

AI as a Gateway or Alternative? Trust in Artificial Intelligence and Professional Help-Seeking Attitudes Among Young Adults Using AI for Mental Health Support

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Abstract:

Background: AI-driven conversational platforms are progressively utilized by young adults for emotional and psychological support. Concerns, however, remain about whether AI serves as an adjunct to formal psychological care or substitute for professional help-seeking. The psychological elements influencing the utilization of AI for mental health assistance are not yet fully comprehended. The current study looked at the association between attitudes about obtaining professional psychological assistance and trust in AI, as well as whether these factors were related to young adults' usage of AI for mental health support.

Methodology: A cross-sectional analysis was performed involving 100 young adults. Participants filled out the Trust in Artificial Intelligence Scale and the Short Form of the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPH-SF). Data concerning prior psychological assistance-seeking behaviors and characteristics of AI utilization, encompassing AI applications for emotional or mental health support, frequency and duration of AI engagement, average interaction length, and perceived efficacy of AI, was also gathered. Spearman rank-order correlations and Mann-Whitney U tests were used for non-parametric analyses because trust-in-AI values significantly deviated from normal. Effect sizes were reported using rank-biserial correlation.

Results: No significant association was observed between trust in AI and attitudes toward professional psychological help-seeking (Spearman's $\rho = -0.140$, $p = 0.163$). Perceived helpfulness of AI was moderately and positively associated with trust in AI ($\rho = 0.443$, $p < 0.001$), whereas frequency and duration of AI use were unrelated to either primary variable. Sixty-seven participants reported using AI for mental health support, while 37 reported no such use. Participants who had used AI for mental

health support demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes toward professional psychological help-seeking (Median = 18) than non-users (Median = 15; $U = 794$, $p = 0.008$, rank-biserial $r = 0.319$). In contrast, trust in AI did not differ significantly between users and non-users (both group medians = 48; $U = 1138$, $p = 0.846$, rank-biserial $r = 0.024$).

Conclusion: These results emphasize the necessity of conceptualizing AI-based mental health support as an integral component of a rapidly evolving and potentially complementary help-seeking landscape, rather than as a mere substitute for professional care. Longitudinal research is required to clarify whether engagement with AI-based support subsequently facilitates, delays or has no effect on engagement with formal mental health services.

Keywords:

Artificial intelligence, mental health support, professional psychological help-seeking, trust in AI, young adults, digital mental health.