

Youth Mental Health in the Age of AI: An Exploratory Survey on the Use of Artificial Intelligence as a Substitute for Psychotherapy

Dr. Ivaylo Tsanov

Ph. D. Plamena Markova

Abstract: Nowadays, artificial intelligence is widely used both in everyday life and in more specific activities that people perform. One such activity is the use of the so-called AI chatbots to support individuals facing emotional, psychological, or life difficulties. In our work, young people shared that they use artificial intelligence as a kind of psychotherapist. This insight became the starting point of our research, the aim of which is to understand to what extent are young individuals willing to use AI instead of or alongside a psychotherapist; In which situations do they consider AI to be a suitable or helpful tool; What risks or concerns do they associate with replacing human therapists with AI agents. The study was conducted through an online questionnaire, completed by 56 participants. The results show that AI chatbots are indeed starting to emerge as helpers for emotional difficulties, but few of the people surveyed believe that they could completely replace the psychotherapist.

Keywords: Chatbots, Psychotherapist, Digital Technologies, Digital Empathy

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a marked rise in mental health challenges among young people, including heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional isolation. Simultaneously, access to professional psychological support remains limited, hindered by long waiting lists, high costs, social stigma, or geographic constraints. This discrepancy between growing psychological needs and insufficient mental health infrastructure creates a gap that digital technologies increasingly seek to fill. Among these technologies, AI-powered conversational agents such as ChatGPT, Woebot, and Replika have gained popularity as accessible tools for emotional support. These systems allow users

to engage in written dialogues that simulate empathic listening, reflection, and even problem-solving strategies. Young people are increasingly turning to such platforms, not only out of curiosity but as a form of self-directed coping. This development raises significant questions: To what extent can artificial intelligence substitute or complement the functions of a psychotherapist? What are the implications of relying on machines for support in emotionally vulnerable states? The present study focuses on this emerging phenomenon and seeks to explore the attitudes and motivations behind the use of AI in lieu of professional therapy, through the lens of young users' perceptions and self-reported experiences gathered via an online questionnaire.

The aim of this study is to explore how young people perceive and engage with artificial intelligence as a source of psychological support. More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent are young individuals willing to use AI instead of or alongside a psychotherapist?
- (2) In which situations do they consider AI to be a suitable or helpful tool?
- (3) What risks or concerns do they associate with replacing human therapists with AI agents?

The analysis is based on quantitative and qualitative data from an online survey involving 56 participants' age.

This study was motivated by numerous informal accounts from students and young adults who reported using AI chatbots such as ChatGPT and Replika to manage anxiety, loneliness, and emotional overload. These individuals described such tools as accessible, nonjudgmental, and emotionally responsive spaces to express distress, especially when human interaction felt too difficult or unavailable. Within a broader social frame, this reflects a generational shift toward digital self-help and decentralized therapeutic practices. This trend intersects with research showing that AI-mediated support can facilitate user engagement and self-disclosure. As Fulmer et al. (2018) emphasize, "psychological AI emerges as a feasible option for delivering support" due to its accessibility and personalization capabilities. For many young users, these platforms are not just temporary substitutes but perceived as preferable in specific contexts. Understanding this preference is essential to capturing how digital mental health technologies are transforming help-seeking behavior in emotionally vulnerable populations.

Background and Related Work

The application of artificial intelligence in mental health has become a growing area of interest, especially as mental health systems struggle to meet rising global demands. AI-based tools such as Replika, Woebot, Wysa, and ChatGPT offer users the opportunity to engage in structured, reflective conversations modeled on psychotherapeutic techniques, particularly cognitive-behavioral approaches. These tools typically provide 24/7 accessibility, anonymity, and user-directed pacing, making them appealing to individuals who may be reluctant or unable to access traditional therapy.

Young people have shown increased willingness to explore these technologies, often using them to manage emotional stress, loneliness, anxiety, or decision-making in everyday life. Unlike crisis hotlines or formal therapeutic settings, AI chatbots provide a sense of control over interaction and allow users to express themselves without fear of judgment. This aligns with broader trends in digital self-care and the normalization of technology-mediated emotional regulation.

In many cases, AI agents serve as transitional or supplementary tools, supporting users while they await professional help or offering a private space for emotional processing. They can also facilitate early intervention by helping users identify patterns in their thoughts and feelings. The academic discussion surrounding this topic continues to evolve, with contributions such as the review by D'Alfonso (2020) highlighting both the promise and the limitations of integrating AI into mental health service ecosystems.

