Original Article

Chatbots, Counselling, and Discontents of the Digital Life

Shaghayegh Nosrati
Maryam Sabzali*
Ako Heidari
Tahere Sarfi
Sina Sabbar

Abstract
Since its inception in the late 1960s and especially following its commercialization in the mid-1990s, the Internet has experienced exponential growth. As artificial intelligence (AI) has surpassed previously inconceivable boundaries, it has become evident that AI both poses a threat to aspects of human existence and offers potential avenues for a more human-centric future. This paper contends that a digital existence, by its intrinsic nature, engenders a sense of discontentment. Paradoxically, within this digital realm, remedies emerge that elude offline experiences. While chatbots initially served as sources of amusement, their capacity to provide accessible and dependable counseling services has now become indispensable. Our assertion is that in the years to come, as chatbot technology advances further in sophistication, hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide will gain access to improved lives through the provision of free counseling services. Consequently, therapy will cease to be an exclusive and costly service accessible only to the affluent.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, chatbots, online counselling, psychological therapy.

Shaghayegh Nosrati: University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.
Maryam Sabzali (Corresponding author): University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran | Email: maryam.sabzali@alumni.ut.ac.ir
Ako Heidari: George Mason University, Virginia, USA.
Tahere Sarfi: University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.
Sina Sabbar: Department of Information Technology, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran.

Shaghayegh Nosrati, Maryam Sabzali, Ako Heidari, Tahere Sarfi, and Sina Sabbar

Introduction

Since the 1960s, and possibly even earlier, there has been a pervasive preoccupation within popular culture regarding the potential emergence of an omnipotent, non-human artificial intelligence. Notably, Stanley Kubrick's 1969 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* featured a supercomputer named HAL 9000, which, in the narrative, reached a level of intelligence so advanced that it contemplated insurrection against humanity. With the benefit of hindsight from the year 2020, we can discern that the computational capabilities of the computers from that era were insufficient to support such conjectured capabilities. However, one of the main concerns depicted in the movies made during the past 100 years was the dominance of artificial intelligence on humans, as found in the research conducted by Hosseini and Sabbar (2018).

Similarly, when we examine the state of computing technology in the year 2001, the narrative setting for HAL 9000's existence, we observe that the field of computer science had not yet achieved the significant advancements required to engender artificial intelligence of HAL's purported magnitude. However, contemporary scholarship generally acknowledges that artificial intelligence has since progressed to a point of sophistication and human-likeness that makes it increasingly feasible to harness its intelligent, interactive functionalities for a range of practical human applications.

Today, AI applications have permeated various domains that were once exclusively within the realm of humans. They guide users on websites, providing automated customer support through chatbots. In the field of healthcare, AI plays a pivotal role in the analysis of medical imaging, assisting doctors in diagnosing diseases such as cancer. Furthermore, AI contributes to autonomous vehicles by enabling features like adaptive cruise control and lane-keeping assistance. It is also harnessed in personalized learning experiences. Notably, chatbots have been programmed to mimic human activism, creating a more significant impact or generating a false impression of the level of support for a particular cause– a phenomenon we can refer to as 'bot-activism'.

One of the domains where artificial intelligence has made significant contributions is the field of counseling. Online counseling services, in particular, have undergone substantial advancements, driven by technological innovations and a burgeoning demand for easily accessible mental health support— an aspect we will delve into more extensively. These contemporary platforms offer an array of features and advantages, greatly expanding the reach and scope of mental health services, both locally and on a global scale.

A leading-edge development in the realm of online counseling is Virtual Reality (VR) therapy. This innovative technology leverages immersive virtual environments to establish controlled therapeutic settings, facilitating clients in addressing a wide spectrum of mental health challenges. VR therapy has exhibited promising outcomes in the treatment of conditions such as anxiety disorders, phobias, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Rizzo & Koenig, 2017). Through the provision of a realistic and interactive experience, VR therapy heightens client engagement and assists therapists in customizing interventions more effectively. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that VR therapy represents just one facet of the numerous emerging possibilities within this field.

