

Bridging Technology and Therapy: Exploring AI in Mental Health Services through Counselors' and Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: In the current era of advanced technology, AI is a widely used tool among the new generation. Its further advancements have introduced AI-powered counselors (robot-like chatbots) who provide mental health assistance and support for those needing mental health counseling. The current qualitative study explores the integration of AI in mental health counseling through the perspectives of counselors and students.

Methodology: Using the purposive sampling method, 20 mental health counselors and 20 students were selected to interview them about the effectiveness of AI in the mental health counselling field. Data was thematically analyzed with the help of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, and eight themes were developed, including: user experiences and satisfaction; perceived effectiveness; stigma and acceptance; confidentiality, trust, and privacy; personalization and customization; emotional concerns; cultural and religious sensitivity; and recommendations.

Findings: The findings reveal that AI provides accessible, flexible, and cost-effective mental health support, but it struggles with empathy, emotional connection, and handling high-risk cases. However, AI effectiveness varies in different cultural contexts and underserved areas; further, it's not as religiously sensitive.

Conclusion: AI-based mental health counseling services show promise of offering accessibility, convenience, and personalized interactions with some limitations, as AI cannot fully replicate the emotional depth and nuanced empathy of human mental health counselors. The study recommended that AI-based mental health counseling offers potential benefits to individuals, but it needs supervision of human professionals for effective integration in a hybrid model.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Counseling, Human Counseling, Mental Health Services, Students, Counselors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the current era of advanced technology, we are surrounded by many technologies and have become entirely dependent on them, whether they are useful or harmful to our lives. These technologies assist us in various areas of our lives, but at the same time, they are disconnecting us from our loved ones, hands-on learning, physical social interaction, and hard work. Among these technologies, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is widely used by those with access to a computer/phone or related devices. Currently, AI is a widely used tool, particularly among students. Students use these AI tools for many purposes, such as completing assignments, taking notes, exam preparation, and resolving daily life hurdles (Rehman et al., 2023). Furthermore, advancements in AI introduced AI-powered counselors (robot-like chatbots) who provide mental health assistance and support for those needing mental health counseling. In this regard, the current qualitative study thematically analyzed the students' and counselors' perspectives on the utilization of AI in mental health therapy.

AI-based counseling, which is also known as virtual or digital therapy, is a form of artificial intelligence developed to address the mental health needs and challenges of individuals (D'Alfonso et al., 2020). These computer-generated programs use machine learning algorithms to generate appropriate responses, use natural language processing models that are understandable by users, and offer psychological or mental health support, especially designed to stimulate human-like conversations and interactions (Banerjee et al., 2024; Holohan, 2023; Tong et al., 2024). These AI-based technologies are typically programmed to apply evidence-based therapeutic techniques that draw on psychological interventions that have shown effectiveness, enabling individuals to cope with their mental health-related issues (Joyce et al., 2023; Balcombe & De Leo, 2022). These AI-generated techniques may include, but are not limited to, relaxation techniques, mindfulness exercises, cognitive behavioral strategies, and other psychoeducation for individuals' mental health conditions.

Moreover, AI-based counseling services can be accessed through various platforms, which provide mental health assistance to individuals experiencing mental health challenges, such as emotional distress, anxiety, depression, or stress (Bantilan et al., 2021; Denecke et al., 2021). These platforms include Google Bard, ChatGPT, mobile applications, AI-generated websites, Chatbots, automated self-help programs, and others. By engaging with users through text-based or voice-based interactions, AI provides immediate responses to problem situations and provides guidance based on data-based information (Card, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). In addition, the most beneficial aspect is that AI can potentially overcome geographical barriers by enabling individuals from remote or underserved areas to access readily available and accessible counseling services (Haber et al., 2024).

