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Internet users' acceptance of AI-based psychological counseling and its influencing factors: an empirical study based on an online questionnaire

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Abstract: Against fierce social competition and rising emotional distress, China faces strong demand for psychological counseling paired with shortages of professionals and high offline costs. This study adopted 130 valid online questionnaires to explore internet users' acceptance of AI counseling and its predictors. Most prior users would reuse it for mild emotional issues; respondents valued AI's non-judgment and accessibility, together with reduced user stigma, but worried about privacy and risk omission. The public sees AI only as a supplement rather than full replacement for human counselors. AI partly fills daily emotional support gaps, and its development should follow privacy-preserving, risk-aware, AI-assisted frameworks under professional supervision.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; psychological counseling; large language model; acceptance; emotional relief; online survey

1 Introduction

With the accelerating pace of modern life and intensifying competition, work pressure, interpersonal difficulties and emotional exhaustion have become more common among individuals than in the past. Data from national mental health prevention and treatment indicate that approximately 190 million people in China suffer from mental or psychological disorders of varying degrees of severity and require professional intervention [1].

The rapid development of large language model (LLM) technology offers a new way of resolving this contradiction. Dialogue systems built on generative AI can respond immediately to users' emotional expressions in natural language and, to a certain extent, provide empathic listening and preliminary advice [2].

However, to what extent is AI-based psychological counseling actually accepted by internet users? Based on an online questionnaire survey of internet users with experience of AI-based psychological counseling, this study systematically describes their usage behavior, experiential evaluations and risk perceptions. On this basis, it analyzes the advantages and shortcomings of AI-based psychological counseling and puts forward suggestions for improvement, with a view to providing empirical reference for the healthy development of AI psychological services.

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2 Materials and methods

2.1 Participants and data collection

This study adopted the method of an online questionnaire survey. Electronic questionnaires were distributed through the Wenjuanxing platform to internet users who had experience of AI-based psychological counseling or emotional relief. The questionnaire covered usage behavior, counseling scenarios, experiential evaluation, risk perception, attitudes towards the industry's positioning and demographic information, comprising 25 items in total, with item formats including single-choice, multiple-choice and five-point Likert scale questions [3]. The survey was completed in September 2026, and 130 questionnaires were collected; after validity screening, all of them were included in the analysis.

2.2 Sample composition

In terms of gender distribution, female respondents accounted for more than 60%, while male respondents accounted for less than 35%. In terms of age, the sample was dominated by the 26–35 age group, which accounted for nearly half; the 36–45 group accounted for about 24%, the 18–25 group accounted for about 13%, and the 46-and-above and under-18 groups together accounted for less than 10%, showing an overall distinctly young and middle-aged profile.

3 Results

3.1 AI-based psychological counseling for daily emotional relief

With regard to the frequency of using AI for psychological counseling, respondents who used it two to three times a month formed the largest group, at 34.92%; 31.75% used it less than once a month; 22.22% used it once a week or more; 6.35% used it once a day or more; and 4.76% had used it only once. Overall, most respondents used AI periodically for emotional disclosure, displaying relatively stable usage habits. As for the duration of a single session, more than 60% of respondents reported 10 to 30 minutes, about a quarter reported less than 10 minutes, and about 10% reported more than 30 minutes; fewer than 2% reported sessions exceeding 60 minutes. Usage duration thus tended towards the medium-to-short range, which is consistent with the characteristics of fragmented daily emotional disclosure.

3.2 Usage scenarios concentrated on mild-to-moderate daily emotional distress

The types of problems which respondents disclosed to AI showed a distinctly everyday character. Workplace stress and employment anxiety ranked highest, at 71.43%; interpersonal conflict and social anxiety came second, at 69.84%; problems of self-denial, low self-esteem and low mood accounted for 52.38%; sleep problems and mental exhaustion accounted for 52.38%; distress in intimate relationships accounted for 42.86%; and academic and examination pressure accounted for 26.98%. By contrast, trauma-related emotions and depression-related symptoms each accounted for less than 20%.

