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Exploring Psychologists' Perceptions on the Integration, Challenges, and Opportunities on the Use of AI Chatbots: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study explored the perceptions of psychologists regarding the integration, challenges, and opportunities presented by AI Chatbots in therapy and counseling. Guided by a main problem with six sub-problems, the study aimed to understand how AI Chatbots were perceived in terms of their functionality, ethical implications, and potential contributions to mental healthcare. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven licensed psychologists who had prior experience with AI tools in practice. Thematic analysis revealed three themes and twenty-three sub themes: (1) Integration of AI Chatbots, which highlights their usefulness in enhancing efficiency through data collection, psychoeducation, and task automation, while raising concerns about reduced human connection and weakened therapeutic alliance; (2) Challenges in the Use of AI Chatbots, which include issues related to data privacy, emotional limitations, cultural sensitivity, algorithmic bias, and over-reliance on automation; and (3) Opportunities of AI Chatbots in Therapy, which identifies benefits such as improved access to care, support for heavy caseloads, and tools for psychoeducation and guided self-help. The study concluded that AI chatbots may serve as valuable adjuncts in mental health practice if implemented with ethical safeguards, human oversight, and professional training. Recommendations include developing clear guidelines and expanding future research on chatbot applications across diverse populations.

Keywords: *AI chatbots, clinical psychologists and counseling psychologists, mental health technology, phenomenological thematic analysis, ethical considerations in AI integration.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, advanced technology plays a pivotal role in every aspect of life, making tasks easier and significantly reducing the time required to complete activities that once took much longer. This is especially true with the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which has transformed various aspects of daily life and industries. AI's capacity to process vast amounts of data, automate complex processes, and mimic human decision-making has greatly enhanced efficiency and productivity across multiple sectors. From personalized online recommendations to sophisticated diagnostic tools in healthcare, AI is reshaping how people work, live, and interact with their environment.

The Philippines, despite its relatively recent efforts in AI development, is now considered an emerging player in the global AI community. The Department of Science and Technology (DOST) launched the Harmonized National R&D Agenda 2017–2022 to foster the country's growing tech

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landscape, including artificial intelligence. Notably, 2018 marked a significant year for AI advancement in the nation (DOST, 2018)[1].

The field of artificial intelligence is rapidly evolving from a theoretical concept to a groundbreaking force that is transforming the way humans engage with technology and revolutionizing entire industries. At its core, AI is the study and creation of autonomous, automated systems designed to perform tasks that usually require human intelligence, such as learning, problem-solving, and decision-making. Progress in AI, natural language processing, and data analytics have made it an essential tool in fields such as healthcare, finance, education, and increasingly, psychology (Russell & Norvig, 2009)[2].

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into various sectors has revolutionized industries, enhancing efficiency, decision-making, and problem-solving capabilities. In particular, the field of psychology, with its focus on understanding human behavior and mental processes, is increasingly exploring the potential of AI tools, such as AI chatbots, to assist in therapeutic practices, mental health support, and psychological assessments. AI chatbots, powered by advanced natural language processing and machine learning algorithms, offer a unique opportunity to provide immediate, accessible, and potentially cost-effective solutions for individuals seeking psychological support. However, despite the growing interest and the apparent benefits of AI in mental health, there remains limited empirical research exploring psychologists' perceptions of the integration, challenges, and opportunities associated with AI chatbots in their practice.

