

The Impact of AI Chatbots on Social Work Counseling in Sri Lanka: Benefits and Risks

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Abstract

Integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots in social work counseling practices is changing traditional counseling approaches by providing various benefits and challenges. This study examines the advantages and disadvantages of AI chatbots in social work counseling through a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data was collected from fifty final year counseling students, while qualitative data was collected from five professional counselors through interviews. An analysis of qualitative data revealed the main themes as efficiency, availability, ethical issues, and emotional context in AI counseling. The quantitative results suggest that AI

chatbots improve the accessibility of mental health services, but privacy concerns, absence of compassion, and ethical issues are still present. This study emphasizes the need to mitigate the effects of AI by incorporating more human-centered approaches if counseling is to remain ethical and effective. Future research should look into the consequences of AI chatbots on counselors and clients alongside developing ethical parameters on the usage of technology in social work.

Keywords: AI chatbots, social work counseling, Ethical implications, Accessibility

Introduction

AI evolution is at the forefront of advancing various industries, and that includes service delivery like counseling. Simulated chatbots built to mimic human conversationalists have expanded their coverage to providing mental health and emotional counseling support alongside crisis intervention (Haristiani, 2019). These AI tools enhance efficiency, especially for those who are reluctant to attend traditional

counseling venues. AI chatbots used in social work counseling raise important concerns. These include ethics, data privacy, emotional intelligence, and how well AI can understand human emotions (Jayawardana & Nanayakkara, 2018).

Research Problem

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots into social work counseling has generated both enthusiasm and concern. As AI-driven conversational agents become increasingly involved in offering mental health support, crisis intervention, and initial counseling services, critical questions emerge regarding their suitability in a field grounded in empathy, ethics, and human understanding (Singer, Báez, & Rios, 2023; Lee, 2023). A central issue is whether AI chatbots can deliver meaningful psychosocial assistance. Traditional counseling relies heavily on active listening, emotional intelligence, and relational depth qualities that AI lacks. While chatbots can simulate language, they cannot authentically engage with human emotions. Studies

by Lemieux et al. (2010) and Prost, Lemieux, & Ai (2016) emphasize the importance of human-led counseling during emotional crises, where relational presence is essential.

Furthermore, ethical and privacy concerns pose major challenges. AI chatbots often rely on cloud-based technologies and algorithmic processes that can compromise confidentiality, introduce bias, or generate misleading outputs. These issues raise questions about transparency, accountability, and the appropriateness of such tools in sensitive human services (Tawfeeq, Awqati, & Jasim, 2023; Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). Finally, the effectiveness of AI in real-world counseling remains uncertain. While AI tools can improve accessibility and reduce counselor burden (Chen, Gong, Lu, & Tang, 2022), they may fall short in addressing complex, culturally nuanced cases. The absence of clear regulatory frameworks for AI use in social work adds further complications (Fernando, 2023).

This study aims to critically examine the benefits, limitations, and ethical considerations of using AI chatbots in social work counseling. Through a mixed-methods approach, it will assess their practical value and explore whether AI can serve as a supportive tool or whether its risks outweigh its contributions to professional practice.

Background

The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into human service domains has reshaped how professionals interact, assess, and support clients, particularly in the realm of counseling. Globally, AI-driven chatbots have been increasingly adopted in mental health services to provide scalable, immediate, and cost-effective emotional support, particularly for underserved populations (Chen et al., 2022; Haristiani, 2019). These tools are praised for their accessibility and efficiency, especially in societies facing mental health workforce shortages or stigma around psychological help-seeking (Floridi et al., 2021). However, this technological shift also

raises complex questions regarding the ethics of care, privacy, data use, and emotional competence in AI systems (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017; Hugman & Smith, 2002). Scholars argue that while AI offers benefits, it cannot fully replicate human sensitivity, empathy, and contextual understanding crucial to effective counseling (Moore, 2019; Sheridan, 2009).

In Sri Lanka, where social work is still an emerging professional discipline, the use of AI in counseling is at a nascent stage. Despite improvements in mental health awareness, systemic challenges such as limited human resources, socio-cultural stigmas, and uneven access to services persist (Fernando, 2023; Jayawardana & Nanayakkara, 2018). These constraints have opened the door to digital tools like chatbots, especially among youth and urban populations. Yet, little empirical research has been conducted to examine their actual role, effectiveness, and ethical fit within Sri Lanka's socio-cultural framework. This study, therefore, aims to explore how AI chatbots are perceived and utilized within the

Sri Lankan context, focusing on both their potential and limitations in social work counseling practice.