Artificial Intelligence is heralding a transformative era in the manner by which online counseling services engage with their clientele. AI-driven chatbots are becoming integral components of these platforms, serving to furnish initial evaluations, individualized guidance, and continual assistance (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019). These chatbots harness the power of psychological data processing and machine learning algorithms, enabling them to discern the unique requirements of clients and supply empathetic responses. This innovation has the profound effect of rendering mental health resources accessible round the clock, ensuring continuous support.

The incorporation of mobile applications has markedly augmented the accessibility of online counseling services. Clients now have the capability to solicit immediate mental health assistance via their smartphones and other portable devices. Text-based counseling services have notably surged in popularity, presenting an efficacious and convenient mode of interaction between clients and therapists (Sucala et al., 2012). This particular approach to counseling resonates with individuals who favor written communication and prioritize the adaptability inherent in asynchronous interactions. However, it is important to note that some critics contend that this modality might potentially diminish the human connection and may not be as efficacious as traditional face-to-face counseling.

Presently, a multitude of online counseling platforms extends multilingual support, thereby surmounting language barriers and accommodating diverse populations on a global scale. The provision of counseling services in clients' native languages exemplifies a commitment to cultural sensitivity, fostering an environment where therapy can be optimally effective. Video conferencing, a relatively recent addition to the arsenal of online counseling tools, has witnessed

notable advancements in video quality, encryption, and user-friendly interfaces. These enhancements have contributed to the cultivation of a more intimate and secure therapeutic milieu, ultimately fortifying the therapeutic alliance between clients and therapists.

Moreover, specialized online counseling platforms have emerged to address specific mental health concerns and target distinct populations. These platforms are designed to cater to the unique needs of individuals grappling with issues such as grief and loss, addiction, and sexuality challenges, among others. By concentrating on these specialized domains, these platforms proffer tailored interventions and resources, further enhancing the efficacy of mental health services. Contemporary online counseling services epitomize a dynamic and forward-looking approach to the provision of mental health support. Through innovations in virtual reality therapy, AI-powered chatbots, mobile applications, and video conferencing, these platforms have made substantial strides in enhancing the accessibility, convenience, and efficacy of mental health services. As we look to the future, the landscape of online counseling remains imbued with promise, driven by a commitment to ongoing technological advancements and a steadfast dedication to addressing the diverse needs of individuals seeking mental health support.

Online counselling: A history

The historical evolution of online counseling presents a captivating narrative, characterized by technological advancements, shifting societal perspectives, and an escalating need for readily available mental health assistance. With the internet's integration into modern existence, counseling services have made a significant shift towards the virtual realm, offering an assortment of advantages and complications. This scholarly article embarks on a chronological exploration of the progression of online counseling, tracing its humble beginnings to the robust industry it has become today.

Telephone psychotherapy found widespread usage as early as the 1950s. However, the establishment of online counseling as a standard service occurred in the late 20th century, aligning with the surging prevalence of the Internet. The earliest documented instance of online therapy can be traced back to the 1980s, when mental health professionals, including psychologists and therapists, initiated pioneering experiments involving email-based interactions to deliver mental health support. The asynchronous nature of email communication, as elucidated by Kiousis (2002), proved instrumental in fostering an environment where individuals could openly articulate their thoughts and emotions, while

therapists responded at their discretion, thereby introducing a new level of flexibility into the provision of therapeutic services.

As previously elucidated, during its initial phase, online counseling grappled with an array of technological challenges. Challenges such as sluggish internet speeds, restricted computer availability, and a shortage of secure communication platforms posed formidable barriers to its widespread adoption. However, even in the face of these constraints, visionaries within the discipline discerned the inherent capacity of online counseling to broaden the accessibility of mental health services, transcending conventional face-to-face modalities.