This study sought to address several gaps in current literature regarding psychologists' perceptions of AI chatbots in therapeutic settings. Prior research has focused on technical applications on AI, but there is limited insight into how psychologists experience its integration, particularly concerning ethical concerns like data privacy, informed consent, and professional accountability (Magrabi et al., 2019; Hazarika 2020)[3,4]. Few studies explore how empathy and human-like interaction affect adoption and trust in mental health contexts (Pelau et al., 2021)[5], or how AI decision-support systems influence clinical judgement. Additionally, little is known about how AI impacts the therapeutic alliance from the client's perspective (Luxton, 2014)[6] and how these challenges differ in developing countries with limited resources (Hazarika, 2020)[7]. While AI chatbots are heralded as tools with transformative potential, they also raise questions about their effectiveness, reliability, and the human element in therapy. This phenomenological study seeks to shed more light on psychologists lived experiences with AI chatbot use, with particular emphasis on (1) how AI Chatbots are being integrated into psychological practice; (2) the ethical, technical, and practical challenges psychologists encounter in the process, and (3) the perceived opportunities for expanding access to mental health services, enhancing therapeutic processes, and reshaping their professional roles and identities. In doing so, the study also explores how psychologists perceived the impact of AI chatbots on their role as practitioners, decision-makers and facilitators of care.

METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design, which aimed to explore and understand the essence of psychologists' lived experiences regarding the use of AI chatbot technology in practice. Phenomenology was appropriate for this research as it centers on how participants make meaning of a particular phenomenon in their personal and professional lives.

In-depth qualitative interviews or focus group discussions with psychologists were conducted to explore their perceptions of the usefulness, ease of use, and general attitudes toward the application of AI chatbots in therapy or assessment.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data by identifying recurring patterns and themes that reflect how psychologists perceive AI chatbots.

Establishing validity in qualitative research involves a comprehensive approach, including strategies to ensure the authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 2018)[10].

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To effectively present the results and findings, essential strategies included member checking, triangulation, and the use of detailed, comprehensive explanations. To strengthen the validity of the study, the researcher disclosed personal biases, included negative or discrepant information, spent time in the field to gain deeper insights, participated in thorough debriefing, and considered the function of an external auditor.

This research design aimed to gain a deep and detailed examination of how clinical psychologists perceive and interact with AI chatbots, the challenges they face, and the opportunities they see for integrating these technologies into their practice.

First, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB) at Centro Escolar University. To ensure that the questions were appropriate, suitable, and unambiguous, a semi-structured guide for interviews was created and evaluated by psychology experts in accordance with ethical research standards. Feedback was incorporated into the final interview guide.

The researcher disclosed no conflicts of interest that could affect the conduct or reporting of this study. To ensure neutrality and integrity throughout the process, the research is not affiliated—personally, professionally, or financially—with any companies or developers of AI chatbots. This declaration complies with institutional and ethical standards to maintain transparency and uphold the study's credibility. Should any conflict of interest arise, the Ethics Review Board will be promptly informed.

Research participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Before participating, they were invited to ask questions and, if they agreed to be audio recorded, were asked to sign an informed consent form. Each participant gave informed consent after being fully briefed about their role in the study.

To ensure privacy and confidentiality, all collected data were anonymized and securely stored, with access limited solely to the researcher. No publications, papers, or presentations included personally identifiable information. Upon completion of the study, audio recordings were securely deleted, in line with institutional data protection policies, and were used solely for transcription and analysis purposes.

Licensed clinical and counseling psychologists were contacted by the researcher through their Facebook and LinkedIn profiles as part of the recruitment process. All prospective participants received an intake form via Google Forms to assess their eligibility for the study. Seven psychologists were deemed eligible and were invited to participate in interviews via Google Meet at their preferred schedule.

Since the interviews were conducted online, the researcher sought and obtained consent from participants to take images with them as part of the study documentation. However, to protect their privacy and anonymity, their identities and affiliations were not disclosed.

To explore psychologists' views on the use of AI chatbots, the study employed a qualitative interviewing technique using open-ended questions designed to understand the integration, challenges, and opportunities of such tools in professional practice.

The researcher anticipated that licensed clinical and counseling psychologists would hold diverse perspectives on whether AI chatbots serve as complementary tools or potential disruptors in psychological practice. While some participants were expected to express optimism about AI's potential to enhance accessibility and support in therapy, others were anticipated to raise ethical concerns, point out limitations, and express reservations about its impact on the therapeutic relationship.

