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Lived Experiences with Chatbots as a Support Tool for Stress and Anxiety Management

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Abstract
Chatbots that use artificial intelligence (AI) have become one of the emerging effective digital mental health interventions in recent years especially in stress and anxiety management in university students. Although their use is on the rise, little is known about how students actually deal with these tools in the context of real-world acquisition in terms of academic and emotional experiences. The analysis seeks to understand the real-life experiences of students who had stress relievers and anxiety reduction with AI-powered chatbots. The data were gathered using a qualitative, phenomenological methodology, as the semi-structured interviews with a sample of 18 undergraduate students who used mental health chatbots during six weeks were conducted. NVivo software was used to carry out thematic analysis which could be used to obtain repetitive themes in terms of emotions, behaviors and thoughts. Participants also stated that they had both positive and ambivalent experiences which included availability, non-judgemental, and anonymity of chatbots as being beneficial. Nevertheless, some of them also raised worries related to emotional richness, A/C experience and data confidentiality. The significant implications include the postulations that chatbots can provide support of low barriers and instant coping measures but that effectiveness is very individualized to user expectations and emotional background. The research can lead to a better interpretation of the affective affordances and constraints of AI-mediated mental health devices, which require more consideration of individuality and ethical design to proceed with chatbot creation.

Introduction
The increasing rate of stress, anxiety and other mental health issues amongst university students has remained a major problem in higher education institutions all over the world. Scholastic stress, economic strains, social adjustment, and loneliness have set the stage of an increasing need of ready access to mental health supportive services. In its part, education is growing progressively reliant on digital interventions specifically chatbots, which makes use of artificial intelligence (AI) to provide scalable and cost-effective support to traditional counseling services (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017); (Inkster et al., 2018). Such AI chatbots as Wysa or Woebot are intended to replicate a human-like dialogue and provide emotional support, cognition behavioral therapy (CBT), and self-care. Early research indicates that they are capable of alleviating anxiety and depression symptoms, improving emotional control, and giving users the feeling of anonymity and immediacy (Vaidyam et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the human-computer interaction (HCI) experience in emotionally sensitive settings

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is not studied in detail.

Although a good part of the current evidence about mental health chatbots is on reducing the symptoms and their clinical outcome, fewer studies address the experiences and perceptions of students regarding their experiences with the tools. The assumption that permeates is that should chatbots prove to be effective in alleviating stress levels, it is axiomatic that they are indeed performing the duty they are supposed to. However, this dismisses important aspects of user experience like emotional involvement, trust and satisfaction that are critical in long-term engagement and support seeking behavior (Gaffney et al., 2019). Besides, the lack of qualitative inquiry regarding subjective experiences of students may contribute to supporting a one-size-fits-all model in designing and implementing technologies related to mental health. This paper will contribute to the emerging debate on digital mental health ethics and design by refuting this assumption.

This paper presents a discussion of the first-to-first-year university students using AI chatbot as a stress and anxiety management tool. It identifies the impact of chatbot-based support on students in the form of its emotional comfort, usability, and psychological effects through the use of in-depth qualitative interviews. This study will provide the intricate and even contradictory user experience information, as well as the knowledge about the potential and perceived limitations of AI-based mental health solutions. With a focus on voices of students, the study leads to more understanding and supportive, receptive and responsive, and context-sensitive digital interventions. The rest of the paper is organized in the following manner: literature review, description of the research methodology, the description of main findings, discussion of findings, and conclusions including practical and theoretical implications.

Literature Review

The implementation of chatbots based on AI in the domain of mental health services has grown at a wide rate, especially in university settings where mental health services are currently in greater demand among students than available materials. The review summarizes the recent studies on (1) the efficacy of chatbots in mental health care, (2) user satisfaction and emotional involvement, (3) ethical and design concerns, and (4) the lack of qualitative, experience-oriented research. It aims to give a full context based on the necessity to conduct a phenomenological inquiry on the lived experiences of students.

Chatbot Stress and Anxiety Effectiveness

The successful application of chatbots as effective interventions to alleviate the symptoms of stress, anxiety and mild depression is supported by a large amount of research, especially with regard to targeting university students with high psychological burdens and minimal support mechanisms in place. Such AI-based chatbots imitate a psychotherapeutic conversation and are usually based on evidence-based treatment models, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and mindfulness-based interventions.