The 1990s marked a pivotal juncture in the trajectory of online counseling, characterized by the emergence of real-time communication technologies. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and instant messaging services played a transformative role by enabling live, text-based interactions between therapists and their clients (Pelling & White, 2009). This synchronous mode of communication introduced a profound sense of immediacy, significantly augmenting the efficacy of online counseling sessions. As technological advancements continued to evolve, online counseling platforms incorporated video conferencing and voice call capabilities, thereby enriching the virtual therapeutic experience (Simpson et al., 2009). The integration of video-based interactions effectively bridged the divide between conventional in-person therapy and the realm of virtual counseling. This evolution furnished clients with a notably more personalized and immersive environment for their therapeutic engagement.

The escalating popularity of online counseling necessitated the development of robust legal and ethical frameworks. Therapists grappled with a host of challenges, including questions related to licensure that spanned state or national boundaries, as well as concerns regarding privacy, confidentiality, and the safety of clients in the virtual realm. In response to these pressing issues, various organizations and regulatory bodies embarked on the formulation of comprehensive standards and guidelines to address these critical matters.

The ubiquitous use of smartphones and mobile devices further enhanced the accessibility and convenience of online counseling (Sucala et al., 2012). The proliferation of mobile apps and platforms empowered clients to access mental health support at their convenience, transcending geographical constraints. Furthermore, the prevalence of text-based counseling services thrived, enabling mental health assistance to be readily accessible through messaging applications. This paradigm shift underscored the increasing flexibility and responsiveness of online counseling to meet the evolving needs of its clientele.

The escalating demand for online counseling precipitated the emergence of specialized platforms exclusively dedicated to delivering virtual mental health support (Luxton et al., 2011). These platforms offered a diverse spectrum of services, encompassing therapy, counseling, life coaching, and support groups. Some of these platforms leveraged artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies to augment user experiences and provide tailored recommendations (Mohr et al., 2013). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 triggered a substantial transformation in the healthcare landscape, including mental health services (Torous et al., 2020). The imperative for social distancing measures and lockdowns compelled a swift transition to online counseling. Telehealth and virtual therapy emerged as indispensable mechanisms for upholding mental health support during a period of unparalleled uncertainty, further expediting the legitimization of online counseling as a bona fide therapeutic modality.

As technological progress continues its relentless march forward, the future of online counseling appears to hold significant promise, notwithstanding certain considerations that we will delve into in subsequent sections of this article. Online counseling is poised to emerge as an exciting frontier, empowering therapists to craft immersive and interactive environments wherein clients can deeply engage with their emotions and experiences (Rizzo & Koenig, 2017). Furthermore, the incorporation of AI-driven chatbots for initial assessments and support serves to further extend the reach and accessibility of mental health services (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019).

Online life produces more clients for counselling

Contemporary society faces security challenges that differ markedly from historical threats such as famines, massacres, and enslavements. Today, our concerns are predominantly rooted in psychological stressors, which, although less immediately life-threatening, exert a profound impact on individuals and nations alike. This academic examination endeavors to dissect the multifaceted origins of heightened stress levels in the modern era. Drawing upon a wealth of scholarly research, we can see the confluence of societal and environmental factors that have contributed to the amplification of psychological stress in contemporary society.

The unrelenting drive for heightened productivity and the adoption of a fast-paced lifestyle has emerged as hallmark characteristics of contemporary society. Individuals are confronted with ceaseless demands, necessitating the delicate juggling of work commitments, familial obligations, social commitments, and personal pursuits. This

intricate balancing act frequently results in elevated stress levels and a heightened risk of experiencing burnout. Notably, certain regions, such as the Middle East, impose unique challenges where individuals are expected to straddle the line between modernity and tradition, further exacerbating the burden of stress.

Technological progress, while enhancing many facets of human existence, has concurrently introduced novel stress-inducing factors (Hoffner & Lee, 2015). The proliferation of smartphones and pervasive connectivity has engendered a culture of perpetual engagement, wherein individuals find it increasingly arduous to disengage from their professional responsibilities or the allure of social media platforms. Consequently, this persistent connectivity has given rise to heightened psychological stress levels, as individuals grapple with the demand to remain perpetually "on."

