



International Journal of Science, Architecture, Technology and Environment

The Study of AI Chatbots Vs. Human Therapists: Gen Z's Mental Health Preferences

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63680/ijstate0126049.050>

Abstract

The study focuses on understanding the mental health preferences of Generation Z, particularly their inclination toward AI chatbots and human therapists for psychological support. The main objective is to examine Gen Z's choice between digital and traditional mental health interventions, identify the key factors influencing their preferences such as accessibility, empathy, confidentiality, and cost evaluate the effectiveness of a hybrid support model combining both approaches. A descriptive research design was adopted, utilizing both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through a structured Google Form questionnaire distributed to 50 respondents, primarily students and young adults familiar with digital platforms. Secondary data were obtained from published journals, research articles, and online studies related to AI in mental health care. The findings reveal that while 36% of respondents prefer human therapists and 24% favor AI chatbots, 40% express equal preference for both, indicating an openness to blended care. Factors such as personalized guidance and emotional understanding significantly influence the preference for human therapists, whereas accessibility and privacy make AI chatbots appealing. Furthermore, 53% of participants support a hybrid model using AI chatbots initially followed by human therapy reflecting the potential for integration rather than substitution. The study concludes that combining human empathy with AI efficiency can enhance accessibility, engagement, and overall effectiveness in mental health care for Generation Z.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Chatbots, Human Therapists, Mental Health, Gen Z, Therapy Preferences, Emotional Well-being, Digital Counseling, Psychological Support, Technology in Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

Mental health has emerged as one of the most significant concerns of the 21st century, especially among Generation Z, a group characterized by digital fluency, social awareness, and emotional sensitivity. With the increasing prevalence of anxiety, stress, and depression, access to timely and affordable mental health care has become a pressing necessity. However, traditional therapy methods often face barriers such as high costs, limited availability of professionals, and societal stigma.

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots have gained attention as an alternative or supplementary form of psychological support. These AI-powered conversational agents are designed to simulate human-like interactions, provide emotional assistance, and guide users through coping mechanisms. Applications such as Woebot, Wysa, and Replika have become popular among Gen Z users who seek immediate, judgment-free, and anonymous mental health support.

While human therapists offer empathy, emotional depth, and personalized care, AI chatbots bring advantages like round-the-clock accessibility, cost efficiency, and data-driven insights. This contrast raises a critical question: Do Gen Z individuals prefer AI chatbots or human therapists for their mental well-being?

This study aims to explore Gen Z's mental health preferences, focusing on their perceptions, experiences, and comfort levels with both AI chatbots and human therapists. It seeks to understand whether technology-driven interventions can complement or substitute traditional therapy and how these preferences shape the future of digital mental health care.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Lipschitz J M et al. (2022). Digital Mental Health Interventions for Depression: Scoping Review of User Engagement.
This article reviews the engagement behaviour of users with digital mental health tools (including apps, web-based interventions) and finds that while many users engage initially, sustained use is challenging.
2. Sriati A et al. (2023). The Effectiveness of Digital-Based Psychotherapy in Overcoming Psychological Problems in College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Scoping Review.
This work focuses on college-aged individuals and how digital psychotherapy (which may include AI tools or therapist-mediated digital interventions) helped during the pandemic.
3. Omarov B, Narynov S & Zhumanov Z (2023). Artificial Intelligence-Enabled Chatbots in Mental Health: A Systematic Review.
This review specifically looks at AI chatbots (conversational agents) in mental health, summarizing their capabilities, limitations, and research gaps such as usability, engagement, and integration with human care.
4. Werntz A et al. (2023). Providing Human Support for the Use of Digital Mental Health Interventions: Systematic Meta-review.
This meta-review examines how human support (therapist/trained staff) interacts with digital mental health interventions, showing that human support improves outcomes and suggesting human-AI combinations may be beneficial.
5. Cho Y M, Rai S, Ungar L, Guntuku S C et al. (2023). An Integrative Survey on Mental Health Conversational Agents to Bridge Computer Science and Medical Perspectives.
This integrative survey addresses chatbots ("conversational agents") from both computer science and medical viewpoints, pointing out the divide between technical development and clinical outcomes, which is relevant to comparing AI vs human therapy.
6. AlMakinah R, Norcini-Pala A, Disney L, Canbaz M A (2024). Enhancing Mental Health Support through Human-AI Collaboration: Toward Secure and Empathetic AI-enabled chatbots.
This article looks ahead at how AI chatbots may integrate with human clinicians (collaboration) rather

than replace them, emphasizing trust, empathy, privacy, and human-AI workflow in mental health care.