Bright ones are the use of AI chatbot, the Woebot that provides CBT-informed dialogue, and the use of Wysa that offers AI assistance and optional human intervention. The two sites have shown quantifiable results in both clinical and non-clinical communities. Indicatively, a randomized controlled trial of the Woebot discovered that college students that used Woebot experienced a

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marked reduction of symptoms of anxiety and depression symptoms in only 2 weeks (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). On the same note, Wysa users have also complained about better mood control and stress management as well as well-being (Inkster et al., 2018).

Chatbot interventions have one of their greatest strengths in its on-demand availability. In comparison to the traditional therapy services, where they might experience long waiting lines, and the services are few or stigma-driven, the mental health chatbots provide access to these services at all times, haven anonymity and a non-judgmental platform to express themselves. This convenience is especially attractive among those students who have academic, financial, and personal stressors. It is often stated that the high level of accessibleness during the chatbot support enables them to request assistance as soon as the first signs of discomfort appear instead of having to reach the state of crisis.

Considering this, conversations with chatbots are usually goal-oriented and systematic, showing users prompts in journaling or breathing exercises or thinking in a new way. This organised interaction can provide students the ability to regulate their emotions and increase their self-awareness in time. Other chatbots offer mood tracking and behavior monitoring, which give the student an opportunity to recognize patterns and triggers of the emotional states. These advantages are also backed by meta-analyses and reviews, suggesting that chatbot interventions may yield beneficial short-term effects in comparison with the traditional in-person treatment of persons with mild to moderate mental issues (Gaffney et al., 2019). Although they cannot replace clinical care when it comes to a severe mental illness, they are a scalable and economical supplement to the already established campus counseling services, especially during high-demand times, or a shortage of personnel.

Overall, there is solid evidence suggesting the effectiveness of chatbot-like interventions as an initial stress- and anxiety-reducing emotional support tool and, to my mind, used with students. Nonetheless, according to the further parts of the discussion their effectiveness is determined not only by the content of the therapy but also by the perception of the users and their emotional attachment to the system and their trust of it.

Emotional Interaction and User Interaction

Although chatbot based mental health tools have proven to be functionally effective, emotional resonance in terms of how they are being felt during and after use is crucial in long term engagement and perceived value. Chatbot communication is a contrast to clinical settings, which imply human purporting empathy done through tone, body language, and active listening, because communication with the chatbot is presented in the form of pre-written conversations and programmed replies and reasoning. Accordingly, user experience is determined not only by what is said by chatbot, but it is also influenced by how emotionally sensitive and human it is to the user.

Studies suggest that emotional involvement is an imperative predictor of extensive use as well as contentment with mental health chatbots. To illustrate, a user who views the AI as unjudgmental, friendly, and soul-affirming would find it easier to go back to it when in distress (Hoermann et al., 2017). It is particularly applicable in the case of students who are currently under an academic or emotional similar stress or isolation, as they may find perceived anonymity and safety of chatbot interactions superior to a more personal

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counseling, especially when addressing sensitive subject matter.

Nevertheless, most of the users also complain that chatbot conversations may be mechanical, cold, or shallow, particularly when the answers are repetitive or do not react to the emotional intonation of the user (Nadarzynski et al., 2019). All these can be frustrating or de-connecting, and users may start to wonder whether the chatbot really comprehends their experiences or not. To certain individuals, this perceived lack of sensitivity is an obstacle to trust that diminishes the chances of users advancing chatbot recommendation or interacting with it over time.

Computational empathy The idea of computers which can simulate empathetic behavior has attracted interest because chatbot designers seek to make their designs more human-like. The methods such as natural language processing (NLP), sentiment analysis, and emotion tagging have enhanced the flow and responsiveness of conversations. Nevertheless, the sophisticated systems are unable to reproduce the fine empathy of a human therapist. As a result, the users can find themselves torn between convenience and connectivity: they find the immediate, stigma-free support pleasing, and might still be in need of a more profound emotional insight.

Expectation management is another area that influences the way emotions get involved. Students can be frustrated when they meet chatbots with high expectation of therapeutic richness or personalized attention to them just as they would with a human counselor, especially when the chatbot is portrayed as a complete replacement of the human counselor. In turn, a framing of user satisfaction as a first step or a coping mechanism has a tendency to increase user satisfaction. Researchers indicate that making achievable expectations regarding the what the chatbot can and cannot accomplish helps to enhance emotional involvement and lower the dropout rates (Miner et al., 2016).