The emergence of AI tools in mental health care raises important questions about the nature of empathy and trust in human-machine interaction. Although AI systems lack consciousness and emotional awareness, their design enables them to simulate therapeutic dialogue and produce responses that resemble empathic communication. Many users, especially younger individuals accustomed to digital platforms, report feeling emotionally supported by such tools. The perception of empathy is not rooted in the system's capacity to feel but rather in the user's experience of being listened to, acknowledged, and responded to in a coherent and nonjudgmental manner.

Trust in AI tools is another key factor influencing their adoption and sustained use. Elements such as interface design, response accuracy, and personalization affect how reliable and safe users perceive these systems to be. In contexts where traditional therapy is unavailable or socially stigmatized, users may prefer interacting with digital agents that allow for anonymous and private disclosure.

Empirical studies have examined these phenomena and reported overall positive user experiences with mental health chatbots, especially in terms of emotional relief, usability, and perceived support. Systematic reviews of such tools, including those by Abd-alrazaq et al. (2020), have highlighted both their potential and the need for further research into long-term psychological outcomes and ethical safeguards.

Young people face distinct challenges in seeking mental health support, including limited access to services, fear of stigma, and concerns about confidentiality. These barriers often lead them to delay or avoid professional help, even when experiencing significant psychological distress. In this context, digital tools including search engines, forums, mobile apps, and increasingly, AI-based chatbots are becoming alternative pathways for coping and self-regulation. The immediacy, anonymity, and perceived neutrality of digital agents

align with the preferences of digital-native populations who often navigate emotional difficulties online before turning to in-person support.

The concept of “digital help-seeking” reflects this behavioral trend, wherein youth explore technology as a preliminary or substitute step to formal care. Several studies have documented that adolescents and young adults are more likely to use digital mental health resources than older adults, particularly for mild to moderate symptoms of anxiety, depression, or loneliness. Research by Pretorius et al. (2019) confirms that youth report greater willingness to engage with online platforms and mental health technologies due to their perceived accessibility, control, and reduced fear of judgment.

Understanding this shift in help-seeking behavior is crucial for evaluating the growing role of AI in early intervention and for designing ethical, developmentally appropriate digital tools.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a structured online questionnaire administered via Google Forms, completed by 56 voluntary respondents. The instrument included 11 items targeting awareness, attitudes, and behaviors related to seeking psychological support from artificial intelligence. It combined closed-ended questions with optional open responses to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. Most participants were familiar with AI chatbots, but few had directly used them for emotional support. The questionnaire also addressed perceived risks, contexts of use, and expectations toward digital therapeutic alternatives. Demographic data, including age and gender, were collected to contextualize trends among young and middle-aged adults.

The sample consisted of 56 respondents selected through convenience and snowball sampling, without targeting specific subgroups. Participants were recruited online via social networks and messaging platforms, ensuring broad, incidental reach. No inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied beyond the ability to read and complete the survey. The aim of this initial data collection was to conduct a preliminary validation of the questionnaire, focusing on clarity, relevance, and internal consistency of items. Responses were anonymous, and participation was voluntary. The exploratory nature of the sampling reflects the early stage of inquiry into the phenomenon of AI use for emotional self-support.

The structure of the questionnaire reflects a theoretically grounded progression from cognitive awareness to attitudinal disposition and behavioral engagement with AI-mediated psychological support. Drawing on social psychological models of help-seeking and human technology interaction, the instrument was designed to capture both explicit evaluations and implicit readiness to engage with digital emotional tools. The preliminary findings suggest a discrepancy between high levels of conceptual familiarity with AI chatbots and relatively low experiential involvement. This gap underscores the ambivalence often observed in emerging social norms around digital care: openness coexists

with hesitation. As such, the questionnaire not only functions as a tool for initial data collection but also enables insight into the psychosocial conditions under which trust in artificial therapeutic agents may form. The following analytical section will explore these trends in greater detail, providing descriptive insights into the distribution of responses and identifying attitudinal clusters within the sample.

The analysis of the survey data was conducted using the JASP statistical software package (version 0.18), selected for its accessibility, transparency, and suitability for exploratory research in the social sciences. Given the descriptive and preliminary nature of the study, the analysis focused on frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations for categorical variables, as well as measures of central tendency and dispersion for ordinal items. This approach allows for a structured overview of general trends in awareness, attitudes, and behavior related to the use of AI as a substitute for psychological support. Particular attention was given to identifying patterns across gender and age groups, as well as potential associations between declared emotional vulnerability and openness to AI tools. Open-ended responses were reviewed qualitatively to extract recurrent themes and language patterns. While no inferential statistics were applied at this stage, the analysis provides an empirical basis for interpreting the psychosocial contours of digital help-seeking among young people and informs directions for future study.