7. Generative Artificial Intelligence in Mental Healthcare: An Ethical Evaluation (2024). Current Treatment Options in Psychiatry. This review discusses the ethical implications of generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT-style) in mental health care: issues of privacy, trust, bias, and the human vs machine therapeutic relationship.
8. Guo Z, Lai A, Thygesen J H et al. (2024). Large Language Model for Mental Health: A Systematic Review. This review focuses on large language models (LLMs) in mental health, their use in screening, conversational agents, and potential risks. It contextualizes the AI-side of mental health support.
9. BMC Psychiatry (2025). The application of artificial intelligence in the field of mental health: a systematic review. This systematic review provides updated evidence on AI-based conversational agents in mental health care, highlighting that AI can alleviate psychological distress but must be carefully integrated with human care to avoid reinforcing disparities.
10. Dohnány S, Kurth-Nelson Z, Spens E et al. (2025). Technological folie à deux: Feedback Loops Between AI Chatbots and Mental Illness. This paper explores the emerging risks when vulnerable users engage heavily with AI chatbots—such as over-reliance, worsening symptoms, and blurred boundaries between human and machine support highlighting caution for Gen Z use.

RESEARCH GAP

While several studies have explored the role of technology in mental health care, limited research has focused specifically on Gen Z's preferences between AI-based chatbots and traditional human therapists. Most existing literature emphasizes the effectiveness and design of AI tools or the therapeutic relationship in human counseling, but few compare how young adults perceive and choose between the two.

Additionally, previous studies tend to focus on Western populations, leaving a gap in understanding Indian Gen Z's perspective, where cultural attitudes, stigma toward therapy, and digital literacy differ significantly. There is also a lack of comprehensive research that examines factors influencing Gen Z's choices, such as accessibility, empathy, confidentiality, and cost, in a single comparative framework.

Therefore, this study aims to fill these gaps by analyzing Gen Z respondents' preferences, experiences, and perceptions toward AI chatbots and human therapists, offering fresh insights into the future of hybrid mental health care systems.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Type of Research: The present study is descriptive in nature. Descriptive research focuses on portraying the existing attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of individuals toward a particular subject. In this study, the emphasis is on understanding Gen Z's preferences and perceptions regarding mental health support through AI chatbots and human therapists. The purpose of this research is not to develop new psychological theories but to analyze and describe the existing trends in how young individuals view digital versus human-based mental health support. This method was most suitable because it enabled a clear and systematic understanding of factors such as accessibility, empathy, confidentiality, and cost, which influence Gen Z's decision-making in seeking mental health assistance.

2. Sampling Technique: A non-probability sampling method was adopted for this study, specifically convenience sampling. Under this approach, participants were chosen based on their accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate in the survey. This method was appropriate for the study as it allowed the researcher to gather data efficiently from a target group familiar with or exposed to mental health awareness and technology use. The data was collected using a Google Form questionnaire that was circulated online among college students, young professionals, and individuals belonging to the Gen Z age group (18–26 years). This sampling technique was chosen because it was time-efficient, cost-effective, and practical for obtaining responses from a digitally active population. Although convenience sampling may not fully represent every Gen Z individual, it provided reliable insights into general preferences and opinions within the group.