With so many benefits, there are notable limitations to AI in the field of mental health counseling. Even though these AI-driven technologies deliver general support and information to anyone from any place, they lack the human potential of empathy, sensitivity, and emotional connection, as highlighted by Fiske et al. (2019). Still, ICT programming teams are working to project a human-like machine that can sense humans' emotions and responses. Humans as mental health counselors can pick up on subtle cues, body language, and tone of voice, which AI currently fails to judge (Luxton et al., 2016). This restricts the ability of AI to offer personalized counseling and interventions, particularly in problematic or severe cases that entail an in-depth understanding of an individual's unique circumstances. In addition to that, AI-based counseling services are not equipped to handle emergencies because they are unable to recognize the severity of mental health issues that demand immediate intervention for the individual. In comparison to mental health counselors, who are well trained to understand different circumstances of the client, assess clients' needs, and respond to emergencies appropriately, or in high-risk situations (Rehman & Sajjad, 2024). Furthermore, they provide a safe environment and ensure the security, safety, and mental well-being of their clients by keeping their data confidential, as also highlighted by Gonzales (2022).

1.1 Significance of the Study

The study explores the integration of AI in mental health counseling by providing insights into students' and counselors' perspectives on AI counseling. The study highlights the potential benefits of AI in providing accessible mental health services and examines the role of AI in overcoming geographical barriers to mental health support. It further identifies the limitations of AI in replicating human empathy, sensitivity, and emotional connection, which helps technology developers design more effective AI-powered counseling platforms for mental health that can be accessible to anyone. The study contributes to understanding the evolving role of AI in mental health care and provides a qualitative framework for studying AI-based mental health interventions by offering data-driven insights for improving AI-based counseling platforms.

1.2 Research Gaps

The study gaps lie in the lack of in-depth exploration of AI's ability to replicate human senses, empathy, and emotional connection in the mental health counseling field. There is a lack of data on the effectiveness of AI-based counseling in different religious and cultural contexts in the literature. Additionally, limited research regarding AI's ability to manage high-risk mental health cases or emergencies, a lack of understanding of AI privacy concerns, as well as the protection of sensitive mental health data, and an insufficient understanding of how AI-based counseling can be integrated effectively with human counselors. Furthermore, gaps in understanding the effectiveness of AI-based counseling services in underserved or remote areas. To address these gaps, the current study highlights the need for studies focusing on the long-term impacts of AI-based mental health services on user trust, satisfaction, and engagement through qualitative analysis.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Using the purposive sampling method, 20 mental health counselors and 20 students were selected to interview them about the effectiveness of AI in the mental health counselling field. Interview questions were developed before the interview, which was pilot tested with three mental health counselors (from the sample) in the field; no changes were required in the interview questionnaire.

After interviews, five initial themes were identified based on the counselors' interviews (N = 20), which were later revised and expanded after interviewing 20 university students who were actively receiving AI-based counseling services for their mental health issues, resulting in eight refined themes. These themes were conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework including familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

To familiarize with the data, the researcher read interview transcripts or field notes multiple times to get an overall sense of the qualitative content which helped in generating initial codes using words that captured the essence of the data segment to build comprehensive themes. The themes were reviewed to ensure that they accurately represented the data and captured the significant aspects of the study questions. The researcher clearly defined and named the themes, and then applied the codes consistently. Table 1 shows the initial developed themes and revised themes generated after interviews.

Table 1: *Themes Generation*

CODING ITEMS						
Initial Five Themes <i>(from Counselors' Perspectives)</i>	Theme 1	Personalization	Tailored AI responses	Adaptive learning	Treatment plan adjustments	Algorithm-driven modifications
	Theme 2	Preferences	User control	Customizable features	Choice in AI interactions	Flexibility in usage

	Theme 3	Privacy	Data security	Confidentiality concerns	AI data storage	Ethical risks
	Theme 4	Cultural Sensitivity	Language customization	Respect for cultural values	Region-specific adaptations	Ethical considerations
	Theme 5	Trust	Reliability of AI	Credibility of responses	Human-AI comparison	Fear of AI errors
Revised Eight Themes <i>(After Students' Interviews)</i>	Theme 1	User Experiences and Satisfaction	Ease of interaction	Accessibility	Engagement level	User feedback
	Theme 2	Perceived Effectiveness	Mental health improvement	Perceived benefits	Behavioral changes	Coping skills
	Theme 3	Stigma and Acceptance	Societal judgment	Self-stigma	Willingness to use AI	Peer influence
	Theme 4	Confidentiality, Trust, and Privacy	Data anonymity	Ethical concerns	Trust in AI	Security measures
	Theme 5	Personalization and Customization	Tailored AI suggestions	User-specific responses	AI flexibility	Individualized interventions
	Theme 6	Emotional Concerns	Emotional attachment to AI	Lack of human empathy	AI response effectiveness	Emotional triggers
	Theme 7	Cultural and Religious Sensitivity	Faith-based adaptations	Religious values	Cultural representation	Bias in AI responses
	Theme 8	Recommendation	Suggested improvements	User testimonials	Future AI enhancements	Feedback for developers