Lastly design-related elements of user experience include interface tone, visual design, and conversational pacing. As an illustration, avatars can be friendly, language can be soft and responsive wording can be emotive and all the more comfortable and approachable. On the other hand, the chatbot can also seem detached and impolite because of the use of clinical language, intentional jumps, or the inability to comprehend emotional signals. These aspects are particularly critical in the context of mental health as the level of emotional vulnerabilities is great, and the user is usually in need of a connection and not only information.

In brief, although chatbot applications indeed have unequivocal logistical and therapeutic potential, their future effectiveness would be determined by the extent to which this technology would enable the establishment of trust, comfort, and emotional validation. In future, the focus of development should be on the user centered design practices which will incorporate the emotional usability tests, empathy modelling and various student input so as to make such tools work and feel friendly.

Ethics, Privacy and Design

With the increasing adoption of AI-driven chatbots in mental health practice, there are serious ethical and design implementations that directly affect user trust, safety and viability. As much as these tools are being championed as very convenient and effective, they can unintentionally harm the lives of users when implemented without keen consideration of privacy, transparency, and inclusivity.

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One of the main ethical issues will be that of data privacy and informed consent. Chatbots gather very personal psychological information, such as mood patterns, reaction to behaviors, and personal revelations. A lot of students do not know how this data is stored, processed, or shared, particularly in the case of the third-party service or cloud infrastructure. It is not that the users will be willing to use the chatbot therapeutically since, without effective policies in data governance, they will be hesitant to wholly engage in chatbots (Binns et al., 2018). Particularly, students have mentioned being reluctant to share personal emotions or troubling mind because they are afraid that their information can be abused or revealed to their school, parents, or insurance companies. The slightest thought of feeling spied on may not be real, however, the suspicion may kill customer loyalty.

Also, due to the opaque character of chatbot algorithms, ethical ambiguity can be added. Majority of the mental health chatbots are built on either rule-based or machine learning models, but users are seldom informed of how responses are given and ranked. It creates a risk of not being able to measure the accuracy of advice or notice the possibility of bias in communications because of the lack of algorithmic transparency. As an example, an AI might always fail to detect some cultural manifestations of suffering or will fail to accept non-Western emotional signals. The chatbot answers can feel contrary or dismissive in these situations and someone unwittingly sees their own wrongedness or exclusion strength reinforced.

Another design problem that is linked to it is that many chatbots cannot recognize or react to crisis situations. Although the majority of them are coded to provide helpline referrals when users enter harm or suicidal thoughts, research indicates that these additional capabilities are not always enabled well and in the right context. Other chatbots might fail to recognize nonverbal signals or use ambiguous language and some may go over the top of common expressions. In both situations, the misalignment may be devastating when there is no delivery of required intervention or may scare away the user when there is a disorienting, premeditated response. This brings out the moral obligation of striking a balance between automation and human-in-the-loop assistance, particularly among vulnerable customers.

Inclusive and accessible design of chatbots must also be taken into account in terms of ethics. Numerous existing tools are biased in training data, patterns in language or content development, and relate to sidelining other users with disabilities, different/neurodiverse lingo-cultural backgrounds, and/or disability. As an illustration, a chatbot that is based extensively on the use of written language might be inaccessible to students with learning disabilities, and those that are not designed to respond to cultural idioms or emotional sentiments might be culturally insensitive. Inclusive design involves collaboration with other student groups and the development practices based on trauma-informed principles that expect emotional instigations and adjust the tone, respectively.

And lastly, it is the expanded question of philosophical responsibility of whether AI should be involved in emotional care. Although chatbots might benefit students by providing them with a sense that they will not be judged, other students consider the concept of computerizing mental health services to be reductive in nature. The lack of empathy, moral thought and human interaction form some concerns regarding when emotional labor is delegated to machines. This rivet highlights the importance of the clear delimites between

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what chatbots are capable of providing including grounding exercises or mood monitors and what must be left to human counselors.

To conclude, chatbots are reality-based steps to democratize the support of mental health, but the development and implementation of chatbots should be based on a solid ethical model. These are solid data safe-guards, open-source approaches, crisis management safeguards, and people-oriented development that appreciate reluctance to emotion and cultural sensitivity. These tools can only deliver what they promise without translating to the loss of student safety and dignity.