This structure indicates that internet users currently use AI-based psychological counseling mainly to deal with mild-to-moderate daily emotional problems such as workplace adjustment, social anxiety, low self-evaluation and sleep-related exhaustion, rather than severe mental disorders or post-traumatic psychological intervention. This usage boundary is broadly consistent with the actual capability range of AI dialogue tools, and to some extent reflects that the public already conducts simple self-screening regarding appropriate scenarios for AI psychological services [4].

3.3 The primary reason for choosing AI rather than a human counselor

When respondents were asked about "the primary reason for choosing AI rather than immediately seeking a human counselor", the first-ranked reason for both groups—those who had previously received offline face-to-face counseling and those who had not—was "AI's capacity to provide consultation at any time and anywhere", with the proportion exceeding 40% in both groups; the second-ranked reason in both groups was concern about privacy leakage, and the price factor was similar across the two groups. The difference lay in the fact that, among those who had not received offline face-to-face

counseling, more than 10% stated that "my problems are only mild emotional issues, so there is no need to see a human counselor", an option that was not selected by those who had received offline counseling.

3.4 Users' experiential evaluation of AI-based psychological counseling

In terms of emotional understanding, nearly 70% of respondents agreed that "AI can understand the reasons behind my emotions", while fewer than 15% disagreed. In terms of the sense of non-judgment, more than 80% of respondents agreed that "AI's replies do not make me feel judged or lectured", and no respondent chose "strongly disagree". In terms of the effect on emotional relief, more than 70% of respondents agreed that "after disclosing to AI, my negative emotions were relieved", among whom nearly 30% chose "strongly agree", and no respondent disagreed entirely. In terms of willingness to continue using the service, more than 80% of respondents indicated that they would still be willing to use AI for counseling when they encountered psychological distress in the future, with nearly half choosing "strongly agree" and fewer than 5% explicitly unwilling to use it again.

3.5 Risk perception and its group differences

Respondents' risk concerns about AI-based psychological counseling displayed a distinctly stratified pattern.

First, public concern about the risk to privacy and security was the highest. Nearly 60% of respondents expressed varying degrees of concern that chat records and personal emotional privacy might be collected by platforms.

Second, the risk of failing to identify danger signals and thereby delaying treatment received considerable attention. Nearly 43% of respondents were "fairly concerned" or "very concerned" that "AI cannot identify danger signals such as severe depression and self-harm", with an overall mean score of 3.11 points, falling in the "fairly concerned" range.

Third, concern about "AI giving incorrect psychological guidance and aggravating psychological problems" stood at about 40%.

Fourth, concern about "long-term dependence on AI and avoidance of real social interaction and professional treatment" was relatively moderate: about 28.5% of respondents were explicitly concerned, more than 36% held a neutral attitude, and about 35% expressed no concern.

Overall, risk concerns followed the pattern that "the younger, the more highly educated, and those with offline counseling experience were the more concerned". This pattern does not mean that this group rejects AI; rather, it indicates that, while actively using AI, they possess a clearer understanding of its professional boundaries and potential harm.

3.6 A clear public consensus on the industry positioning of AI-based psychological counseling

When asked "how should AI-based psychological counseling be positioned in the future", nearly 70% of respondents believed that AI should assist in psychological intervention under the supervision of professional psychological practitioners, about a quarter believed that AI could serve only as a tool for the daily emotional relief of ordinary people, fewer than 5% believed that AI could completely replace human psychological counselors, and fewer than 2% did not recommend the use of AI-based psychological counseling.

4 Discussion

4.1 Practical advantages of AI-based psychological counseling

In light of the survey results, the advantages of AI-based psychological counseling are mainly reflected in the following four aspects.

First, it is highly accessible and fills the supply gap in daily emotional support. In the survey, more than 80% of respondents endorsed "freedom of time and the ability to disclose at any time", and more than 40% chose "not being limited by time or place" as the primary reason for choosing AI.