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Theme 1: User Experiences and Satisfaction

The theme 'User Experiences & Satisfaction' was developed to capture students' perspectives on those who have engaged with AI for counseling information. It covers the overall students' experiences of satisfaction, feedback, usefulness, and impact of AI on the counseling process for mental health issues. The majority of students expressed a negative impact of AI in the mental health domain because it could not fulfill individual needs. Although it was easy to use, 24/7 accessible, and cost-effective for students, the majority were not satisfied with that. Some responses are given below:

Respondent 1:

"AI cannot judge you the way humans can because humans are complex. They are influenced by values, cultures, norms, etc., too which only a human can understand who knows and has dealt with the same in their life as well. I was not satisfied with the way the AI guided me for my problem". (Student)

Respondent 2:

"AI just gave me bookish information that I could find in any book or web portal, nothing else. He couldn't see my tears while discussing my problems, couldn't feel my emotions I was feeling at that time. It was just providing me information that you can

do this and this, that's it. Even lots of information given by AI was useless to me".
(Student)

Respondent 3:

"In my opinion, counseling is different for each individual, because every individual has their own life and experiences and circumstances, and their therapy is cut out for them specifically and how it would best suit them. However, with AI, I feel like it lacks the emotional understanding and empathy required to offer practical solutions to an individual who seeks one in times of vulnerability. Moreover, conversing with robotic models would always feel a lack of connection and respect as they are not a living entity, a human being, capable of building a complex understanding of your psyche".
(Counselor)

Respondent 4:

"No, it cannot be a great option. AI will only judge according to the input words. A human counselor judges the gestures, expressions and mental state as well and acts accordingly. Although it is easy to use, but not every time I don't always chat with it, nor can I express everything I can express in my wording through writing. Chatting will take more time to express your emotions; it's a waste of time and energy".
(Student)

Respondent 5:

"No, most of the time people express their situation through their dressings and the way they speak, sometimes they cry while speaking, with AI I feel that it is so superficial and there is a curtain in between us, so many hidden parts of the problem discussion cannot be revealed". (Counselor)

Thus, the majority of the students were dissatisfied with AI in providing counseling services due to its lack of emotional understanding and inability to address the individual needs of clients. They also criticized AI for offering universal, theory-based information, impractical solutions unsuitable for all, and lacking a personal connection. However, as compared to mental health counselors, AI is 24/7 available for users, accessible, easy to use, and cost-effective for all. Despite all of these, AI cannot interpret crucial non-verbal cues essential for building a strong therapeutic relationship, such as emotions, tone of voice, or body language, as reported by users, as highlighted by the majority of counselors. Compared to AI, mental health counselors build deeper connections and offer personalized support.

3.2 Theme 2: Perceived Effectiveness

This theme, 'perceived effectiveness,' delves into the subjective evaluation of the effectiveness of AI in counseling therapy compared to traditional human counseling. The majority of the students and mental health counselors perceived AI as ineffective for addressing mental health concerns, but in a few cases, it could be used. Some responses are below:

Respondent 1:

"Absolutely 'No', it has no benefit in the field of mental health. We can get theoretical material or information from AI, like we found in psychology books. But it has no concern with mental health therapy; it cannot deal with the emotions of individuals and does not judge the body language. It is generated by a human being, but cannot be a replacement for a human." (Counselor)

Respondent 2:

"It is not effective at all and offers no value in the mental health profession. It might provide theoretical information only, but it can't handle human emotions and feelings. It can't replace a psychologist or counselor." (Counselor)

Respondent 3:

"AI has a bundle of information on any field, like Google or other sources. To some extent, it can provide you with information that helps you to overcome the mental health issues, but it cannot reach the exact scenario of the problem and how to resolve it according to the circumstances. In my opinion, go for the counseling to the counselor is a better choice. Face-to-face interaction gives you more energy and a positive attitude toward yourself and others. (Student) "