Significance of the Study

The adoption of social work AI chatbots marks an unprecedented shift in service provision that has its own benefits and disadvantages. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effects of AI chatbots on social work counseling in Sri Lanka using a mixed methods strategy which includes both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with licensed counselors as well as final-year counseling students. With the growing use of AI-powered technologies in supporting mental health and social services, it has become essential to assess their efficacy in addition to ethics and hazards.

This study will add to the ongoing debate on the advantages and disadvantages of AI in social work practice. Given that AI uptake in counseling services is still nascent in Sri Lanka, the research will be worthwhile for social practitioners, trainers, and

curriculum developers as well as policy advocates. The results will not only determine the AI chatbots' capabilities and limitations in counseling, but also assist in formulating guidelines for their integration into the practice of social work in an ethical manner that protects fundamental humanistic principles of social work.

Literature Review

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in social work counseling is transforming the delivery of mental health and psychosocial support services. AI chatbots natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning-based conversational agents are increasingly utilized to provide psychological support, crisis intervention, and therapeutic guidance (Singer, Báez, & Rios, 2023; Haristiani, 2019). These tools simulate human conversations to offer immediate feedback and assistance, improving accessibility for emotionally distressed individuals. Although common in healthcare and customer service, their

application in social work counseling remains relatively new and underexplored.

Research highlights that AI chatbots can enhance the efficiency and reach of social work services. By automating certain counseling tasks, they enable practitioners to manage larger caseloads and extend support to underserved communities (Chen, Gong, Lu, & Tang, 2022; Moore, 2019). Singer et al. (2023) observe that such models also contribute to educational contexts in social work. Additionally, chatbots provide 24/7 access, increasing responsiveness during emotional crises (Floridi et al., 2021). Their interactive design fosters engagement, particularly among users reluctant to seek traditional counseling (Haristiani, 2019).

However, these advancements are accompanied by notable ethical and emotional concerns. Scholars caution against potential misuse and ethical risks, including privacy breaches, algorithmic discrimination, misinformation, and a lack of empathetic engagement (Tawfeeq, Awqati, & Jasim,

2023; Boddy & Dominelli, 2017; Hugman & Smith, 2002). The inability of AI to demonstrate critical thinking and compassion raises concerns about its appropriateness in handling sensitive interpersonal situations (Lee, 2023). As social work emphasizes relational depth, emotional intelligence, and ethical care, questions emerge regarding how AI tools align with the profession's core values.

The limitations of AI in providing genuine psychosocial support are also underscored in the literature. While chatbots may imitate human language, they lack the emotional depth and relational capacity essential for navigating complex human experiences (Thompson, 2015; Radin & Welsh, 1984). Lemieux et al. (2010) and Prost, Lemieux, & Ai (2016) emphasize the importance of human connection in times of trauma and disaster support that AI systems may not adequately replace.

In summary, while AI chatbots offer promising innovations in expanding access and efficiency in social work counseling, critical challenges remain in

terms of ethics, emotional resonance, and cultural appropriateness. This underscores the need for more rigorous evaluation and the development of ethical frameworks to guide their integration into professional practice.

Research Objective

- To investigate the impacts of AI chatbots on social work counseling in Sri Lanka regarding their effectiveness, ethical implications, and impact on the therapeutic relationship.

Other objectives are,

1. To identify the effectiveness of AI chatbots in enabling social work counseling.
2. To assess the ethical concerns and dilemmas of employing AI chatbots in social work practice.
3. To identify the impacts of AI chatbots on the counselor-client relationship in Sri Lanka.

Research Questions

1. To what degree are AI chatbots efficacious in promoting social work counseling support in Sri Lanka?
2. What are the principal ethical problems and challenges of employing AI chatbots in social work counseling?
3. To what extent do AI chatbots influence the therapeutic relationship between the counselor and the client?

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data in a comprehensive examination of the impact of AI chatbots on social work counseling. By integrating statistical results and in-depth information, this approach facilitates a balanced

understanding of the pros and cons of AI-powered counseling tools. A convergent mixed-methods design was used, where quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed together. This design ensures that the study captures both quantitative trends and subjective experiences, enabling a comprehensive perspective on the research problem. The study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that allows participants to be deliberately chosen based on their experience and relevance to the study. This guarantees that the information collected is highly specific to the study context.

Participants

- **Qualitative Data:** In-depth interviews were conducted with five experienced, professional, licensed counselors with social work counseling experience in Sri Lanka. These participants provided expert insights into the ethical, practical, and emotional

implications of AI chatbot deployment in counseling.