To uphold ethical standards and show appreciation for participants' time and insights, the researcher offered refreshments or food vouchers as tokens of gratitude—while ensuring that participation remained entirely voluntary and free from undue influence.

Semi-structured questionnaire

The semi-structured interview questions that the researcher created were verified by a number of renowned licensed psychometricians or psychologists. The aforementioned validators guaranteed that the guiding questions are pertinent and useful for the investigation.

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The researcher herself prepared the interview questions, which would act as a roadmap for the discussion between the participants and the researcher. Participants were to carry the interview beyond the discussion guide, and the researcher will have more freedom to be flexible and deviate from the script.

Interview

The participants are licensed psychologists, and the interviews will be conducted face-to-face. Each participant was interviewed on a single day, for approximately one to two hours. Within this timeframe, the researcher covered a thorough discussion of the consent form, the purpose of the research, its duration, and the interview itself.

Participants were asked to sign a consent form if they agree to be audio- or video-recorded, and they will be encouraged to ask questions as needed.

Rights for access to own record in the research

Participants had the opportunity to view their recordings and may request modifications if any material is to be withheld or partially disclosed, by notifying the researcher. They are entitled to see and review the data they provide for the study. The researcher will not share any participant's information with other participants or individuals.

Data Analysis

Since the study adopted a qualitative approach, the researcher employed Thematic Analysis, following the framework of phenomenological inquiry. This process involves identifying significant statements, clustering them into themes, and constructing descriptions that capture the core essence of the participants' experiences.

Thematic Analysis

As discussed by Kiger (2020)[11], thematic analysis is an appropriate technique for analyzing data to fully understand experiences, insights, or actions across a dataset.

Through thematic analysis, the researcher generates themes to connect, reinterpret, and/or reframe data elements. These themes serve not only as organizing tools for categorizing and labeling content, but also for engaging in deeper data transformation and interpretation. As part of the process, the researcher will create organizational and categorization labels to characterize the data.

Kiger (2020) outlined a six-step procedure commonly used in thematic analysis:

Step 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data

Gaining familiarity with the complete data set is the first step in the theme analysis process, which requires actively and repeatedly looking over the data. (Kiger, 2020)

Step 2: Developing preliminary codes

Coding is the initial analytical phase that helps organize data in a precise and granular manner. After familiarization, researchers begin noting relevant questions, patterns, and interesting elements within and across the data. A code should logically fit within a broader coding framework (also known as a coding manual), which guides the coding process by clearly defining the codes used.

A code should fit logically into a larger coding framework or coding template also known as coding manuals, which directs the coding process by defining and outlining the codes to be applied. It should also be adequately well-defined and demarcated to avoid overlapping with other codes. (Crabtree and Miller 1999; Attride-Stirling 2001; King 2004; Nowell et al. 2017)[12,13,14,15]

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Step 3: Searching for themes

A code should fit logically into a larger coding framework or coding template—also known as coding manuals—which guide the coding process by defining and outlining the codes to be applied. It should also be adequately well-defined and clearly demarcated to avoid overlapping with other codes (Varpio, 2017).[16]

Key themes will offer important connections among data pieces and address significant research inquiries. However, before moving on to evaluate the themes in Step 4, the researcher cannot yet predict which themes will ultimately be retained, rejected, or altered in some way (Kiger, 2020).

Step 4: Evaluating themes

It was defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a two-level analytical procedure.[17]

To guarantee coherence and proper alignment, the researcher examines the coded data within each theme. The procedure involves evaluating whether each theme is supported by adequate and relevant data, determining whether the data within the theme make sense, and assessing whether any themes are too diverse or broad. To justify their separation, themes should exhibit internal consistency—meaning the data within a theme are coherent—while also being distinct from other themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

When the researcher is confident that the revised thematic map sufficiently incorporates all of the coded data for the final analysis, this initial level of analysis is considered complete (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers should maintain detailed notes, or memos, documenting their decisions and thought processes regarding the development, modification, and/or removal of themes throughout this process. According to Nowell et al. (2017), these notes can help researchers make connections between themes and provide an audit trail that enhances the validity of their conclusions.