RESULTS

The survey results indicate a high level of awareness of AI-powered chatbots among respondents. Out of 56 participants, 50 (approximately 89%) answered that they know what an AI chatbot is (e.g., ChatGPT, Woebot, Replika), while 5 respondents (9%) indicated partial knowledge, and only one respondent (2%) stated that they are not familiar with the concept. This suggests that AI-based psychological support tools are already integrated into the informational landscape of most participants, likely reflecting broader exposure through media, education, or peer networks.

The dominant awareness may be attributed to the increasing visibility and accessibility of conversational AI systems in everyday life, particularly among digital natives. In line with social psychological models of technology diffusion, such early cognitive familiarity serves as a precursor to attitudinal openness and eventual behavioral experimentation.

The partial or absent awareness reported by a small minority is notable, as it suggests a residual digital gap even in an otherwise tech-oriented population. This may be shaped by differences in age, gender, or individual interest in mental health resources factors to be further explored in later sections. Overall, the data confirm that any observed hesitation toward AI in emotional contexts is not due to lack of awareness, but rather to more complex psychological and value-based considerations that warrant deeper analysis.

The participants' responses reflect a nuanced attitude toward the use of AI in contexts of psychological vulnerability. When asked whether they would seek psychological support from AI in the absence of access to a therapist, 24 respondents (43%) answered affirmatively ("Yes" or "Rather yes"), whereas 32 respondents (57%) indicated reluctance ("No" or "Rather no"). This suggests that although awareness is high, confidence in AI's supportive role is conditional and varies across circumstances.

This hesitation becomes more pronounced when access to a human therapist is available. In such a scenario, only 16 participants (29%) expressed willingness to use AI ("Yes" or "Rather yes"), while 40 (71%) were clearly disinclined to substitute for a human therapist. The sharp decline in openness underscores the perception that AI is considered a fallback option, rather than a preferred one.

From a social psychological perspective, this finding illustrates the role of situational framing in help-seeking behavior. While AI may be accepted under constraint, human connection remains the normative ideal in emotional support. Furthermore, these responses suggest that the imagined therapeutic capacity of AI is perceived as limited or qualitatively different, even by those who are technologically literate. Such patterns will be further elaborated in the context of actual usage and perceived effectiveness.

When asked whether they had ever sought psychological support from artificial intelligence, most respondents 42 out of 56 (75%) answered "No." This substantial majority confirms that despite high awareness and some openness in principle, actual engagement with AI for emotional support remains limited in practice. An additional 9 participants (16%) reported that they had sought advice from AI but were uncertain whether it constituted psychological support. Only 5 individuals (9%) affirmed that they had actively turned to AI for such purposes.

These findings reflect a common phenomenon in the early adoption of emerging technologies familiarity and hypothetical openness preceding real-world behavioral implementation. Among those who did engage with AI in a supportive context, qualitative follow-up (analyzed in the next section) suggests mixed perceptions of effectiveness. The ambiguity among the 9 respondents who were unsure whether their interaction with AI counted as psychological support points to a blurred line between informational use and emotional reliance. This is consistent with the hybrid role that AI often occupies in the digital lives of users between a tool, a guide, and a pseudo-social presence.

The limited use also implies that current AI platforms are not yet fully internalized as legitimate sources of therapeutic relief. For many, trust and perceived competence may not yet outweigh the symbolic authority and experiential grounding offered by human therapists. As such, the behavior-attitude gap remains a critical element in interpreting readiness for digital mental health support.

Respondents expressed a range of nuanced concerns regarding the use of artificial intelligence in emotionally vulnerable situations. Of those who believed

AI posed risks when used as a substitute for a therapist, the most frequently cited issue was the lack of empathy and emotional attune. Participants noted that “AI is not capable of empathy,” reflecting a widespread perception that emotional resonance and human presence are irreplaceable in therapeutic contexts.

Another recurring theme was the risk of misinformation. Several responses highlighted the algorithmic nature of AI, emphasizing its tendency to generalize based on patterns rather than context. One participant pointed out that AI “generates the most common information, which is not always the most accurate,” suggesting that such tools might inadvertently reinforce cognitive biases or mislead users facing complex psychological challenges.

A third set of concerns centered around potential emotional harm. Respondents warned that reliance on AI could “worsen the person’s condition” or lead to “permanent negative consequences,” especially if the interaction gives a false sense of security or replaces professional care.

These findings underline the existence of a psychological trust gap between AI and human therapists. While AI might be accepted in a complementary role, the current level of skepticism reflects broader concerns about authenticity, safety, and accountability factors that significantly influence the perceived legitimacy of AI in mental health support.