- **Quantitative Data:** A structured survey was administered to 50 final-year counseling students. The students' responses were utilized to quantify perceptions, concerns, and expectations regarding AI chatbots in social work practice.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews (Qualitative Data Collection): Conducted semi-structured interviews with five licensed social work counselors. Open-ended questions were designed to explore counselors' attitudes towards AI chatbots, their use in counseling, ethical considerations, and limitations in providing psychosocial care. Recorded interviews, transcriptions, and thematic analysis were employed to identify key trends and findings.

Surveys (Quantitative Data Collection): 50 final-year counseling students were issued a structured

questionnaire. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items (e.g., strongly agree to strongly disagree) and multiple-choice questions assessing students' knowledge, perceptions, and concerns regarding AI chatbots in counseling. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods to identify trends and correlations.

Data Analysis

This study employs a mixed-methods design to analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data, collected through surveys of 50 final-year counseling students at a Sri Lankan government counseling school, will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution will be used to summarize the data. Inferential statistical tests (e.g., t-tests or chi-square tests) will be employed to examine relationships between key variables, such as AI chatbot perceived value and ethical implications. Statistical analysis will be conducted using software

like SPSS or Excel for precise and efficient data interpretation.

For qualitative data, thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring patterns in the in-depth interviews with five licensed professional counselors. Thematic coding will be applied to classify responses into major themes related to the benefits, risks, and ethical concerns of AI chatbot use in social work counseling. These themes will be analyzed alongside the quantitative findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of how AI chatbots influence social work counseling in Sri Lanka. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data will strengthen the study's reliability by providing a more evidence-based discussion on the role of AI in social work practice.

Results and Discussion

1. Quantitative Results

A total of **50 final-year counseling students** and **five licensed professional counselors** participated in

this study. The findings from the **quantitative survey** highlight key perceptions and concerns regarding AI chatbots in social work counseling.

4.e.1.1 Demographic Profile of Participants

Variable	Frequency (n=50)	Percentage (%)
Gender (Male)	22	44%
Gender (Female)	28	56%
Familiarity with AI Chatbots in Counseling (Yes)	35	70%
Concerned About Ethical Issues (Yes)	40	80%
Believe AI Can Be Used as a Counseling Tool (Yes)	30	60%
Prefer Human Counselors Over AI (Yes)	45	90%

The results indicate that while **70% of students** were familiar with AI-based counseling chatbots, **90% still preferred human counselors**, primarily due to concerns about **ethical implications (80%)** and the **lack of emotional intelligence in AI**.

4.e.1.2 Perception of AI in Counseling

AI Feature		Positive Perception (%)	Negative Perception (%)
Availability (24/7 Support)		85%	15%
Confidentiality & Anonymity		60%	40%
Accuracy of Responses		50%	50%
Empathy & Emotional Understanding		30%	70%
Ability to Replace Human Counselors		10%	90%

Most participants agreed that **AI chatbots provide 24/7 availability (85%)** and a **degree of confidentiality (60%)**, but **70% found them lacking in empathy** and **90% believed they could not replace human counselors**.

2 Qualitative Results (Thematic Analysis)

Interviews with five licensed professional counselors revealed three major themes regarding AI's role in social work counseling:

Theme 1: AI as a Supplementary Tool, not a Replacement

Counselors largely viewed AI as a supportive tool rather than a substitute for human interaction. They acknowledged its potential benefits in specific areas but maintained that AI should not replace human counselors.

Sub-theme 1: AI for Initial Assessments and Psychoeducation

Many counselors believed AI could play a role in conducting preliminary assessments and providing psychoeducational resources. AI chatbots can assist individuals in identifying symptoms, understanding mental health conditions, and guiding them toward appropriate resources.

Example quote:

"AI chatbots can assist in providing general advice and self-help resources, but they lack the depth of understanding required for trauma counseling."

Sub-theme 2: AI's Role in Crisis Support and Immediate Assistance

While AI cannot provide deep therapeutic interventions, some participants noted that chatbots could be useful in crisis situations where immediate responses are required. AI chatbots can offer grounding techniques, emergency contacts, and coping strategies for distress. However, counselors cautioned against relying solely on AI for urgent psychological care.

Example quote:

"Chatbots can provide immediate assistance and referrals in crisis moments, but they must not replace trained crisis counselors who offer emotional support."

Sub-theme 3: Human Connection Remains Essential in Counseling

Participants emphasized that the human connection in counseling is irreplaceable. Empathy, active listening, and nonverbal cues contribute significantly to effective therapy, and AI lacks these critical components.

Example quote:

"AI can simulate a conversation, but it cannot replicate the warmth, understanding, and trust-building that comes with human counseling."