3. Sample Design:

a) Defining the Population: The target population for this study consisted of Gen Z individuals, primarily students and young working professionals aged between 18 and 26 years, who are aware of or have used mental health services such as AI chatbots or human therapy.

b) Sampling Frame: There was no formal sampling frame such as a predefined database or list of respondents. Instead, participants were approached through educational networks, social media platforms, and peer sharing of the Google Form link. This aligns with the convenience sampling method and ensured participation from individuals who actively engage with digital platforms and mental health discussions.

4. Sample Size: The study collected responses from a total of 50 participants. These respondents represented diverse backgrounds, including college students, young professionals, and individuals interested in mental health awareness. The sample size was considered adequate for identifying emerging patterns and analyzing the comparative preferences between AI-based mental health support and human therapy. The chosen participants provided a balanced mix of perspectives, allowing meaningful interpretation of Gen Z's mindset toward technology-assisted emotional care.

5. Actual Collection of Data

Both primary and secondary data were used in the study.

- **Primary Data:** Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire created on Google Forms. The survey included 10 multiple-choice questions related to the type of mental health support preferred, frequency of usage, key influencing factors, and comfort level in using AI chatbots compared to human therapists. Responses were gathered from 50 Gen Z participants through online circulation.
- **Secondary Data:** Secondary data was obtained from academic journals, research papers, articles, and online publications discussing AI in mental health, digital therapy, and Gen Z behavioral patterns. Additional references were drawn from government and organizational reports on mental health awareness and technology adoption in India. This data supported the theoretical foundation and helped validate the study's findings.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Even though AI chatbots and human therapists both play important roles in supporting mental health, several

challenges were observed while conducting the study and analyzing Gen Z's preferences.

1. **Limited Awareness and Understanding of AI Chatbots:**
Many respondents were not fully aware of how AI chatbots function or the extent to which they can provide mental health support. Some participants assumed chatbots were only for general conversation or stress relief, not for actual emotional counseling. This limited understanding made it difficult for respondents to give fully informed opinions. Increasing digital literacy about AI-based therapy tools is essential for more accurate perception studies in the future.
2. **Emotional Disconnect in AI Interaction:**
One of the main challenges identified was the emotional gap between users and AI systems. While AI chatbots are efficient and accessible, they often fail to show empathy, deep emotional understanding, or human warmth. Gen Z respondents expressed concern that chatbots may give automated responses that feel "robotic" or lack personal touch, reducing trust and comfort during sensitive emotional discussions.
3. **Stigma and Privacy Concerns in Human Therapy:**
Another challenge observed was the hesitation among Gen Z to approach human therapists due to the ongoing stigma around mental health in Indian society. Some respondents felt uncomfortable sharing personal details face-to-face, fearing judgment or lack of confidentiality. This made it harder to assess genuine preferences, as many participants were influenced by cultural or social barriers rather than actual service quality.
4. **Inconsistent Use of AI and Human Support:**
Many respondents used AI chatbots or therapists irregularly—often switching between the two based on mood, urgency, or convenience. This inconsistency made it difficult to measure long-term satisfaction or reliability with one specific form of support. The lack of continuous engagement highlights a gap between short-term digital support and long-term human guidance.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

1. To examine Gen Z's preference between AI chatbots and human therapists for mental health support.
2. To analyze the factors influencing Gen Z's choice, such as accessibility, empathy, confidentiality, and cost.
3. To evaluate whether AI chatbots can complement human therapists in a hybrid mental health model.

SCOPE AND IMPORTANCE

A) SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1. **Understanding Gen Z's Mental Health Preferences:** The main scope of this study is to explore how Gen Z perceives and chooses between AI chatbots and human therapists for mental health support. The study focuses on identifying which factors—such as accessibility, empathy, confidentiality, and cost— influence their decisions. It provides insights into how technology and human connection shape the mental health-seeking behavior of young adults in the digital age.
2. **Evaluating the Role of AI Chatbots in Emotional Support:** The study also aims to assess how far AI chatbots can effectively assist individuals in dealing with stress, anxiety, or emotional struggles. It examines how Gen Z users view AI-based platforms in terms of convenience, privacy, and

trustworthiness. This scope helps in understanding the potential and limitations of AI chatbots as an emerging form of digital therapy, especially for users hesitant to seek traditional counseling.