Respondent 4:

"AI is not effective in all areas of mental health-related concerns. It provides you load of information and alternatives to the problems' solutions, but it cannot fully identify the exact cause of the problem like a psychologist or counselor does. It sometimes gives you more funny solutions that you cannot do or perform in your surroundings. Sometimes you get addicted to it without getting any fruitful outcomes. It's a waste of time." (Student)

Respondent 5:

"I believe that AI usually gives quite generic answers which are not applicable in helping everyone, according to life situations". (Counselor)

It is estimated that the majority of students and mental health counselors viewed AI as ineffective in the mental health counseling domain because it provides only theoretical information regarding the therapeutic services. It cannot effectively handle emotions or interpret human body language, which limits its role in mental health counseling therapy. The findings also revealed that AI cannot interact face-to-face with the client and provide personalized care; it provides generic and sometimes impractical solutions that lead to dissatisfaction. In terms of 'perceived effectiveness', it is concluded that AI's role in mental health assistance is perceived as limited and ineffective, and has the potential for addiction without meaningful outcomes.

3.3 Theme 3: Stigma and Acceptance

Mental health issues often bring stigma, discrimination, misconceptions, and avoidance of seeking help, impacting individuals' well-being and preventing open discussions with others about mental health-related issues. The theme 'stigma & acceptance' delves into perceptions of students seeking help from AI-based sources versus mental health counselors, examining potential stigmas, societal attitudes, and acceptance levels toward AI-based mental health information.

Respondent 1:

"Oh yes, one thing I observed while chatting with it, there was no fear of stigma. AI accepted me as who I am, without judging me for my issues. Though, when discussing with a psychologist, I have some fear of being judged or labeled by him/her". (Student)

Respondent 2:

"The good thing about AI is that it is neutral to anyone on any problem. It would not label you, don't set the boundaries and limitations. You can ask whatever you want to. But being neutral is not only the need of counseling therapy, it requires all the qualities and skills a therapist or counselor has". (Student)

Respondent 3:

"I enjoyed chatting with AI because I didn't feel any hesitation about being judged by AI. Although it didn't help me in my situation, which required full emotional & physical support from someone, not AI". (Student)

Respondent 4:

"Yes, that's true for AI, as being a neutral entity, doesn't categorize you based on your problems because you choose what information to share with it and what not to do. Unlike AI, a counselor might ask questions to pinpoint the root cause of that problem. It's about building a relationship between the counselor and the client; not every counselor or therapist judges or labels you negatively—individual differences matter. It's essential to choose a counselor whom you feel most at ease with and can establish a better understanding and relationship." (Counselor)

Thus, significant concerns were raised about stigma and fear of judgment by most students when seeking mental health support. Students appreciated AI services because of their non-judgmental and neutral interactions that helped in reducing stigma, imposing boundaries, or fear of being labeled by society. It may lack qualities that are essential for effective counseling therapy. In contrast, mental health counselors may label and they may ask probing questions and establish positive relationships, which can be essential for effective mental health support and treatment. The findings reveal that there is a significant impact of stigma-related barriers and labeling on the interaction of counselors and clients. Therefore, the quality of the therapeutic relationship and personal comfort with a mental health counselor must be considered in the counseling process.

3.4 Theme 4: Confidentiality, Trust, and Privacy

The theme 'trust and reliability' probes into the level of reliance students invest in AI systems for their mental health support through AI-based platforms. It delves into concerns regarding the dependability and accuracy of AI-generated insights, comparing this to the traditional trust students have in their mental health counselors. Most participants lack trust in mental health counselors as compared to AI, mentioning concerns about potential data leaks. Their primary worry centered on data confidentiality and privacy in their interactions with mental health counselors. A few participants expressed confidence in AI's ability to ensure data confidentiality and privacy. However, there were concerns raised about AI collecting personal data or information for third-party use, noted by participants that users must sign agreements before using AI on smartphones or other devices, indicating AI platforms share data with third parties for software updates and marketing purposes. Some responses from respondents are given below:

Respondent 1:

"I have worries, emphasizing how crucial it is to keep personal information safe during therapy sessions, either from human counselors or an AI as a virtual assistant. It is unsafe for me to open up in front of an unknown person or machine. Because I know that this information can be leaked at any time." (Student)

Respondent 2:

"AI provides a safe space to discuss without prying into our details or asking uncomfortable questions, at any time. On the other hand, psychologists tend to probe deeper, potentially uncovering aspects of our personalities and lives that we prefer to keep hidden. If the psychologist does not ask the questions from client questions to uncover hidden aspects, he cannot find the root cause of the problem, and the problem will remain unresolved. That's the main reason many people avoid visiting a psychologist or counselor." (Counselor)

Respondent 3:

“I have visited my counselors many times, and I trust that she has not disclosed my data with anyone. We have both signed confidentiality and data privacy agreements before counseling sessions. I feel secure and comfortable opening up easily in front of her. It was the best decision of my life.” (Student)

However, among students using AI-based counseling services, it was found that AI is very popular among students; they have concerns about the dependability and accuracy of AI-generated insights. Students have varying levels of trust in AI, as some students showed more trust in AI than in mental health counselors. They showed major concerns about data confidentiality, privacy, and fears of data leakage by mental health counselors. However, some students raised concerns about AI sharing data with third parties. On the other hand, mental health counselors highlighted their duties and concerns for clients that AI cannot fulfill. They build trust with their clients or students by signing confidentiality agreements and through clients’ or students’ past experiences with secure interactions.

3.5 Theme 5: Personalization and Customization

This theme explores how students and mental health counselors perceived the adaptability of AI to cater to their specific preferences and needs. The majority of respondents said that AI is not customized and flexible enough to address their unique mental health concerns. It provides theoretical information without judging personality, situations, and other needs. In contrast, mental health counselors provide face-to-face individualized therapeutic plans that work for individuals, especially in severe cases. A few responses of the participants are given below:

Respondent 1:

“AI cannot customize the statements or give solutions to my problems, as per my observation in this experimental study. It gives a general opinion of information that can be found on any other website or book. It has just theoretically based information that AI shares with everyone without judging others' aspects and personalities. AI gives general solutions to the particular problems; it has no concern whether a client can do it or not. So, I was not satisfied with AI for counseling purposes. However, it is a great source of information that can only guide you to a limit; it cannot help you to resolve your problem according to your need.” (Student)

Respondent 2:

“I found AI lacking in personalization and customization for counseling needs, I found myself dissatisfied due to its inability to offer tailored solutions. AI has some limitations; it cannot judge individual nuances, does not judge the body language or facial expressions, so how can AI develop a personalized counseling plan for an individual?” (Counselor)

Respondent 3:

“Human mental health professionals are trained to deal with individuals’ psychological and mental health issues; social, emotional, personal, or other issues that directly or indirectly affect their personality or life. They judge or assess the client for their exact problem, they can provide individualized plans/solutions for every individual according to his/her needs. However, AI is just a machine that has lots of information regarding almost everything, but it cannot explain to the client why and how it happens in his/her life and how easily he/she can overcome these issues. Only a psychologist or your counselor can deal with your emotional & psychological aspects on an individual basis.” (Counselor)

It is concluded from this theme that AI provides theoretical information without considering individual personality or specific needs, whereas mental health counselors offer personalized face-to-face therapeutic plans tailored to individual needs. The majority of respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with general and non-specific AI solutions, due to their inability to judge body language, facial expressions, and individual nuances to provide personalized plans. Mental health counselors are better equipped to provide individualized plans and address emotional and psychological aspects.