The Qualitative Perspectives are Necessary

Even though there is increasingly growing evidence on the functional application of AI chatbots in the management of stress and anxiety in students, the current research environment is dominated by quantitative study designs to a great extent. Research tends to involve reduction of symptoms, usage measures or frequency of use which are primary indicators of general effectiveness. Nonetheless, these indicators provide a biased perspective on how chatbots are perceived and lived by users in the context of their real world, which is emotionally colored.

Quantitative research usually is based on a standardized survey, a self-report scale (e.g., GAD-7, PHQ-9), or analytics data that are able to record the outcomes such as reduced levels of anxiety or greater rates of session attendance. However, such data sources are valuable, but their depth is not sufficient to reveal emotional, cognitive and inter-personal understanding of the chatbot interactions by students. As an example, a student can experience a decreased stress level with statistical significance, and at the same time feel alienated, rebuffed or even angered with how the chatbot communicates. These emotional parallels become unreported in the survey results of study.

Qualitative methods of research, including interviews, focus groups, and diary research, have also been increasingly demanded by scholars focusing on user voice and making meaning (Gaffney et al., 2019); (Inkster et al., 2018). These methods can enable the researcher to understand how the students themselves talk about their relations with AI, whether they prefer to interact with AI or not, and what sort of support is missing or helpful. The dynamics are crucial in the design of more emotionally sensitive and context-aware chatbot experiences.

Qualitative research can particularly help reveal unintended effects or emotionally blind areas when designing chatbots. Indicatively, due to specific forms of feedback, users can feel shame, anthropomorphise the bot and believe it to have human characteristics, or neglect to seek further assistance, as the chatbot has lead them to think it could do so. Such nuances do not always show up in quantitative data, so they help to make chatbots sound more natural and responsive and ensure ethical considerations.

Besides, qualitative data are able to show variations among groups of users which become flat in statistical data. Students with marginalized backgrounds might have varied expectations, ways of linguistically expressing them as well as coping experiences that would have an effect on the experience of chatbot assistance. Unless these viewpoints are actively sought and given a narrative exploration, they will be sidelined in the mass tool convention that will create a single solution that will not resonate with different groups of students.

One last benefit of qualitative research is that it allows highlighting meaning-

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making and identity-related themes including how students define vulnerability, autonomy, or trust in AI-mediated environments. These are the primary themes that are developing the relationship between human beings and intelligent technologies with focus on emotional sensitive areas such as mental health.

In a word, although quantitative research is the key to determining overall efficacy, qualitative studies would offer the emotional dimension, the cultural facet, and personal point of view that will result in creating chatbots not only efficient, but also truly helpful. The phenomenological methodology concerned with lived experience offers a major gap in recent studies by elucidating how students truly feel, think, and react to the use of chatbots as mental health supports in their daily studies.

Accurate literature confirms that chatbots that are AI-driven have a potential and can be scaled to provide the accessible mental health support. Yet, in order to create systems which are really helpful, emotionally intelligent and people centred, it is essential to move beyond metrics and heed the user experiences first hand. This paper fills a crucial research gap by examining the emotional responses and perception and assessment of chatbot experiences by the students in the management process of stress and anxiety.

Methodology

The research problem of the proposed study was to examine how educational users feel and comprehend their experiences with AI-driven mental health chatbots in managing stress and anxiety. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used given the emphasis on the individual meaning-making, perception, and emotion. This approach was adopted because it is one of the ways to define the experiences of people focusing on their subjective interpretations of the use of chatbots in emotionally vulnerable situations. This study was based on primary data and made use of descriptive, exploratory, research design, was suitable in exploring relatively unexplored or complicated phenomena, which cannot be aimed at quantifying meaningfully.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 undergraduate students of a medium-sized city university were used to collect data provided that students were at least three weeks away to use a mental health chatbot (e.g., Woebot, Wysa, or Youper) before the interview. The use of a purposive sampling strategy was made so that the participants had personal experience of using chatbot-based mental health tools. Recruitment of the students was done via campus announcements, mental health forums, and academic newsletters. All the interviews took about 45-60 minutes and were carried out through the video conferencing in order to make it flexible and private. The themes that were discussed with the help of interview guide included emotional comfort, perceived usefulness, interaction style, and ethical concerns. The interviews were tape recorded (with permission) and transcribed word-to-word to analyse. The identities of the participants were coded to encourage confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data that were transcribed and, based on the six phases highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis was performed. The data was organized and coded with the help of NCivo software. First codes were formed based on the data inductively and subsequently divided into umbrella themes, i.e. emotional safety, trust and skepticism, empathy gap, and help-seeking behavior. The themes were developed by conducting a personal review, cross-coding between two researchers and member checking to find out credibility by getting the selected participants to validate them. The retrieved

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data did not undergo any statistical tests because the purpose was to create a qualitative understanding but not generalizable conclusion. Nevertheless, the repetition of the patterns and saturation of the themes were observed to increase the rigor and reliability of the results.