A similar set of questions is used in Level 2, this time applied to the complete dataset. The researcher determines whether certain ideas are relevant across the dataset and whether the theme map accurately and sufficiently reflects all of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The thematic map should clearly illustrate how the themes relate to one another and how they represent the topic or construct of interest. To accomplish this, the researcher reviews the entire dataset again, revisiting themes and re-coding any new data that align with the themes developed or revised during this phase. The thematic map is then updated accordingly (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step 5: Determining and defining themes

Following the refinement of the thematic map, the researcher proceeds to Step 5, where they define each theme and provide a narrative explanation, highlighting its significance to the broader research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The theme titles intended for the final report are reviewed to ensure they are concise and sufficiently descriptive (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Next, by focusing on the most significant elements of each theme and the data it encompasses, the researcher develops a coherent narrative explaining how and why the coded data within each theme provide distinct insights, enhance our understanding of broader issues, and relate to other themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researcher identifies areas where themes overlap, uncovers emerging sub-themes—which can reveal data hierarchies or offer more in-depth explanations—and clearly defines the scope of each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Step 6: Generating report/manuscript

In contrast to being a "separate stage," King (2004) described the final phase of presenting findings as a "continuation" of the research and interpretation that has already taken place.

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The analysis should describe the data and provide a rationale for why the researcher's interpretation thoroughly and richly addresses the research question, using both narrative descriptions and representative data extracts (e.g., direct quotes from participants) (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The discussion section can deepen the analysis by linking themes to broader research inquiries, discussing the implications of the findings, and challenging the assumptions or conditions that gave rise to the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Lim (2024)[18] emphasized the importance of understanding the concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research, especially when compared to the conventional criteria of reliability and validity used in quantitative research. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on demonstrating reliability and validity through statistical measures, qualitative research deals with non-numerical data and requires a different set of criteria to ensure rigor.

Lim also stated that credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are the components of trustworthiness that reflect how qualitative researchers ensure the rigor of their work. These elements provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating and safeguarding the quality of qualitative research.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree to which a study's conclusions accurately represent the phenomenon under investigation. It is based on the authenticity of the data and the appropriateness of the researcher's interpretation, with the goal of ensuring that the study's conclusions genuinely reflect reality (e.g., participants' experiences and opinions) (Lim, 2024).

The researcher establishes the study's credibility by using a diverse approach that enhances the authenticity and relevance of the findings through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking.

Lim (2024) defined prolonged engagement as the process of focusing on groups or interviews where the researcher builds rapport, collects more detailed information, and gains a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives by spending sufficient time with them. This reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings.

The study also noted that triangulation—the use of multiple data sources, methodologies, theories, or researchers—enhances credibility and allows for a more comprehensive analysis. Multiple layers of evidence, such as document reviews or observational data, can be used to validate interview findings, thereby strengthening the robustness of the study's conclusions. This approach minimizes the risk of bias that might arise from relying on a single person, method, source, or viewpoint.

Member checking improves credibility by allowing participants to review and confirm the researcher's initial interpretations. This ensures that the findings and analyses accurately represent participants' perspectives and experiences. By agreeing with, refining, or challenging the results, participants help increase the validity and dependability of the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability, which is analogous to the concept of objectivity in quantitative research, refers to the degree of neutrality or alignment maintained in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)[19]. Lim (2024) emphasized the importance of ensuring that the study's conclusions are shaped by the participants and the context of the data collection and analysis, rather than by the researcher's subjective opinions. This requires evidence that the findings were grounded in the data, theoretical framework, and/or research paradigm—rather than influenced by the researcher's personal biases, interests, or goals.