A chi-square test for independence was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and the willingness to seek psychological support from artificial intelligence in the absence of a therapist. The analysis revealed a statistically significant association between gender and willingness ($\chi^2(6, N = 56) = 14.42, p = .025$).

The contingency table showed that women were more likely than men to respond “Rather yes” or “Yes,” while men were overrepresented in the “No” and “Rather no” categories. Notably, 10 women selected “Rather yes” compared to only 2 men, and 20 women selected “Rather no,” contrasting with only 1 male respondent.

This suggests gender differences in openness to AI-supported mental health services when traditional therapy is unavailable. These results align with prior research in social psychology indicating that women are generally more proactive in help-seeking behavior. The significance of this association underlines the need to consider gender-specific attitudes in the development of AI-based therapeutic platforms.

To assess the relationship between trust in artificial intelligence and willingness to use AI for psychological support even when a human therapist is available, a Spearman correlation analysis was conducted. Trust was operationalized through responses to the question regarding the likelihood of AI replacing psychotherapists in the future, while willingness was measured by responses to a direct question about hypothetical use.

The results revealed a moderate, positive correlation between trust in AI and willingness to engage with it despite therapist access ($\rho = .35, p = .008$). This statistically significant relationship suggests that individuals who believe AI could eventually replace therapists are more likely to consider using AI-based support services even when traditional options are available.

From a psychological standpoint, these findings support the notion that expectations regarding AI capabilities may shape openness to non-traditional sources of help. Such insights can inform targeted awareness strategies and interventions in mental health tech design.

A thematic analysis of the open-ended responses regarding perceived risks of using AI for psychological support revealed three dominant categories. First, the lack of empathy emerged as a primary concern. Participants consistently emphasized that AI "is not capable of empathy," underscoring the perceived irreplaceability of human emotional presence in therapeutic contexts.

Second, many responses reflected concern about misinformation and inaccuracy. Several participants noted that AI operates through algorithmic generalization, producing responses based on prevalent data rather than individual nuances. One noted that AI often gives the "most common answer, not necessarily the most correct," raising ethical concerns about misleading vulnerable users.

Third, there was strong mention of potential emotional harm. Respondents warned of the risk that AI might worsen an individual's psychological state or delay necessary human intervention. These findings reinforce the need for transparent communication and ethical safeguards in the development of AI-based tools for mental health support.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this exploratory study contribute to the emerging discourse on artificial intelligence in mental health by offering insight into young adults' perceptions and willingness to engage with AI-based psychological support. Results suggest moderate openness to using AI in the absence of a therapist, particularly among women and respondents who view AI as a potentially valid alternative. However, the data also revealed hesitation, particularly when traditional support remains available.

The positive correlation between trust in AI and willingness to use it even when a therapist is accessible suggests that belief in technological efficacy plays a central role in behavioral intentions. This aligns with expectancy-value models in social psychology, where perceived competence of the support source influences help-seeking behavior. Gender differences observed in the chi-square analysis also resonate with prior research showing that women are more inclined to seek emotional help, including through novel platforms.

Participants qualitative responses underscored enduring concerns about empathy, misinformation, and psychological safety. The perception that AI lacks emotional depth remains a barrier to its legitimacy in therapeutic settings. These findings support previous literature warning against overreliance on unsupervised digital interventions (e.g., D'Alfonso, 2020).

Overall, while AI holds potential as a complementary mental health tool, especially in low-access scenarios, its integration must be approached with caution. Ethical, psychological, and relational factors must be addressed through multidisciplinary frameworks that combine technological innovation with human-centered mental health paradigms. Further validation studies with larger, more diverse samples are recommended to refine our understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the perceptions, attitudes, and initial behavioral intentions of young adults regarding the use of artificial intelligence as a substitute for human psychological support. Based on a survey of 56 participants, the findings indicate a moderate level of openness toward AI-assisted mental health support, especially in situations where human therapists are inaccessible. However, actual engagement with AI tools remains limited, and trust in their effectiveness varies considerably across individuals.

Statistical analyses revealed significant associations between gender and willingness to seek AI support, as well as a positive correlation between trust in AI and intention to use it even when therapists are available. These results highlight the importance of subjective beliefs and demographic factors in shaping technology-mediated help-seeking behavior.

At the same time, thematic analysis of open-ended responses pointed to core concerns: lack of empathy, misinformation, and risk of emotional harm. These elements reflect a critical view of AI's therapeutic legitimacy and underscore the importance of ethical design and clear boundaries in AI applications.

In conclusion, while AI has potential as a supplementary support mechanism, it cannot currently substitute the emotional and relational depth provided by human therapists. Future development should be grounded in empirical research, user-centered design, and ethical considerations that prioritize psychological safety and trust.

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