The chosen methodological framework can be attributed to the fact that it allows accessing profound and intimate information concerning the relationship between humans and chatbots a field in which the numerical information alone would be unsuccessful. The semi-structured interviews gave the participants the opportunity to contemplate seriously on their emotional processes, and the thematic discussion allowed the interpretation of the information in a subtle manner. Advantages of this method are that it is rich in contextual data and is able to identify emergent issues that would not be identified by predefined survey tools. Nevertheless, the constraints are that there is a certain risk of self-selection bias since the participants who will agree to speak about their experiences with the use of a mental health chatbot might also not be the same as those who were disengaged or that had bad experiences. The use of self-report information also creates recall bias or social desirability bias. To overcome these constraints, attention was paid to establish a non-judgmental interview context, and the researchers found it through keeping a reflexive journal process to take into consideration possible researcher influence. Although the results are not statistically representable, they make very useful theoretical and design inferences in the future research and development of digital mental health assurances.

Results

The section contains the results of thematic analysis of 18 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students using AI-based mental health chatbots. There were four overarching themes, namely: 1) Emotional Accessibility and Purity., 2) Empathy and Relational Detachment., 3) Trust and Skepticism, and 4) Conditional Use and Preference of Human Support. All the themes demonstrate common patterns in the narratives of participants and are also represented by characteristic insights.

Emotional Safety and Accessibility

The majority of participants referred to the use of chatbots as a source of their emotional safety, particularly when they needed a human assistance that they found inaccessible, unavailable, or frightening.

Students also liked the 24/7 access, which gave them an opportunity to receive assistance at any time when they were under stress (during late night hours or at the exam time). Since chatbots avoid the use of their names and the judgmental aspect does not imply stigma, some students felt freer to open up.

According to one of the participants: "It is much nicer when you realize that no one is going to judge you... you can be as honest as you wish. This theme discusses chatbots as low barriers into emotional self-regulation among students who are too afraid to turn to the traditional counseling.

Empathy and Relational Disconnect

Although there was an overall appreciation of the tool structure, students complained significantly of the inability of chatbot conversations to have depth of emotion or human touch.

Some of them claim that the chatbot answers were scripted, tedious, or too

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perfect to be believed, and, as a result, they wondered about the genuineness of the service.

Other interviewees were willing to be warmed up or customized in a way that chatbot was unable to provide: "It was fine at first until I realized I was talking to a wall even though it had all the right words. Feelings were mostly overlooked particularly in cases where learners wanted to portray intricate, or unclear feelings.

This lack of connection sometimes caused disengagement with the online content and students able to experience a more active or emotional connection initially.

Trust and Skepticism

Confidence was also a contingent and dynamic value in the use of chatbots. When the chatbot effectively explained its limits (e.g. I am not a real therapist), and was centered on particular tasks such as CBT journaling or mindfulness, students would more readily trust the chatbot. Nonetheless, the issue of data privacy and transparency in the way the AI had handled responses raised concerns enough to inhibit the desire to go into more in-depth issues. Other participants too questioned the capability of the tool to know them, and that they were engaged on a superficial level.

According to one of the students: It helped me when I was slightly nervous. However, on anything serious, I was not certain whether it could handle it or it was storing my data somewhere.

Preference and Conditional use in support of human beings.

The use of chatbots by several students seemed to be situational, and resourceful and not in the place of human interaction.

The most frequent use of chatbots was on the eve of exams or post-argumentation, as well as temporary stress.

Participants often added that chatbots were still better than nothing but they would still choose to have human counselors where they were available: Chatbots are a Band-Aid. when you cannot go to physician, but not same. The chatbot served as a precursor to professional therapy to a number of participants, who presented it as the factor that gave them the confidence to ultimately seek professional help.

This motif supports the concept of the importance of the expectation management: users appreciated the chatbot.

Discussion

This paper examined the experience and perception of AI-driven chatbots among university students during their stress and anxiety management experience. Thematic analysis displayed four huge findings: students found the emotional safety and emotional accessibility of chatbots valuable; most of them felt disconnected through relational, a lack of empathy; there was a conditional appreciation of the usefulness of chatbots based on transparency and privacy; and most students mentioned that the use of chatbots was usually in addition to human engagement.