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Dependability

This component of trustworthiness is crucial because it assures that the results stem from a well-considered and consistently applied research process, rather than from arbitrary or irrational decisions. Dependability acknowledges that, although qualitative research often explores dynamic and evolving phenomena, the procedures and methods used should be sufficiently consistent to produce dependable results (Lim, 2024).

Like the concept of reliability in quantitative research, dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency and stability of findings over time and under similar conditions. It addresses the need for findings to be repeatable and dependable if the study were conducted again under similar circumstances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the extent to which readers are provided with sufficient information about the study's context, participants, and interactions to assess how the findings might apply to other settings or populations. Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes generalizability for universal application, qualitative research emphasizes deep, context-rich insights into specific cases. This allows others to make informed comparisons and judge whether the findings are applicable in similar contexts.

To achieve transferability, thick description is used—providing a detailed and comprehensive account of the study's findings, including the context, participants' experiences, and external factors such as interactions and emotions (Lim, 2024). This concept is analogous to generalizability in quantitative research, which refers to how well a study's conclusions can be applied to different contexts or settings—while recognizing the particular, context-bound nature of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Perceptions on Integration, Challenges and Opportunities of AI Chatbots in Practice

This study aimed to understand how clinical and counseling psychologists perceive the use of AI chatbots in their practice. The results shed light on the perceived integration, challenges, ethical considerations, and opportunities of AI chatbots in their practice. These findings could influence professional and ethical standards, especially in the Philippines, help psychologists make well-informed decisions about using AI chatbots in therapy, and aid in the creation of AI-driven mental health strategies. The data has been divided into three fundamental categories: 1) integration, 2) challenges, and 3) opportunities, by using thematic analysis. Each question theme is extensively explored, emphasizing substantial points of view that the participants had in common.

Identified Themes and Sub-Themes

Through a reflective thematic analysis of interview data, this research has identified core themes, further organized into 23 sub-themes and supported by 47 coded insights.

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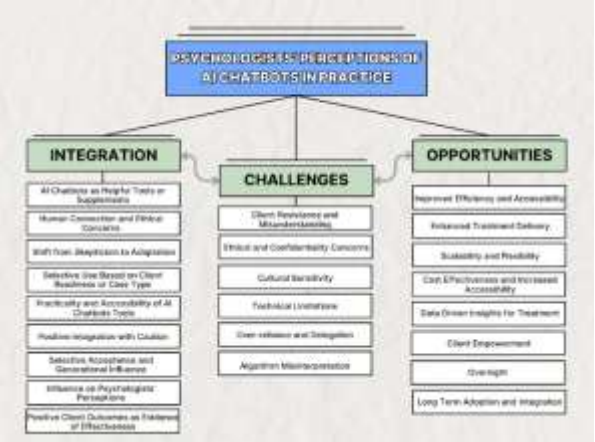


Figure 4. *Simplified Diagram: Conceptual Flow of the Integration, Challenges and Opportunities*

This diagram illustrates the central idea structure that emerged from a qualitative analysis of clinical and counseling psychologists' perceptions on the integration, challenges, and opportunities of AI chatbots into mental health practice. The heart of the picture centers on the fundamental phenomenon studied in the study: "Psychologists' Perceptions of AI Chatbots in Practice." This central emphasis branches into three major thematic domains: Integration, Challenges, and Opportunities, each with specific sub-themes.

1. *Integration*

This cluster encapsulates how psychologists are now using AI chatbots in their professional practice. Nine sub-themes are given, including considering chatbots as helpful tools or supplements, promoting positive integration with caution, and acknowledging generational influence. These findings show that while chatbots are not considered replacements for human therapists, many practitioners use them for speed up work, enhance engagement, or supplement existing interventions. The sub-theme Positive Client Outcomes as Evidence of Effectiveness emphasizes the demonstrated benefits in client progress, particularly when AI tools are utilized ethically and thoughtfully.