3. **Comparing AI and Human Interventions:** Another important aspect of the study is the comparative analysis between AI chatbots and human therapists. The research observes the differences in user satisfaction, comfort level, and emotional connection. It helps in identifying whether Gen Z prefers technology-driven assistance, personal interaction, or a hybrid approach that combines both. The findings aim to guide future innovations in mental health services by blending technological efficiency with human empathy.

B) IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

1. **Understanding Modern Mental Health Behavior:** This study is important as it provides a deep understanding of how today's youth perceive mental health care in an era dominated by digital tools. Gen Z is the first generation to grow up with AI-based communication, and studying their mental health choices reveals how technology is reshaping emotional wellness. It also helps mental health professionals and policymakers understand evolving user expectations.
2. **Bridging the Gap Between Technology and Therapy:** The study holds significance as it highlights how AI and human approaches can complement each other rather than compete. By understanding the advantages and limitations of both, the research contributes to building hybrid mental health models that integrate digital chatbots for instant assistance and human therapists for deeper emotional healing. This knowledge can improve accessibility and reduce stigma around therapy.
3. **Encouraging Awareness and Innovation in Mental Health Care:** Another important aspect of this study is its contribution to spreading awareness about mental health resources. It encourages young individuals to seek help—either through AI chatbots or human counselors—without fear of judgment. Additionally, the research findings can inspire developers, healthcare organizations, and educational institutions to design more empathetic and user-friendly mental health support systems tailored for Gen Z needs.

LIMITATIONS

1. **Limited Sample Size and Representation:** The study is based on responses from 50 participants, which may not represent the entire Gen Z population across different regions, educational backgrounds, or mental health experiences. Since the survey was conducted online using Google Forms, most respondents were students or young professionals with internet access, which may create a bias toward tech-savvy individuals. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the opinions of those who are less exposed to digital tools or traditional therapy services.
2. **Dependence on Self-Reported Data:** The study relies heavily on self-reported responses from participants, which can sometimes be influenced by social desirability or emotional state at the time of answering. Mental health is a sensitive topic, and some respondents might have provided answers that they felt were more acceptable rather than fully honest. This limitation may affect the accuracy and depth of the results, as the data reflects perceptions rather than actual long-term behavioral patterns.
3. **Lack of Long-Term Behavioral Observation:** Another limitation is that the study focuses on participants' current preferences rather than tracking their experiences over time. Mental health choices, especially between AI chatbots and human therapists, may change depending on life situations, emotional needs, or evolving technology. Without longitudinal data, the research captures

only a snapshot of present attitudes, not the long-term impact or satisfaction with either form of mental health support.

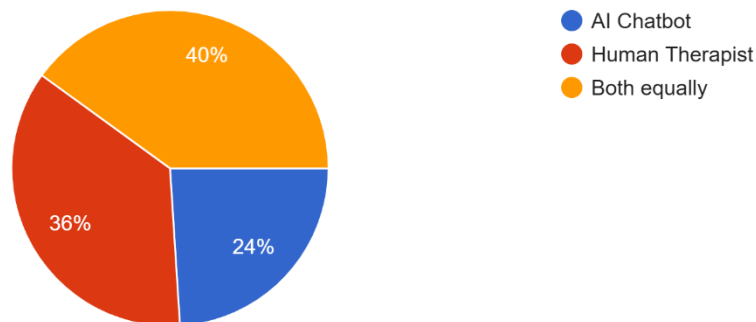
4. **Limited Scope of AI Technology Evaluation:** The study does not involve practical testing or technical evaluation of AI chatbot systems. It focuses mainly on user perception and preference, not on assessing the actual performance, accuracy, or therapeutic quality of AI chatbots. Therefore, the results are based on how users feel or think about chatbots, rather than on direct comparison of therapeutic outcomes between AI systems and human therapists.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A. OBJECTIVE