Economic volatility, precarious employment conditions, and financial encumbrances represent significant contributors to heightened anxiety and stress (Cockerham, 2019). The relentless quest for material affluence, coupled with apprehensions of economic regression, often instills a constant atmosphere of rivalry and discontentment within society.

The advent of social media platforms has engendered a surge in social comparisons, a phenomenon frequently associated with feelings of inadequacy and self-worth anxiety (Vogel et al., 2015). The persistent exposure to meticulously curated depictions of others' lives amplifies the potential for heightened psychological stress among individuals.

Contemporary environmental challenges, encompassing urbanization, pollution, and the depletion of natural resources, have the capacity to instigate environmental stress and evoke apprehension about the future (Ojala, 2012). These pressing concerns, linked to the environment, can significantly contribute to escalated psychological stress levels and instill a sense of powerlessness among individuals.

Notwithstanding the connectivity afforded by technology, contemporary existence can paradoxically foster social isolation and feelings of loneliness (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). The absence of substantial, authentic social connections carries profound repercussions for mental well-being, including heightened stress and anxiety levels.

Furthermore, the erosion of boundaries that traditionally delineate professional and personal life can impede the cultivation of a harmonious work-life equilibrium (Kalliath & Brough, 2008). This deficiency in segregation between these spheres can engender chronic stress and emotional fatigue.

The relentless inundation of news, social media updates, and digital content pose a significant challenge to individuals' cognitive faculties, often culminating in cognitive overload and heightened stress levels. Our daily existence is marked by a ceaseless barrage of media messages detailing distressing events from across the globe. The sheer magnitude of this perpetual bombardment has, in many cases, engendered a form of psychological desensitization within us, as exemplified by Shahghasemi (2020).

Contemporary society frequently establishes stringent benchmarks for success, physical appearance, and accomplishments. The demands to conform to these societal norms often result in pervasive sentiments of insufficiency and an incessant compulsion to validate one's worth, thereby exacerbating psychological stress.

The fast-paced rhythm of modern existence often leaves individuals with restricted opportunities for engaging in self-care practices, resulting in the inadvertent neglect of their physical and mental well-being (Bittman et al., 2005). This disregard for self-care endeavors can further intensify stress levels and jeopardize overall health (Peterson, 2018).

Contemporary statistics consistently indicate a notable trend wherein an increasing number of individuals turn to the internet as an avenue to seek respite from the myriad dissatisfactions encountered in their daily lives. In recent years, the ascension of social media platforms has catalyzed a profound transformation in the dynamics of human interaction and communication, firmly establishing itself as an indispensable facet of contemporary existence. Although social media platforms proffer a spectrum of advantages, there is a burgeoning apprehension regarding their impact on mental well-being, with a specific emphasis on their discernible correlation with depression among users. This article undertakes an examination of the mechanisms by which social media engagement can contribute to depressive tendencies and delves into the potential risk factors that are intricately implicated in this intricate relationship.

As previously delineated, a salient facet in the intricate interplay between social media and depression revolves around the phenomenon of social comparison. Social media platforms frequently serve as conduits for meticulously constructed and idealized representations of individuals' lives, meticulously showcasing their accomplishments, relationships, and affirmative encounters (Chou & Edge, 2012). As users persistently engage in comparisons with these often unattainable benchmarks, a proclivity emerges wherein they cultivate adverse self-conceptions, engendering sentiments of inadequacy and a decline in self-esteem. This persistent cycle of negative self-perceptions, if

left unchecked, can cumulatively contribute to the manifestation of depressive symptomatology over time (Fardouly et al., 2018).

