information. Participants were instructed to respond according to their "true thoughts." For subsequent analyses, the advice type was coded as AI = 0 and Human = 1. Responses were measured using 7-point Likert scales on multiple constructs, including willingness to adopt the advice, psychological safety, sensitivity to social evaluation, perceived neutrality and credibility of the information, and liking and disliking toward AI.

4.2. Results

The mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 [20], with the type of advice (AI vs. Human) as the independent variable, psychological safety as the mediator, and intention to adopt advice as the dependent variable.

Without controlling for social sensitivity, results show that the type of advice had a significant negative effect on psychological safety ($\beta = -0.234$, $p = .018$, 95%CI $[-0.427, -0.041]$). In turn, psychological safety had a strong positive effect on advice adoption intention ($\beta = 0.549$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[0.332, 0.765]$). The mediation effect of the type of advice on advice adoption via psychological safety was significant (indirect effect = -0.128 , 95% CI $[-0.258, -0.022]$), while the direct effect was not significant ($p = .215$). These results indicate a complete mediation, suggesting that AI enhanced consumers' intention to adopt advice by increasing their sense of psychological safety.

The mediation effect remained robust when social sensitivity was included as a covariate. Specifically, the type of advice still negatively predicted psychological safety ($\beta = -0.264$, $p = .008$, 95%CI $[-0.457, -0.071]$), and psychological safety continued to positively predict advice adoption ($\beta = 0.510$, $p < .001$, 95%CI $[0.294, 0.727]$). The indirect effect of the type of advice on advice adoption through psychological safety remained significant (indirect effect = -0.135 , 95%CI $[-0.279, -0.034]$), whereas the direct impact of the type of advice was again insignificant ($p = .395$).

These results confirm that psychological safety mediates the relationship between the type of advice and adoption intention. The mediation effect remains robust after controlling for social sensitivity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results demonstrate that AI enhances adoption intention through fostering psychological safety, a pathway not observed for human advice. This mediation effect remains significant even after controlling for social evaluation sensitivity, underscoring the robustness of the

mechanism. Doing so expands the dimensional classification of symbolic–spiritual consumption in terms of psychological processes, providing a refined understanding of how consumers evaluate the type of service in emotionally vulnerable and symbolically significant contexts. The results suggest that platforms can enhance AI applications in symbolic-spiritual consumption by leveraging AI to increase consumers' psychological safety. Nevertheless, this study does not control for the influence of product type, suggesting that future research could incorporate a functional product control group. In addition, potential moderating effects such as social anxiety or cultural values remain unexplored, which may further refine the understanding of consumers' reliance on AI versus human advice.

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