Theme 2: Ethical and Privacy Concerns

Ethical concerns regarding AI chatbots were a significant theme among counselors, particularly in

terms of data security, informed consent, and AI's potential misuse.

Sub-theme 1: Confidentiality Risks and Data Security

A major concern was the storage and analysis of sensitive client data. AI chatbots often rely on cloud-based storage, raising the risk of data breaches and unauthorized access to personal information.

Example quote:

"Confidentiality is crucial in counseling, and we must ensure AI chatbots adhere to strict data protection policies."

Sub-theme 2: Algorithmic Bias and Misinformation

Counselors worried that AI chatbots might provide biased or inaccurate information, particularly if they rely on flawed datasets. There were also concerns

about chatbots misinterpreting client input, leading to harmful advice.

Example quote:

"If AI chatbots are trained on biased data, they might reinforce stereotypes or provide incorrect mental health guidance, which could be dangerous."

Sub-theme 3: Ethical Boundaries and Professional Responsibility

The lack of clear regulations and professional accountability for AI chatbots was another ethical issue raised by counselors. Unlike human practitioners, AI does not adhere to professional codes of conduct or ethical guidelines.

Example quote:

"Without strict regulations, AI chatbots could operate without accountability, making it difficult to ensure ethical counseling practices."

Theme 3: AI's Limitations in Emotional Intelligence

One of the strongest criticisms of AI chatbots in counseling was their inability to understand, process, and respond to human emotions in a meaningful way.

Sub-theme 1: Lack of Genuine Empathy

Counselors emphasized that while AI chatbots can recognize keywords and respond with pre-programmed messages, they lack the ability to genuinely empathize with clients. Empathy is a fundamental element of therapy, and AI's inability to "feel" emotions makes it less effective in providing deep emotional support.

Example quote:

"A chatbot can provide scripted responses, but it cannot truly 'feel' or adapt to a client's emotions dynamically."

Sub-theme 2: Inability to Adapt to Complex Emotional Needs

Unlike human counselors, AI chatbots struggle to detect emotional nuances, such as sarcasm, distress

masked by humor, or unspoken cues in a client's tone. This limitation makes AI unsuitable for handling complex psychological issues, trauma, and crisis intervention.

Example quote:

"AI chatbots fail to grasp the unspoken aspects of a client's pain. They might give standard responses that don't match the intensity of what the person is feeling."

Sub-theme 3: Risk of Clients Feeling Invalidated

Another limitation noted by counselors was the risk of clients feeling unheard or invalidated when interacting with AI. Since AI cannot adjust its tone or responses dynamically based on a client's emotional state, some clients may find chatbot interactions frustrating or unhelpful.

Example quote:

"A client needs to feel heard and understood. If they receive generic or robotic responses, it could discourage them from seeking further help."

The qualitative findings highlight that while AI chatbots have potential benefits in social work counseling, they are far from being a substitute for human counselors. Their role is best positioned as a supplementary tool, aiding in psychoeducation, crisis support, and accessibility. However, ethical concerns, privacy risks, and the lack of emotional intelligence limit their effectiveness in therapeutic relationships.

Discussion

The findings of the study give an equitable picture of the use of AI chatbots in social work counseling, highlighting both their merits and demerits.

AI's Strengths and Limitations in Counseling

The quantitative data showed that while the majority of counseling students (70%) recognize the advantages of AI in providing immediate support that is accessible everywhere, there is a deep desire for human counselors, as 90% of the students prefer traditional counseling compared to AI-driven

interventions. This has been so mainly because AI cannot yield substantial emotional connection, which is an essential component of effective counseling. Second, ethical concerns, particularly regarding data security and privacy, were also rampant, with 85% of the students having concerns about sharing sensitive information with AI. All this is corroborated by previous research (Tawfeeq et al., 2023), which asserts that there is a need for stronger ethical guidelines to regulate AI-based counseling.

The qualitative findings also confirmed these fears, with licensed professional counselors mentioning the limitations of AI in providing complete therapeutic treatment. Thematic analysis of the interviews showed three core issues: the lack of AI in mimicking human emotional intelligence, ethical and privacy concerns, and the notion that AI must be a supportive tool and not a replacement for human professionals. Counselors also agreed in their view that while AI chatbots can assist in psychoeducation, basic mental health screenings, and crisis

intervention, they lack the ability to read non-verbal cues, cultural context, and complex psychological conditions. As a counselor put it, *"An AI chatbot may say the right words, but it does not empathize with what the client feels. That's a big deal in therapy."* This aligns with research by Floridi et al. (2021), which highlight the importance of responsible AI development in social services.