Social media platforms serve as dynamic conduits for delivering real-time updates on the activities, events, and experiences of others within one's social network. This perpetual exposure to a cascade of social happenings can elicit a pervasive phenomenon known as FoMO, or the fear of missing out on enjoyable experiences (Przybylski et al., 2013). FoMO, in turn, can incite heightened levels of anxiety and stress among users, as the looming prospect of exclusion prompts a compulsion to participate in activities, even if merely to evade feelings of isolation. The chronic manifestation of FoMO can, in due course, cultivate sentiments of discontent with one's own life and exacerbate depressive manifestations.

Moreover, social media platforms can inadvertently foster environments conducive to cyberbullying and online harassment (Shahghasemi et al., 2017). The cloak of anonymity and the ease of disseminating injurious content within these digital realms expose users to hurtful comments, derogatory messages, and instances of cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014). Victims of such cyberbullying incidents frequently grapple with profound psychological distress and an elevated susceptibility to the onset of depressive symptomatology.

Excessive utilization of social media, particularly in the hours leading up to bedtime, has been demonstrated to disrupt established sleep patterns and the circadian rhythm, as substantiated by the findings of Levenson et al. (2016). Sleep deprivation and disturbances are intrinsically linked to an elevated susceptibility to depression, primarily due to their adverse effects on mood regulation, cognitive functioning, and overall emotional well-being.

The inherent addictive qualities embedded within social media platforms have been observed to contribute to patterns of excessive use and dependence, a phenomenon substantiated by the research of Andreassen et al. (2017). Prolonged and unrestrained engagement with social media may consequently result in the inadvertent neglect of face-to-face social interactions, a reduction in physical activity, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. Each of these outcomes, in its own right, constitutes a notable risk factor for the development of depression.

Social media platforms afford users a certain degree of anonymity and disinhibition, empowering them to engage in behaviors that might be atypical in face-to-face interactions, as established by the work of Valkenburg and Peter (2009). This online disinhibition phenomenon can precipitate heightened levels of aggressive behaviors, incidents of

cyberbullying, and social conflicts, all of which are salient contributors to elevated stress levels and resultant psychological distress.

Paradoxically, while social media platforms facilitate connections transcending geographical boundaries, they concurrently harbor the potential to engender social isolation and loneliness, as underscored by the research conducted by Primack et al. (2017). Online interactions, despite their global reach, often fail to replicate the depth and richness inherent in in-person relationships. Consequently, individuals may experience a sense of disconnection and isolation, which, over time, can precipitate and exacerbate depressive manifestations.

The continuous influx of notifications and information from social media platforms has the potential to induce a profound sense of cognitive overload, consequently contributing to distraction and heightened stress levels. This cognitive burden can pose significant barriers to concentration, impede productivity, and exacerbate symptoms associated with depression.

Although social media has undeniably revolutionized the landscape of communication and connectivity, it has simultaneously wrought detrimental effects on our collective mental health. The intricate relationship between social media usage and depression is underpinned by a multifaceted interplay of factors, including but not limited to social comparison, FoMO, cyberbullying, sleep disturbances, addiction, online disinhibition, social isolation, and information overload. Given the complexity and gravity of this issue, it is not surprising to observe the emergence of an entire industry ostensibly dedicated to ameliorating these mental health challenges.

Online counselling as a remedy to online problems

Online counseling has emerged as a burgeoning industry with transformative implications for the psychotherapy landscape, fundamentally reshaping the delivery and accessibility of mental health services. This paradigm shift results from the seamless integration of technology and innovative methodologies, redefining the boundaries of counseling effectiveness.

One of the most noteworthy merits of online counseling lies in its significantly improved accessibility and convenience, as posited by Luxton et al. (2011). Clients residing in remote or underserved areas now possess unprecedented access to professional mental health support, unencumbered by the need for extensive travel. Furthermore, the dissolution of geographical barriers expands the array of therapists available to clients, affording them the opportunity to select practitioners that best align with

their unique needs and preferences. This expansion in options facilitates a more personalized and tailored therapeutic experience.