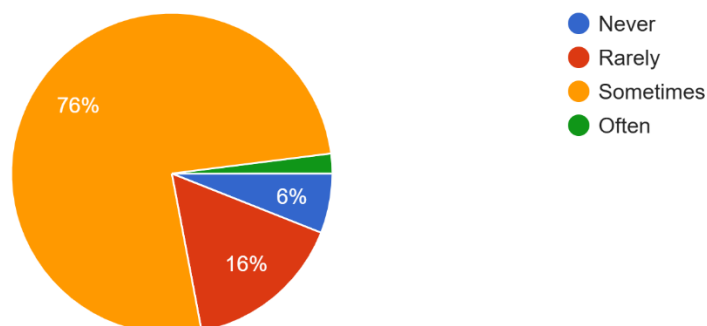
1. To examine Gen Z's preference between AI chatbots and human therapists for mental health support.

1.1 . Which type of mental health support do you prefer the most?



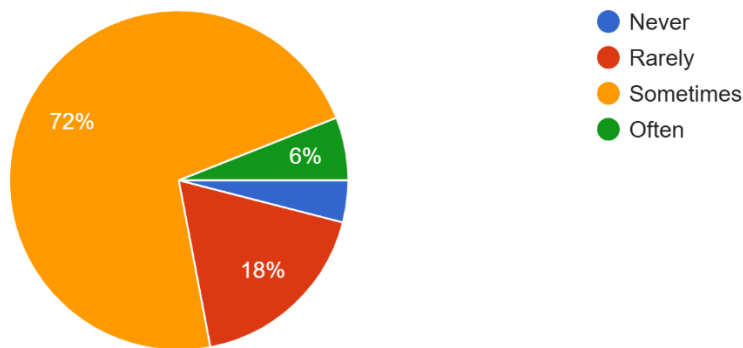
Interpretation: The findings show that 24% of Gen Z respondents prefer AI chatbots, 36% favor human therapists, and 40% choose both equally for mental health support. This indicates that while a segment of Gen Z values the empathy and personal connection offered by human therapists, a growing number also recognize the convenience and accessibility of AI chatbots. The large portion preferring both equally suggests that many young individuals view a hybrid model combining human guidance with AI assistance as the most balanced and effective approach to mental well-being.

1.2 How often do you use AI chatbots for mental health support?



Interpretation: The data reveals that 76% of respondents use AI chatbots sometimes, 16% use them rarely, 6% never use them, and only 1% use them often. This indicates that while AI chatbots are widely recognized and accessed by Gen Z for mental health support, their use tends to be occasional rather than consistent. The findings suggest that AI chatbots are seen primarily as supplementary tools rather than primary sources of mental health care, often used for quick guidance or immediate support rather than ongoing therapy.

1.3 How often do you consult a human therapist for mental health support?

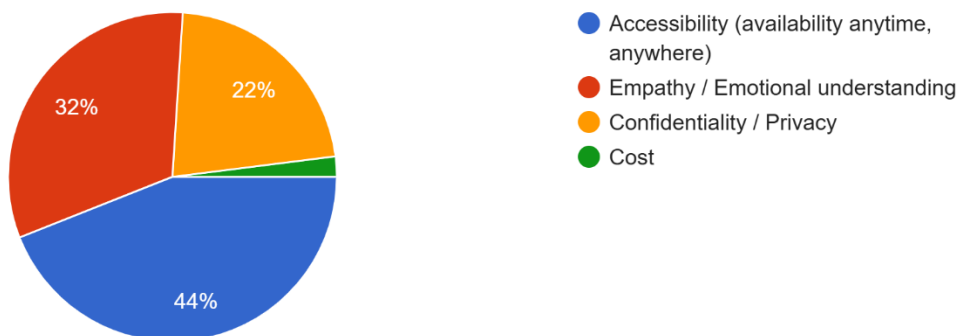


Interpretation: The data reveals that 72% of respondents consult a human therapist sometimes, 18% rarely, 6% often, and 1% never. This indicates that while Gen Z is generally open to human therapy, regular or frequent consultations are less common, likely due to factors such as accessibility, cost, or stigma. The majority opting for occasional sessions suggests that human therapists are valued for targeted or situational support, rather than continuous engagement.