Second, it lowers psychological pressure and reduces the sense of shame associated with emotional expression. More

than 80% of respondents endorsed the view that AI's replies do not produce a feeling of being judged or lectured, and about 70% endorsed "no sense of shame and the courage to express true thoughts" and "no need for face-to-face interaction and less psychological pressure". For users whose problems are not yet severe enough to require entering a counseling room, and who are ashamed to reveal their inner feelings to acquaintances, a non-judgmental conversational environment is itself therapeutically meaningful.

Third, the cost of use is low and the economic threshold is far lower than that of offline counseling. About 65% to 70% of respondents endorsed the view that AI is cheaper or even free. Compared with offline counseling, which typically charges several hundred to several thousand RMB per hour and tens of thousands of RMB for a complete course of treatment, AI dialogue tools are economically more accessible to ordinary internet users and are particularly suitable for long-term, high-frequency use in cases of mild-to-moderate emotional problems [5].

Fourth, the user experience has reached a relatively high level of acceptance in terms of daily emotional support. More than 70% of respondents endorsed AI's understanding of the reasons behind emotions, more than 70% considered that their negative emotions were relieved after disclosing, and more than 80% were willing to use the service again; moreover, a positive correlation existed between recognition of emotional understanding and evaluation of the feasibility of advice.

4.2 Limitations and risks of AI-based psychological counseling

At the same time, the survey results also reveal limitations of AI-based psychological counseling that cannot currently be ignored.

First, the capacity to identify professional risks is still questioned. Nearly 60% of respondents were concerned about privacy and security, more than 40% were concerned that AI cannot identify danger signals such as self-harm, suicide and severe depression, and about 40% were concerned that incorrect guidance from AI might aggravate psychological problems.

Second, the depth and personalization of the service are insufficient. Complaints that "advice is templated and poorly targeted" were relatively concentrated among the public institution/teacher group.

Third, there is a potential risk of overuse and social withdrawal. About 30% of respondents were concerned that long-term dependence on AI would prompt users to avoid real social interaction and professional treatment.

Fourth, the user group in the sample is heavily concentrated among highly educated young and middle-aged workplace populations.

4.3 Directions for improvement

Based on the above advantages and limitations, and in the light of the positioning expectations expressed by the public in the survey, this paper argues that the healthy development of AI-based psychological counseling should focus on improvement in the following four aspects.

First, clarify the product positioning and implement tiered services. AI-based psychological counseling should anchor itself to the core scenario of daily mild-to-moderate emotional relief, focus on improving the quality of responses to high-frequency problems such as workplace stress, social anxiety and sleep-related exhaustion, and refrain from blindly expanding into the treatment of severe mental illness.

Second, treat privacy protection as trust infrastructure. In response to the issues of chat records and emotional privacy that the public cares about most, AI psychological service products should make clear and perceptible privacy commitments—for example, explicitly stating that users' disclosures will not be used for model training or commercial profiling, and providing options for data deletion and anonymization.

Third, strengthen danger-signal identification and safety fallbacks. At the product level, a mandatory mechanism for psychological risk identification and interception should be established: when a user's expression involves self-harm, suicide, severe trauma or depressive symptoms, the system must trigger a warning, provide professional hotlines and medical guidance, and avoid rash "empathic agreement" in its dialogue strategy.

5 Conclusion

Overall, AI-based psychological counseling has already demonstrated practical value in filling the gap in daily emotional relief, and its non-judgmental, always-available and low-threshold characteristics meet the urgent needs of a large number of internet users for mild-to-moderate psychological support. The strong public attention in this study to privacy protection, danger-signal identification and professional supervision precisely points to the direction of the industry's next improvements: as large language models continue to improve in emotional understanding and risk identification, and as industry standards, privacy rules and the "AI plus human" linkage mechanism are gradually established, AI-based psychological counseling is expected—on the premise of adhering to its auxiliary positioning and not overstepping into replacing human counselors—to continuously enhance the professionalism, safety and accessibility of its services, to become an increasingly mature element of China's multi-tiered mental health service system, and to better respond to the people's needs for a better life and for physical and mental health [6].

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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