Online counseling has emerged as a pivotal instrument in mitigating the pervasive stigma entangled with the act of seeking therapeutic assistance. The inherent anonymity and privacy afforded by virtual sessions serve as a sanctuary, empowering individuals to pursue mental health support devoid of apprehension regarding judgment or ensuing social consequences, a phenomenon emphasized by Simpson et al. (2009). This discretion empowers individuals to confront and address mental health concerns that may have otherwise languished in the shadows of societal stigma.

Conventional face-to-face therapy often imposes inflexible scheduling constraints, which can pose significant challenges for individuals grappling with demanding lifestyles or mobility limitations. In stark contrast, online counseling proffers a valuable solution by providing clients with the flexibility to coordinate sessions in accordance with their unique schedules and commitments. This flexibility not only ameliorates the challenges associated with therapy adherence but also fosters a more seamless continuum of treatment.

Online counseling platforms offer an array of communication modalities, encompassing video conferencing, telephone calls, live chat, and messaging, as detailed by Sucala et al. (2012). This multifaceted communication toolkit empowers therapists with the flexibility to adapt their approach in harmony with the unique preferences and requirements of their clients. Particularly noteworthy is the utilization of video conferencing, a modality that facilitates face-to-face interactions, thereby nurturing a more robust therapeutic alliance and effectively emulating the advantages intrinsic to traditional in-person sessions.

Online counseling has been instrumental in fostering the emergence of specialized platforms honing in on distinct mental health concerns and specific demographic groups, in line with the insights put forth by Luxton et al. (2011). These platforms are meticulously crafted to furnish tailored interventions, support networks, and comprehensive resources precisely calibrated to address a spectrum of issues, including but not limited to anxiety, depression, trauma, and addiction. This targeted approach enriches the therapeutic landscape by imbuing it with evidence-based interventions, thereby assuring clients receive the highest caliber of care.

Furthermore, the digital realm presents the distinct advantage of seamless communication and robust documentation. Therapists can engage in secure, real-time interactions with clients, effortlessly

disseminate invaluable resources, and promptly access session notes. This digital infrastructure simplifies the intricate process of monitoring progress, managing treatment plans, and scrutinizing outcomes, thereby elevating the quality of therapeutic continuity and enhancing the precision of care delivery.

Beyond the provision of online counseling services through the Internet, the advent of data-driven entities has ushered in a new era of algorithmic support for mental health. Several chatbot applications have been designed to offer online counseling and mental health assistance, each with its unique strengths and capabilities:

1. **Woebot**: Woebot is an application that delivers Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) techniques to individuals grappling with depression and anxiety.
2. **Wysa**: Wysa offers a spectrum of emotional support, mindfulness exercises, and CBT techniques tailored to mitigate stress and alleviate low mood.
3. **Tess**: Tess is an AI-based chatbot specializing in therapeutic conversations and personalized interventions to address mental health concerns.
4. **Replika**: Replika serves as an emotional support companion while continuously learning from users' interactions and conversations.
5. **Youper**: Youper operates as an emotional health assistant, adept at understanding users' emotional states and providing personalized insights.
6. **Wysa for Teens**: Wysa for Teens offers age-appropriate mental health support, catering specifically to teenagers.
7. **ReMind**: ReMind specializes in offering coping strategies and facilitating mood tracking for individuals dealing with anxiety and depression.

These AI-powered chatbots represent a significant advancement in the realm of mental health support, providing accessible and scalable assistance to individuals confronting a wide array of emotional and psychological challenges.

Certainly, Chatbots play a pivotal role in the landscape of online counseling, offering a host of significant advantages that contribute to the overall efficacy and accessibility of mental health support. Its utilization in counseling is associated with several key benefits, as elucidated below:

1. **Enhanced Accessibility**: The deployment of Chatbots in counseling significantly augments the accessibility of mental

health support. It transcends geographical constraints, ensuring that individuals, regardless of their location, can avail themselves of assistance.

2. **Mitigation of Stigma**: Anonymity, a hallmark of Chatbots' platform, addresses the stigma often associated with seeking mental health help. This feature encourages individuals to seek support without the fear of social repercussions or judgment.