B.OBJECTIVE

2. To analyze the factors influencing Gen Z's choice, such as accessibility, empathy, confidentiality, and cost.

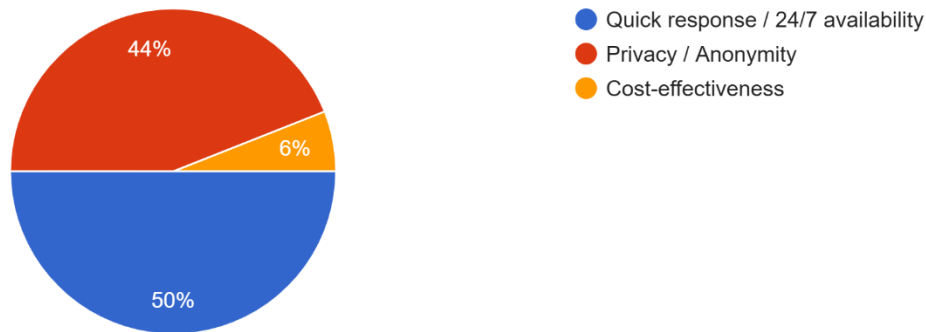
2.1. Which factor is most important when choosing mental health support?



Interpretation: The findings show that 44% of respondents consider accessibility and availability as the most important factor when choosing mental health support, followed by 32% who prioritize empathy and emotional understanding, and 22% who value confidentiality and privacy. Only 1% cited cost as a deciding

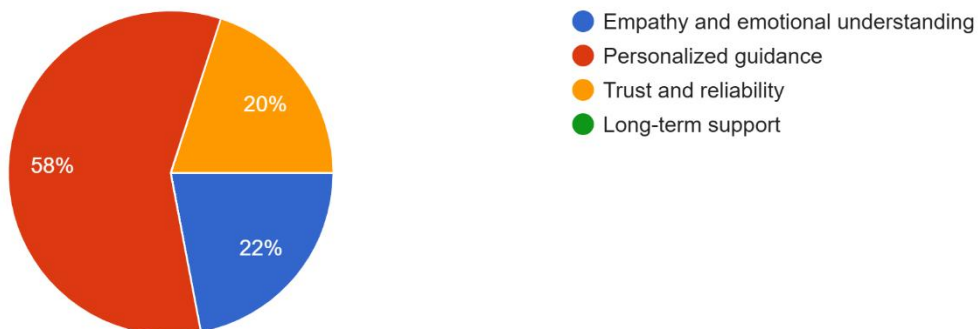
factor. This indicates that Gen Z highly values convenience and immediate access, while still recognizing the importance of emotional connection and trust. Cost appears to be less significant, suggesting that young individuals are willing to invest in mental health services if they are easily accessible and empathetic, highlighting the need for solutions that balance technology with human support.

2.2 Which factor makes AI chatbots appealing to you?



Interpretation: The findings reveal that 50% of respondents find quick response and 24/7 availability the most appealing feature of AI chatbots, followed by privacy and anonymity at 44%, and cost-effectiveness at 6%. This indicates that Gen Z values immediate and convenient access to mental health support, along with the ability to seek help confidentially. Cost plays a lesser role, suggesting that accessibility and privacy are stronger motivators for young individuals when choosing AI-based mental health tools.