3.6 Theme 6: Emotional Concerns

Emotional resonance plays an essential role in the counseling process, where the client's emotions and the therapist's responses towards those emotions are important. AI, lacking empathy and emotions, lacks this crucial element in counseling. It was observed that the majority of students expressed dissatisfaction with AI due to its failure to respond to their emotional aspects during the provision of counseling information. Some of the responses are below:

Respondent 1:

“AI would still be AI. Only humans can relate and deal with the complexity of emotions, unlike AI, for which everything is just 0s and 1s. Counseling needs understanding of true emotions of the patient and careful analysis, which can be done by humans, not machines”. (Counselor)

Respondent 2:

“Not really, as it is an AI tool, they don't have senses; feel, touch, see, hear, etc. I don't think it will be able to have the same level of empathy as a human being can have”. (Counselor)

Respondent 3:

“It cannot. It only gives a mainstream idea that any normal individual will think of. They are robotic, they tried very hard to make a conversation, but I just feel we need some physical presence to listen to us and guide us”. (Student)

Respondent 4:

“It's not good to take counseling sessions from AI, I think some of the time we need someone who can empathize with us and not just listen to us but motivate us and guide us through turmoil in life”. (Student)

Respondent 5:

“It is an extremely bad idea to introduce AI for counseling. AI can never have the empathy, warmth, or understanding of humans”. (Counselor)

The findings reveal that in the counseling process, emotional resonance is crucial and involves the therapist's ability to respond to the client's emotions. The majority of students were dissatisfied with AI due to its lack of emotional understanding and empathy, as AI cannot replicate the intricacy of human emotions or offer the same level of empathy and support. Students mentioned that AI responses were generic rather than personalized emotional support. Mental health counselors, compared to AI, provide meaningful guidance during difficult times. They are trained professionals in the field of mental health and have the ability to empathize, motivate, and provide immediate emotional support.

3.7 Theme 7: Cultural and Religious Sensitivity

AI's approach in mental health counseling relies on general and Western-centric theories by Carl Rogers in 1942 (Muhamad, 2023), posing different challenges in accommodating diverse cultural as well as religious beliefs. In Pakistan, this theme examines how both AI and mental health counselors struggle to

address varied cultural norms and religious perspectives, particularly in regions like Pakistan, where diverse cultural backgrounds, Islam shape individuals' beliefs and practices. In this context, AI cannot fully meet the cultural and religious needs of individuals.

Respondent 1:

“I have some family-related issues based on Islamic applications. I asked AI to provide me with some strategies to resolve them, but I didn’t get a single useful answer.”
(Student)

Respondent 2:

“Our family strictly follows Islamic values and norms. I used AI for my sleeping issues and it guided me to go for jogging with your boyfriend at night time in track tracksuit lol. It further suggests me when I reject this suggestion, I should listen to music and songs with headphones. How can I apply these strategies in my life that I don’t want to? Our Islam doesn’t permit us to do these kinds of things. And I love to follow my Islam.”
(Student)

Respondent 3:

“Most of the suggestions provided by AI cannot fit in our country because it provides information based on Western culture, not Pakistani culture.” (Student)

Respondent 4:

“AI cannot meet our needs because it gives us only that information which has been coded into it. It cannot guide us as per our religion and cultural norms. It is a robot that utilizes information fed by humans. It was giving me directions that are not applicable in my city or even country.” (Student)

In Pakistan, AI's General and Western-centric guidance may not align with diverse cultural and religious norms. Students experienced dissatisfaction with AI-based counseling and its recommendations that lack Islamic values and cultural practices. AI's suggestions often conflict with local cultural norms and religious beliefs. This lack makes them impractical for users seeking culturally appropriate advice.

3.8 Theme 8: Recommendation

When the participants were asked if they would recommend AI for counseling information to other individuals who require mental assistance, the majority of the students did not agree with recommending AI. A few statements are given below:

Respondent 1:

“AI is undoubtedly a revolutionary change this era has seen where it can perform pretty much any task efficiently and with perfection. But when it comes to interpersonal relationships and communication, I think AI can never replace human beings. Our brains are delicately wired to perceive, process, and empathize with the info we receive from others, and we have the choice to act accordingly. Our brains are capable of picking up even the subtlest of changes in behavior and tone/voice, and identifying the vulnerabilities that AI is not. So, I will not recommend it to anyone”.
(Student)

Respondent 2:

“It is not recommended. AI is created by humans, and it will remain artificial no matter how it takes over the world in the coming years. Human brains haven't been fully explored yet, so how can AI explore each of our emotions/problems in length and decide or treat us?”. (Student)

Respondent 3:

“Humans are social animals. We are created in a way that interpersonal relationships, socializing, and empathizing are crucial to survival. In this era of advanced technology, I hope we don't lose ourselves completely to robots and let AI take over even the most delicate roles of human-to-human interactions. So, we need human interaction, not machine”. (Counselor)