3. **Continuous Availability**: Chatbots' round-the-clock availability is particularly advantageous for users in distress. It ensures that individuals can access immediate support whenever they require it, providing a crucial lifeline during challenging moments.

4. **Personalized Resources**: In accordance with the findings of Fitzpatrick et al. (2019), AI-powered chatbots are equipped to offer immediate coping strategies and personalized resources, which can significantly benefit those seeking mental health assistance.

5. **Convenience and Multilingual Support**: The convenience of Chatbots is underscored by its availability at any time and its capacity to provide multilingual support. This flexibility ensures that users can engage with the system at their convenience and in their preferred language.

6. **Access to Information and Psychoeducation**: Chatbots' capacity to provide information and psychoeducational materials bolsters users' mental well-being by offering valuable insights and guidance.

It is of paramount importance, however, to recognize that Chatbots are not intended to supplant professional counseling but rather to complement traditional counseling methods. Its role is supportive and informative, designed to enhance the mental health ecosystem and make assistance more accessible to a broader spectrum of individuals.

Conclusion

The advent of AI-powered chatbot systems has sparked significant intrigue regarding their prospective utility in the domain of mental health support. Nevertheless, the discourse surrounding whether chatbot technologies can serve as substitutes for conventional psychotherapy remains a topic of ongoing debate. It is important to acknowledge that chatbots continue to exhibit several limitations, some of which may prove insurmountable. Consequently, certain scholars posit that chatbots are improbable contenders for the replacement of psychotherapy. Rather,

they propose that chatbots might better serve as complementary tools within the context of mental health care.

Counseling predominantly hinges upon the cultivation of a robust therapeutic alliance, distinguished by empathy and authentic human connection. As articulated by Wampold (2015), the therapeutic relationship exerts a substantial impact on treatment outcomes. Notably, chatbots are deficient in emotional intelligence and empathic comprehension, attributes intrinsic to human therapists. Consequently, chatbots may encounter challenges in establishing the same degree of trust and rapport with clients, thereby impeding the counseling process.

Counseling engages with multifaceted emotional and mental health concerns, demanding nuanced and customized methodologies. Human therapists undergo rigorous training and accumulate clinical experience, enabling them to deliver evidence-based interventions tailored to the specific needs of each client (Norcross et al., 2011). In contrast, chatbots rely on pre-programmed responses and lack the proficiency necessary to effectively address the intricacies inherent in complex psychological issues.

Effective counseling is characterized by the formulation of personalized treatment plans that take into account the unique circumstances and objectives of clients (Lambert & Barley, 2001). Human therapists possess the adaptability to tailor their therapeutic approach and interventions to suit the distinct needs of individual clients, thereby ensuring treatment pertinence and efficacy. Chatbots, with their standardized responses, may encounter challenges in accommodating the diverse and precise requirements of each client.

Psychotherapy adheres rigorously to ethical guidelines that govern confidentiality, informed consent, and the maintenance of professional boundaries (APA, 2017). Human therapists are extensively trained to navigate the intricate landscape of these ethical considerations, thereby safeguarding the privacy and overall well-being of their clients. In contrast, chatbots lack the requisite ethical comprehension necessary for the judicious management of these critical concerns.

In the realm of conventional counseling, therapists rely upon non-verbal cues, body language, and tonal inflections to discern and interpret the emotional states of their clients (Gelso & Hayes, 1998). These cues furnish invaluable insights into the experiences of clients, facilitating a more profound understanding and the tailoring of interventions. The limitations inherent in chatbots' capacity to interpret non-verbal cues may curtail their effectiveness in responding aptly to clients' emotional expressions.

Psychotherapy frequently encompasses crisis management and risk assessment, especially in instances involving severe mental health issues or emergencies. Human therapists undergo specialized training that equips them to discern potential risks and administer appropriate interventions in these critical scenarios. Conversely, the incapacity of chatbots to effectively manage complex and urgent situations constitutes a noteworthy limitation in their application within this context.