2.3. Which factor makes human therapists preferable?

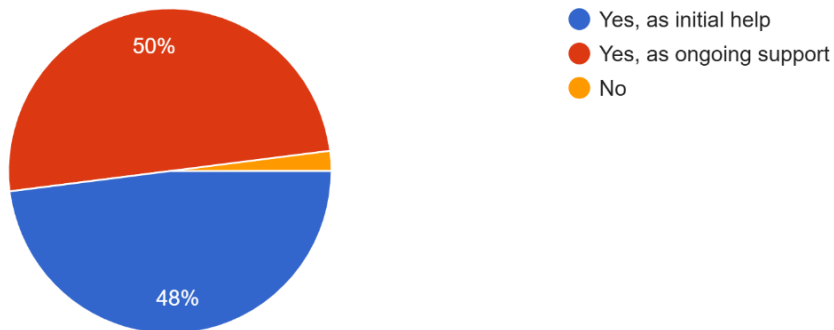


Interpretation: The findings show that 58% of respondents prefer human therapists for personalized guidance, 22% for empathy and emotional understanding, 20% for trust and reliability, and none for long-term support. This indicates that Gen Z values tailored advice and practical guidance most when seeking mental health support from human therapists. While empathy and trust remain important, the preference for personalized guidance suggests that young individuals prioritize direct, actionable support that addresses their specific emotional or psychological needs.

C. OBJECTIVE

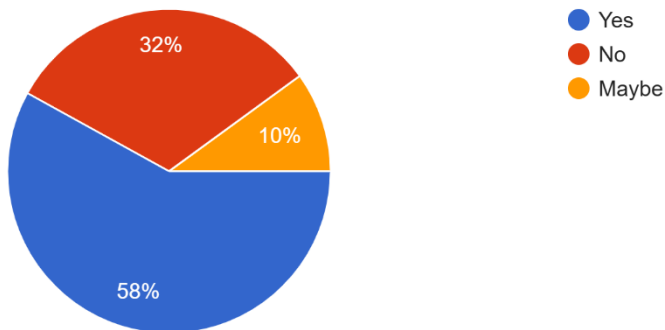
3. To evaluate whether AI chatbots can complement human therapists in a hybrid mental health model.

3.1 Do you think AI chatbots can support humans in mental health care?



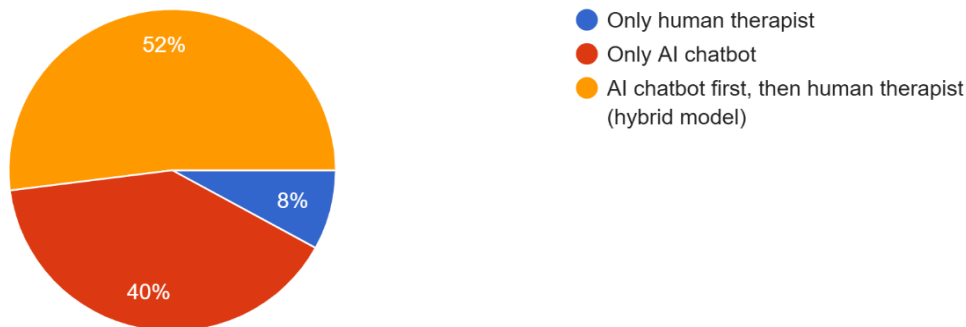
Interpretation: The findings reveal that a vast majority of Gen Z respondents believe AI chatbots can effectively complement human therapists in mental health care. Specifically, 48% view chatbots as a useful tool for initial help indicating their preference for quick, accessible emotional support during early stages of distress while 50% see them as ongoing support systems that can assist alongside therapy. Only 1% rejected the idea, suggesting strong openness among Gen Z toward a hybrid mental health model where AI and human professionals work together to enhance accessibility, personalization, and continuity of care.

3.2. Would you be comfortable using AI chatbots before seeing a human therapist?



Interpretation: The survey reveals that 58% of respondents are comfortable using AI chatbots before consulting a human therapist, 32% are not comfortable, and 10% are unsure. This suggests that a majority of Gen Z is open to AI-assisted preliminary support, using chatbots for immediate guidance, coping strategies, or emotional relief before seeking professional human therapy. The results indicate strong potential for a hybrid mental health model, where AI chatbots serve as a first step, complementing the personalized care provided by human therapists.