Respondent 4:

“AI is an implausible advancement in technology, capable of professionally performing various tasks in a few minutes or seconds. Still, in matters of human interaction, communication, & connection, AI falls short. Our brains are magnificently tuned to perceive gradations, empathize, and adapt to others' feelings, emotions, & behaviors, something AI can't imitate. Recommending AI for human counseling is cautioned against.” (Counselor)

Participants expressed concerns about AI's inability to replicate human empathy, interpersonal connection, and emotional understanding. They did not recommend AI to others for counseling services due to its limitations in understanding complex human emotions. In contrast, the human brain's capacity for social interaction and emotional processing was highlighted by the participants, and the importance of human-to-human interaction in mental health support was emphasized over AI-based solutions.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic analysis, mixed opinions were observed related to AI-based counseling services. AI is 24/7 available for users with convenience, accessibility, ease of use, and cost-effectiveness for all. Despite all of these, AI cannot interpret crucial non-verbal cues essential for building a strong therapeutic relationship, they lack physical presence, ignorance of non-verbal cues, and difficulties with the technology. However, in recent studies of 2024-2025, many pieces of evidence have shown mixed opinions on AI-based mental health counseling. Clients generally report satisfaction with AI, such as Chatbots, based on efficacy (quick responses), availability (24/7), and personalization (tailored interactions), but they often feel less emotional connection with Chatbots compared to human interactions, as AI Chatbots cannot deal with complex queries that require nuanced empathy. The current study's findings, based on thematic analysis, are closely related to and supported by Xie et al. (2024) and Denecke et al. (2021).

The significant developments in AI technology showcase its potential to transform mental health counseling by offering precise, efficient, and personalized services. Many other studies mentioned that updated AI applications or platforms like Chatbots' emotional disclosures significantly increased clients' satisfaction, as clients showed their willingness to reuse Chatbots for their mental health counseling (Imel et al., 2024). This is because of the further advancement in AI which can stimulate human emotion, such as thinking and feeling like humans, and then interact accordingly. But it can only handle mild to moderate-level mental health issues. Likewise, Park (2023) and his colleagues indicated that AI's emotions and their disclosures positively affect clients' experience in Chatbot-mediated mental health counseling. Furthermore, clients' intention to disclose emotions and perceived intimacy with AI Chatbots independently and consecutively mediate the relationship between clients' satisfaction and Chatbots' emotional disclosure. Similarly, Johnson (2024) observed high satisfaction levels with AI among some clients due to increased flexibility and accessibility, while others expressed concerns over reduced personal connection and technological challenges such as software glitches, connectivity issues, and lack of user-friendly interfaces.

AI Chatbots such as 'Pi' could be useful for providing initial assistance with mild to moderate psychosomatic matters, as highlighted by Kuhail et al. (2024), particularly when access to human therapists is limited. These AI Chatbots' responses and interventions are of higher quality than compared

of mental health counselors. However, by creating a more engaging and human-like interaction, AI Chatbots can significantly improve clients' satisfaction and engagement through emotional expressions in the mental health field. This emotional expression is important for building a strong connection with clients and helps in making interactions feel more personalized and supportive through empathy and rapport. However, the effectiveness of emotional expression in AI Chatbots varies depending on several factors such as the type of emotional expression, the context of interaction, and user expectations, as also highlighted by Lin (2024) and Zhang et al. (2024).

5. CONCLUSION

AI-based mental health counseling services show promise of offering accessibility, convenience, and personalized interactions. It has some limitations, as it cannot fully replicate the emotional depth and nuanced empathy of human mental health counselors. Participants recognized the benefits of AI, including flexibility and cost-effectiveness, but also expressed concerns regarding emotional connection, privacy, and technological limitations. For this purpose, continued advancements in AI may enhance user satisfaction and engagement, but challenges related to trust, cultural and religious sensitivity, and emotional attachment remain significant factors to address in the development of AI mental health-related services. The study recommended the utilization of AI in mental health therapy under the supervision of mental health professionals, like a hybrid approach, or AI can further advance its ability to think, feel, and sense like humans.

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