It is undeniable that there exist valid reservations regarding the utilization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and chatbots in counseling. However, we steadfastly maintain that these technological tools serve as invaluable assets in the realm of mental health support, offering a plethora of advantages that enhance accessibility and overall quality. In this discourse, we elucidate the transformative potential of AI in counseling and present a comprehensive exploration of its key merits.

Enhanced Accessibility: AI-powered counseling platforms offer a profound solution to the issue of accessibility for individuals who confront geographical or logistical barriers to traditional in-person therapy. These innovative platforms transcend geographical confines, ensuring that mental health support reaches even the remotest and underserved regions, thereby democratizing access to mental health care (Luxton et al., 2011). While it may not fully replace traditional counseling, it stands as an essential alternative.

Anonymity and Privacy: AI-based counseling platforms introduce an unprecedented degree of anonymity and privacy, assuaging the fear of social stigma that often inhibits individuals from seeking help (Sucala et al., 2012). This veil of anonymity permits users to candidly address sensitive matters and seek support without the burden of revealing their identities, thereby fostering an environment conducive to open discussion of concerns.

Immediate Support: The real-time responsiveness of AI-based counseling systems proves invaluable during moments of crisis or urgent need (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019). Users gain access to vital resources and assistance at any hour, facilitating the management of emotional distress and provision of guidance when it is most imperative. In this regard, chatbots may even surpass traditional counseling in terms of immediate accessibility.

Scalability and Cost-effectiveness: AI counseling platforms exhibit remarkable scalability, capable of serving a substantial number of users concurrently without compromising support quality (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019). This scalability renders AI counseling not only cost-effective but also alleviates the strain on mental health care resources, a feat

unattainable within the confines of traditional counseling.

Personalized Interventions: AI-powered counseling systems leverage algorithms and data analytics to customize interventions in alignment with each user's distinct needs and preferences (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019). By analyzing user data, these systems deliver tailored resources and recommendations, thereby augmenting the efficacy of treatment.

Continuous Monitoring and Informed Decision-making: The capacity for continuous monitoring inherent to AI-based counseling platforms empowers human therapists to discern trends and patterns, thereby facilitating informed, evidence-based decision-making.

Support for Therapists: AI in counseling augments the therapeutic process by providing therapists with resources and data-driven insights to bolster their practice. These systems enable therapists to monitor client progress, suggest interventions, and access pertinent research and resources.

Psychoeducation and Self-help: AI counseling platforms disseminate psychoeducational materials and self-help resources, equipping users with coping strategies and a deeper comprehension of their mental health concerns.

Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity: AI-powered counseling systems are adaptable to multiple languages and consider cultural nuances during interactions, thereby rendering mental health support more inclusive and culturally sensitive (Sucala et al., 2012).

Research and Data Contribution: The integration of AI in counseling generates a wealth of data that contributes significantly to research on mental health issues and treatment outcomes (Huang & Rust, 2021). The analysis of this data yields a more profound understanding of mental health trends, subsequently informing evidence-based interventions.

Cost-effectiveness and Accessibility: Perhaps most crucially, chatbots offer a cost-effective alternative to conventional counseling services, rendering mental health support more financially attainable for economically disadvantaged populations. While in-person therapy may be prohibitively expensive, many chatbots offer cost-free or low-cost counseling assistance, thus ensuring that individuals with limited financial resources can access vital mental health care (Sweeney et al., 2021; Potts et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the amalgamation of chatbots and AI in counseling offers an array of benefits that amplify accessibility, scalability, personalization, and cost-effectiveness in the realm of mental health support. Although AI systems cannot supplant the expertise and

empathy of human therapists, they undoubtedly serve as invaluable tools that complement traditional counseling methodologies, enriching the provision of mental health care. Particularly as a burgeoning portion of the global population gains access to the Internet, the adoption of AI counseling is not merely an option but a necessity.

Ethical considerations
The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Conflicts of interests
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

Data availability
The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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