AI's Role in Expanding Mental Health Accessibility

Despite these limitations, AI chatbots can be employed to bridge gaps in mental health accessibility, particularly in underprivileged communities where professional counseling services may be scarce. Singer et al. (2023) suggest that AI can play a valuable role in mental health outreach by providing round-the-clock support and guiding individuals toward professional help when needed. However, the study findings indicate that AI cannot function independently in counseling settings. Instead, a hybrid model where AI supports human

professionals rather than replaces them may be the most effective approach. This model would allow for the utilization of AI to assist in administrative tasks, initial assessments, and follow-up with clients and allow human therapists to focus on more complex therapy aspects.

Ethical Risks and Cultural Bias in AI Counseling

A second significant issue emerging from studies is the risk of bias and misdiagnosis in AI-aided interventions. AI chatbots are trained with current datasets, and such datasets have cultural and systemic biases that they might exhibit. Counselors feared that AI would provide generic, one-size-fits-all solutions, which may not be appropriate for clients with diverse backgrounds and unique psychological needs. As one interviewee pointed out, *"AI lacks cultural awareness. Counseling is not just advice but understanding the context, emotions, and experience of the individual."* This suggests the need

for more research into the development of culturally informed AI models capable of learning to negotiate multiple sociocultural contexts.

The result of the research indicates that the future of AI in social work counseling depends on ethical integration and regulation. Stronger ethical standards, transparency in data usage, and constant human oversight are required to ensure that AI enhances and not diminishes expert counseling services. Improved AI models for greater ethical uniformity and emotional intelligence, and training social workers to integrate AI-based tools seamlessly into practice, would be research priority areas in the future.

The Future of AI in Social Work Counseling

Lastly, while AI chatbots can do much to assist in social work counseling, their position should be understood as complementary, not substitutive. AI can provide wider access and immediate intervention, but its limitations in emotional

intelligence, ethical accountability, and cultural sensitivity prevent it from replacing human professionals. The most likely model for the future appears to be a collaborative human-AI one where AI provides preliminary interventions and bureaucratic functions and human counselors provide deeper therapeutic intervention.

Conclusion

The study investigated the impact of AI chatbots on social work counseling, highlighting both the benefits and limitations of their use. The findings indicate that AI chatbots can be effective tools for improving access to mental health care, particularly among vulnerable populations. Their capacity to provide immediate responses, enhance psychoeducation, and aid in basic mental health screening makes them a promising addition to the social work counseling field. Nevertheless, the study also revealed significant limitations, including AI's

inability to mimic human emotional intelligence, concerns regarding data security and privacy, and the potential for biased or inappropriate responses. Both quantitative and qualitative findings emphasize that AI should serve as a supporting tool rather than a replacement for human counselors.

The thematic analysis of interviews with professional counselors highlighted key challenges such as AI's lack of cultural awareness, its inability to interpret non-verbal cues, and ethical concerns surrounding AI-driven counseling. Similarly, the survey of counseling students showed a strong preference for human-led interventions, reflecting skepticism about AI's capacity to handle complex psychological cases. These insights suggest that while AI can enhance certain aspects of counseling, its role should be complementary rather than substitutive.

Future Research Directions

With the rapid advancement of AI technology, further studies are needed to refine AI chatbots for

social work counseling. The following areas should be given top priority:

1. Creating Emotionally Intelligent AI

Future research should focus on enhancing AI's ability to perceive and respond to human emotions. This entails integrating affective computing and machine learning algorithms that can adapt to different client needs.

2. Ethical and Privacy Resolution

Further research is needed to establish ethical guidelines for AI counseling, particularly concerning data protection, client confidentiality, and the avoidance of algorithmic bias.

3. Cultural Adaptability of AI Chatbots

AI algorithms must be trained to recognize and respect diverse cultural contexts. Future studies should focus on developing culturally sensitive AI

systems capable of providing individualized and context-aware counseling services.

4. Hybrid Counseling Models

Research should assess the effectiveness of human-AI collaborative counseling models. Evaluating the impact of AI chatbots when used alongside professional counselors can help optimize their role in social work practice.

5. Longitudinal Impact Studies

Larger, long-term studies are required to examine the psychological and social effects of AI counseling interventions across diverse populations.

In summary, while AI chatbots have the potential to revolutionize social work counseling, their adoption must be approached cautiously to ensure ethical and effective practice. The most viable way forward is through a human-centered strategy, where AI serves

as an assistant rather than a substitute for human counselors.

Abbreviations:

- **AI** – Artificial Intelligence
- **LMMs** – Large Language Models
- **ML** – Machine Learning
- **NLP** – Natural Language Processing
- **SWC** – Social Work Counseling
- **GDPR** – General Data Protection Regulation

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