2. *Challenges*

This domain focuses on perceived challenges or limitations in the application of AI chatbots. Themes like Ethical and Confidentiality Concerns, Cultural Sensitivity, and Client Resistance indicate widespread concerns about professional accountability and data protection. Issues such as over-reliance, algorithm misinterpretation, and technical limitations highlight the practical and ethical complications that may prevent integration. These findings highlight the need for ethical rules, user education, and platform transparency to promote responsible use.

3. *Opportunities*

This cluster describes the potential benefits that psychologists connect with AI chatbot adoption. The themes include increased efficiency and accessibility, client empowerment, data-driven insights, and long-term integration. These sub-themes reflect a forward-thinking perspective in which AI chatbots, when aligned with clinical standards and ethical precautions, are considered as potential tools for expanding reach, personalizing therapy, and assisting both clients and practitioners in their therapeutic journey.

The overall structure of the diagram represents the dynamic interaction between these three thematic domains. For example, while challenges generally shape integration, rising opportunities often influence it. The employment of AI chatbots in mental health is not binary, but rather a spectrum of acceptance, adaptability, caution, and optimism based on ethical duty and the contextual needs of psychological treatment.

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Integration of AI Chatbots

Psychologists generally perceive AI chatbots as supplementary tools rather than replacements for traditional therapy. They are primarily integrated for administrative support (e.g., scheduling, reminders) and basic therapeutic functions, such as psychoeducation and client self-practice. This finding is consistent with Tuena et al. (2022)[20], who noted that AI tools are increasingly being integrated into psychological processes to reduce variability in practice and provide supplementary support without replacing the human therapist. Furthermore, AI chatbots are seen as enhancing accessibility for clients in remote or underserved areas and for those who prefer digital interaction.

However, generational differences in acceptance were observed: younger clients tend to be more open to AI use due to their digital fluency, while older clients often express skepticism or discomfort. Integration decisions must be tailored to each client's needs and technological comfort, and AI should only be used when clients are prepared to engage meaningfully with it.

Psychologists view AI chatbots as supplemental tools rather than replacements for traditional therapeutic interventions. Because these chatbots are particularly adept at managing administrative tasks, psychologists can focus more on the crucial aspects of treatment. AI chatbots also increase mental health support accessibility, especially for clients who live in remote areas or prefer virtual interactions.

One common observation among participants was the careful and nuanced use of AI chatbots in psychological practice. Participants noted that clients' willingness to use AI tools varied by generation. Due to their familiarity with digital technologies, younger clients are generally more open and comfortable interacting with AI chatbots. In contrast, older clients often express mistrust, favoring more traditional therapeutic methods and, in some cases, choosing to avoid digital tools altogether.

These findings underscore the importance of tailoring technology integration to each client's therapeutic needs, preferences, and readiness. Psychologists emphasized that AI chatbots should be used cautiously and only when clients are able and ready to engage meaningfully with the technology.

Psychologists were also cautiously optimistic about incorporating AI chatbots into their work. While these tools are valued for their support in client self-practice, psychoeducation, and administrative functions, they are not intended to replace human-led therapy. AI is regarded as a supplementary tool—especially useful for routine interventions—but inadequate for complex cases where human empathy and emotional depth are essential.

In the long term, practitioners are increasingly recognizing AI chatbots as valuable supplementary tools that can provide additional support, customize care, and empower clients on their mental health journeys—even though they are not meant to replace human therapists.

Challenges in the Use of AI Chatbots

Despite their usefulness, AI chatbots present notable ethical, relational, and practical challenges:

1. ***Data Privacy and Confidentiality***. Psychologists expressed strong concerns about potential risks to client data, which may violate APA and PAP ethical guidelines.

2. ***Misunderstanding of AI's Role*****.** Some clients mistakenly perceive chatbots as replacements for therapists, potentially affecting trust, accountability, and treatment quality.

3. ***Lack of Emotional Intelligence*****.** AI tools cannot replicate the empathy, emotional attunement, and non-verbal cues essential to therapy, consistent with Mehrabian's communication model.

