

Preferences for AI Functionalities in Emotional Counselling among Youth and Young Adults

Alvin Junus, Yu-cheng Hsu, Light Yip, Christian S. Chan, **Paul S. F. Yip**

Background: Counselling services enhanced by artificial intelligence (AI) functionalities are a potentially scalable solution to meet foreseeable increased mental health needs among youth and young adults (YYAs; 10–35-year-olds). However, a principal contributor to YYAs' mental health treatment gap is their low demand for mental healthcare. Clarifying their needs, concerns, and desires regarding AI-integrated counselling is imperative for developing services that they will likely use.

Methods: Preferences for specific forms of AI-enhanced counselling and the underlying reasons were assessed in a population-representative survey (Study 1; N=1,500) and a two-wave panel survey on users of a 24/7 synchronous text-based emotional counselling service (Study 2; N=413). Logistic regressions identified factors associated with these preferences, and, in Study 2, examined whether attitude changes predicted preference shifts over time.

Results: Receptiveness to AI-enhanced counselling was 39.0% in Study 1 and $\geq 50.9\%$ in Study 2. AI's potential to shorten waiting times and informational utility were the most frequently cited reasons for acceptance. Scepticism regarding AI's capacity to understand emotions and to listen attentively were the chief reasons for reluctance; attitude changes on these points were associated with shifts in preference among service users. No notable gender differences emerged.

Discussion: AI-enabled counselling will not appeal uniformly to all youth and young adults; substantial heterogeneity exists in their perceptions, expectations, and concerns. Ongoing dialogue between service providers and the YYAs can clarify those expectations and help reduce scepticism about AI functionalities in counselling.