The findings reflect that students consider chatbots most of all as the service of entry-level support that is useful in obtaining prompt emotional relief but not adequate in satisfying deeper psychological needs. The anonymity and the 24/7 access were said to empower the participants, especially when they are in stressful academic situations. This walks the claims of earlier studies that

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intimates that digital tools reduce the barrier to help-seeking behavior among students who would otherwise not seek counseling (Vaidyam et al., 2019). But there was the friction in the absence of emotional overtones and perceived superficiality of chatbot answers. Despite the fact that bots can recreate a therapeutic conversation, in many instances, they were incapable of misilesurion. This verifies the already existing worries on the drawbacks of compassionate empathy through computational means in emotionally sensitive settings (Hoermann et al., 2017). A recurrent problem was also trust. The readiness of students to open up was largely dependent on their knowledge of data storage and the operation of the algorithm of the chatbot. This was a reflection of the previous ethical arguments regarding the transparency gap of AI tools that have the potential to adversely impact the user confidence and emotional safety (Binns et al., 2018).

These results build on the existing quantitative researches with a qualitative layer to the experience of studying as a student when using chatbots. Although research undertaken by Fitzpatrick et al. (2017) and Inkster et al. (2018) demonstrates that the use of chatbots leads to a reduction in symptoms, our study demonstrates that establishing emotional connection and trust is also a prerequisite to progress in further engagement and positive results. The paper also supports the appeal of Gaffney et al. (2019) to research that is not confined to the effectiveness of clinical use, instead focusing on user -centered knowledge as the key to the ethical design.

There are a few limitations which should be mentioned. To begin with, the sample involved the voluntary participation of students in the mental health research and they might have been more reflective or emotionally expressive compared to the general population. Second, not all users used the same platform chatbots, and this can introduce a difference in user experiences. Finally, the research was on short-term use; there were no assessments of the engagement patterns and results over long-term use.

The results have practical consequences to the developers and the institutions. Such aspects as empathy-based design, language that is culturally sensitive, as well as increased transparency in algorithms, should be of primary concern among developers. The institutions implementing the chatbot systems need to provide clear data privacy messages and position the usage of the chatbots as an auxiliary, but not a substitute to professional mental health services. This paper also emphasized that technological development related to mental health should focus on co-designing the technologies used by the students in such a way that they meet the expectations and attachments of the students. Although the respondents noted that they were not always supported emotionally, they could have placed too high expectations on the imitation of human-like sympathy. This discontent can be not due to failure of the chatbot, but rather framing i.e. selling the tool as more emotionally receptive than it is plausible to be. Explaining its role in the initial phases can help to decrease dissatisfaction.

The repositioning of the research objective in order to the lived experience of students with AI chatbots the results indicate that students view these technologies as emotionally available but relationally constrained. In combination with other mental health systems, chatbots can have an ethical and useful, albeit limited, purpose of assisting in stress and anxiety management.

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Conclusion

This paper began with an aim of comprehending the experience and perception of the university students about the use of AI-driven chatbots to cope with stress and anxiety. It was shown that although the students discovered these digital tools convenient, personal, and supportive when emotional strain occurred, they also had restrictions on emotional intensity, confidence, and emotional attachment. The results indicate that chatbots may prove a useful addition to mental health care particularly in a situation where more conventional resources are available but not viewed as complete replacements of human compassion and care.

The study contributes to the growing amount of evidence which confirms that mental health chatbots may alleviate emotional distress, yet provides a qualitative dimension of presenting how users experience and relate to these systems in real life. These lessons have valuable implications on design and deployment. The developers do not need to focus on functionality only but they need to design tools, which touch the hearts and institutions need to create feasible expectations and express them clearly over privacy and restrictions.

Returning to the initial issue, of the increased stress and how mental health struggles in the sphere of higher education that this study reinforces the prospective capabilities of AI to increase access to early intervention should the tools be used with both ethical and emotive awareness. Listening to the life stories of students, we will be able to comprehend more about the role AI takes in the emotional world of learning and the ways in which it can be enhanced.

So what? This study highlights that user emotion, trust, as well as agency, has to be placed at the core of designing digital mental health tools. The importance of investigating the long-term effects, the influence of identity and culture on the use of chatbots, and how co-design together with students can contribute to more efficient and human-centered support systems should be introduced in future research.

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