These concerns call for clear boundaries, informed consent, and responsible use of AI in clinical practice.

However, careful attention must be paid to client readiness, ethical risks, and the limitations of AI in capturing emotional complexity. AI chatbots are tools—not therapists—and their value lies in enhancing, not replacing, the human connection at the core of therapy.

Whether used for administrative or therapeutic purposes, the implementation of AI chatbots in mental health raises several challenges, particularly ethical ones. Psychologists expressed particular

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concern regarding data privacy and confidentiality, fearing potential violations that could undermine the ethical foundations of their practice. Another issue is the misinterpretation of AI chatbots' roles in therapy, where some clients mistakenly believe that chatbots can substitute real therapeutic interventions. This misconception creates accountability problems, as clients may question the professionalism and reliability of psychologists who use AI tools.

Even with the acknowledged benefits of AI-based tools like chatbots and self-help applications, both clients and psychologists continue to highlight the importance of human connection in therapy. While digital tools may enhance accessibility and provide supplementary support, they cannot replace the relational dynamics and emotional sensitivity fundamental to effective therapy. This limitation aligns with Albert Mehrabian's communication model, which asserts that 93% of emotional communication is non-verbal—38% conveyed through tone of voice and 55% through facial expressions (Mehrabian, 1981)[21].

Furthermore, both the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP) emphasize the importance of upholding ethical standards when incorporating technology in psychological practice. Psychologists may face challenges in maintaining the APA's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, which mandate the protection of client confidentiality, professional competence, and avoidance of harm (APA, 2017)[22]. Similarly, the PAP Code of Ethics advocates the cautious and context-sensitive use of technology to safeguard client welfare and uphold the profession's integrity (PAP, 2017)[22].

Moreover, as emphasized by Wendy, Gballa, and Ronda (2024)[23], the use of AI tools in practice must be governed by ethical standards in tele-mental health, including safeguarding confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and recognizing the limitations of remote interventions. Their analysis highlights that while digital tools expand access, professionals must ensure that ethical frameworks evolve alongside technological advancements to maintain the quality and safety of care.

Opportunities of AI Chatbots in Therapy

Psychologists remain cautiously optimistic about the potential of AI tools to support therapy:

1. *Workflow Efficiency*. To manage routine tasks, chatbots allow therapists to focus on complex clinical issues. This enhances both practitioner well-being and client care.

2. *Client Empowerment*. Chatbots offer 24/7 support, promoting self-management, flexibility, and continuity of care.

3. *Expanding Access*. AI helps bridge the global mental health gap, aligning with WHO initiatives and ethical standards set by the APA and PAP.

Studies (e.g., Siddals et al., 2024; Fitzpatrick, Darcy, & Vierhile, 2017)[24,25] demonstrate how AI chatbots can support trauma recovery, enhance therapeutic relationships, and reduce stigma through increased anonymity. These findings highlight that, when used ethically and appropriately, AI chatbots can enhance psychological practice by augmenting human care, improving accessibility, and streamlining administrative burdens.

For example, a study by Siddals et al. (2024) involving interviews with 19 individuals who used generative AI chatbots for mental health revealed high engagement and beneficial effects, such as improved relationships and trauma recovery. Additionally, studies show that AI chatbots can provide personalized support, offering a sense of privacy and anonymity that encourages individuals to seek help (Fitzpatrick, Darcy, & Vierhile, 2017).

The study also highlighted the substantial opportunities that AI chatbot technologies offer in mental health care, particularly in relation to the themes of integration and challenges. While many benefits are practitioner-centered, numerous advantages are client-focused—especially in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and empowerment.

Psychologists frequently noted that AI chatbots can assist with routine but essential tasks such as scheduling appointments, monitoring client progress, and providing psychoeducation, thereby increasing

the efficiency of therapeutic environments. These tools primarily reduce administrative burdens and allow practitioners to dedicate more time to advanced clinical work and therapeutic interactions, resulting in improved client outcomes and practitioner well-being.