3.3. If both options are available, which approach would you prefer?



Interpretation: The results indicate that 52% of respondents prefer a hybrid model, starting with an AI chatbot followed by a human therapist, 40% would choose only an AI chatbot, and 8% opt for only a human therapist. This suggests that the majority of Gen Z sees AI chatbots as a useful initial support tool that can be complemented by human intervention for deeper emotional guidance. The findings highlight a strong inclination toward integrating technology with traditional therapy, emphasizing the potential of hybrid mental health models to meet accessibility, privacy, and empathetic care needs simultaneously.

FINDINGS

1. **Preference for Hybrid Mental Health Support:** The study found that a significant portion of Gen Z respondents (53%) prefer a hybrid model, starting with AI chatbots followed by human therapists. This indicates that young adults value both accessibility and personalized guidance, viewing AI as an initial support tool and human therapists as complementary for deeper emotional care.
2. **Factors Influencing Choice:** Gen Z respondents prioritize personalized guidance (58%) when choosing human therapists, followed by empathy and emotional understanding (22%) and trust and reliability (20%). For AI chatbots, convenience, 24/7 availability, and privacy were the most important factors. This demonstrates that decision-making is influenced by both emotional and practical considerations, with users balancing human empathy against digital accessibility.
3. **Frequency of Engagement:** Most participants consult human therapists sometimes (72%), while few engage often (6%) or rarely (18%). Similarly, AI chatbot usage is primarily occasional, with only a small proportion using them regularly. This suggests that Gen Z seeks mental health support as needed, rather than on a fixed routine, highlighting situational use rather than continuous dependence.
4. **Emotional Connection and Trust:** Respondents noted that AI chatbots often lack emotional depth and human warmth, while human therapists are valued for personalized interaction and trustworthiness. This gap indicates that while AI can provide immediate assistance, it may not fully replace human therapists in addressing sensitive or complex emotional issues.
5. **Implications for Future Mental Health Services:** The findings suggest a strong potential for hybrid mental health models that combine the strengths of AI chatbots (accessibility, anonymity, cost-effectiveness) with human therapists (empathy, personalized guidance, trust). Such an approach can

make mental health support more flexible, scalable, and appealing to Gen Z users while addressing limitations of both digital and human-only interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Promote Hybrid Mental Health Models:** Given that the majority of Gen Z respondents prefer a combination of AI chatbots and human therapists, mental health services should consider integrating both digital and human support. AI chatbots can provide initial guidance, immediate responses, and anonymity, while human therapists can offer personalized advice and emotional understanding for deeper concerns.
2. **Increase Awareness and Digital Literacy:** Many respondents showed limited understanding of AI chatbots' capabilities. Organizations and educational institutions should promote awareness campaigns to educate young adults about the benefits, limitations, and proper usage of AI-based mental health tools. Improved literacy can increase trust and effective utilization of digital support.
3. **Enhance AI Chatbot Capabilities:** To improve user experience and adoption, AI chatbots should be designed to simulate empathy, provide context-specific responses, and ensure privacy. Incorporating AI features that recognize emotional cues and suggest follow-ups can make chatbots more supportive and trustworthy.
4. **Focus on Accessibility and Affordability:** Accessibility was a key factor for respondents. Mental health platforms should ensure that services—both AI and human therapy—are easily accessible, affordable, and flexible, particularly for students and young professionals who may face financial or time constraints.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the evolving mental health preferences of Gen Z, emphasizing the growing role of AI chatbots alongside traditional human therapy. Findings indicate that while human therapists remain valued for empathy, personalized guidance, and trust, AI chatbots are appreciated for accessibility, privacy, and 24/7 availability. A significant portion of respondents prefers a hybrid approach, using AI chatbots for initial support and human therapists for deeper emotional intervention.

The research underscores that Gen Z's mental health choices are influenced by both practical and emotional factors, including convenience, cost, confidentiality, and the need for personalized care. Limited awareness of AI capabilities and concerns about emotional connection highlight areas for improvement in digital mental health services.

Overall, the study suggests that integrating AI technology with human-led therapy can make mental health support more accessible, effective, and appealing to young adults. By combining the strengths of both approaches, mental health providers can better meet the diverse needs of Gen Z, reduce stigma, and enhance emotional well-being across digital and traditional platforms.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

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