One of the most widely recognized benefits was the increased accessibility provided by AI chatbots. The availability of 24/7 psychological support for clients in underserved or geographically remote areas encourages engagement and promotes continuity of care beyond scheduled sessions. This aligns with the World Health Organization's (2021)[27] push for integrating digital mental health solutions in response to rising global mental health needs, reinforcing broader efforts to close mental health care gaps through technology.

Impact on Psychologists' Professional Role and Identities

The incorporation of AI chatbots into psychological practice signifies more than just a technological advancement—it indicates a profound change in the professional identity of psychologists. Participants articulated this shifting role as a transition from being the exclusive providers of care to becoming partners in a digitally facilitated therapeutic environment. With AI tools assuming routine responsibilities such as scheduling, psychoeducation, and symptom monitoring, psychologists are increasingly able to concentrate on tasks that necessitate intricate human judgment, empathy, and ethical awareness. This transition has engendered both empowerment and uncertainty.

Some psychologists shared positive reflections, highlighting that AI chatbots enable them to enhance their time management and resource allocation, especially by offloading administrative and repetitive therapeutic duties. Conversely, others voiced apprehensions that excessive reliance on AI could weaken the therapeutic relationship or reduce their roles to mere oversight instead of active therapeutic involvement. These concerns align with broader literature, which warns against perceiving AI solely as a tool for efficiency without recognizing its psychological and ethical ramifications on clinical roles (Blease et al., 2020; Luxton, 2014).[28,29]

Furthermore, participants recognized the increasing necessity to cultivate digital skills, adapt to new platforms, and uphold ethical standards in progressively technology-driven environments. This encompasses preserving confidentiality, ensuring informed consent, and establishing boundaries regarding the extent of AI utilization—issues emphasized by both the American Psychological Association (2017) and the Psychological Association of the Philippines (2017) in their ethical guidelines.

In summary, the integration of AI chatbots requires a thoughtful reassessment of the psychologist's role—not as a diminished entity in the face of automation, but as a steadfast human guide within an ever more digitized mental health landscape. As one participant remarked, "AI can help lighten the load, but it should never replace the human connection."

CONCLUSION

Integrating AI chatbots into psychological therapy requires careful and ethical considerations, even though they present significant potential to increase the effectiveness, accessibility, and scope of mental health services. Psychologists' perceptions reveal a multifaceted interaction between promise and uncertainty. AI needs to be applied with openness, cultural awareness, and supervision from experts if it is to be a true friend in mental health treatment.

The field can benefit from AI while preserving the therapeutic tenets at the core of psychology by setting clear guidelines, emphasizing ethical behavior, and providing psychologists with the required resources and training.

Limitations of the Study

This study had a number of limitations that might have affected how comprehensive and in-depth its conclusions were. First, in the local environment, there is still a lack of widespread adoption of AI chatbots in psychology practice. Because they had no firsthand experience with AI chatbot implementation, many potential participants provided insights that were more observational, hypothetical, or theoretical than based on actual experience.

Second, just a small number of seven people participated in the study. Although this figure is suitable for a phenomenological approach, it might not adequately represent the range of opinions held by clinical and counseling psychologists as a whole. Although the breadth of individual experiences was valued more highly than generalizability, future studies could gain from a larger sample size to increase the findings' representativeness.

Third, the study encountered key challenges when gathering data. A number of potential volunteers refused to participate unless they were paid for their time. Access to potentially useful insights from more seasoned or specialized individuals was restricted because payment was not possible due to the academic and non-commercial nature of this research. Additionally, practicing psychologists' time constraints made scheduling challenging and occasionally restricted the duration and depth of interviews.

These limitations emphasize how critical it is to carry out more varied sampling in future research, including psychologists who actively use AI chatbots in their work. Future studies should also look at morally righteous strategies to promote involvement, like working with professional associations or offering incentives for professional growth.

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