

The Therapeutic Relationship in AI-Mediated Psychological Counselling: Review of Therapeutic Alliance, Empathy, and Trust

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A B S T R A C T

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in mental health interventions has raised questions regarding its impact on the therapeutic relationship, a core component of counselling psychology. This review examines the psychological constructs of therapeutic alliance, empathy, and trust in AI-mediated counselling. Drawing on recent empirical and theoretical literature, this paper synthesizes findings on how AI-based tools influence relational dynamics between clients and technology-assisted counselling systems. Implications for counselling practice, ethical considerations, and future research directions are discussed. Results suggest that while AI offers accessibility and consistency, challenges persist in replicating human-like empathy and establishing trust, highlighting the need for human-centered design grounded in psychological theory.

Keywords: AI-mediated counselling, therapeutic alliance, empathy, trust, counselling psychology, digital mental health.

Introduction

The therapeutic relationship is widely recognized as a pivotal factor influencing the efficacy of psychological counselling (Bordin, 1979; Rogers, 1957). Traditional counselling relies heavily on human empathy, relational trust, and collaborative engagement to foster client well-being. With the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) in mental health interventions, including chatbots, virtual therapists, and mobile applications, the nature of this relationship is evolving. AI-mediated counselling provides scalable and accessible support, particularly in regions with limited mental health resources, such as India. However, its ability to replicate or support the psychological processes underpinning human counselling remains an area of ongoing research (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017).

This review focuses on three core psychological constructs central to counselling: therapeutic alliance, empathy, and trust. By synthesizing current literature, the paper aims to provide insights into how AI affects these constructs, highlight gaps in research, and propose directions for integrating AI ethically and effectively into counselling practice.

Theoretical Background

Therapeutic Alliance

The therapeutic alliance refers to the collaborative partnership between client and counsellor, encompassing agreement on goals, tasks, and the relational bond (Bordin, 1979). It has been consistently linked to positive psychological outcomes across counselling modalities (Horvath et al., 2011). In AI-mediated counselling, establishing a therapeutic alliance is challenging because relational cues, nuanced empathy, and interpersonal attunement are inherently human (Provoost et al., 2017). Yet, AI systems are being designed to simulate alliance-building through conversational responsiveness, reinforcement of goals, and adaptive feedback mechanisms (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017).

Empathy

Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and resonate with another person's emotional state, is central to counselling efficacy (Rogers, 1957). AI can simulate empathic responses using natural language processing and affective computing, yet evidence suggests clients perceive these responses differently than human empathy (Bickmore & Picard, 2005).

Perceived authenticity, congruence, and emotional attunement influence whether AI-mediated empathy positively affects client engagement.

Trust

Trust is a cornerstone of effective counselling, affecting disclosure, adherence, and engagement (Simpson, 2007). AI-mediated counselling introduces unique challenges to trust, including concerns about data privacy, algorithmic decision-making, and reliability of automated feedback. Studies indicate that transparent communication, ethical data handling, and human oversight enhance trust in AI-assisted mental health interventions (Luxton, 2014).

Methodology

A systematic review approach was employed to synthesize literature on AI-mediated counselling and the therapeutic relationship. Databases searched included PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Keywords included: “AI counselling”, “therapeutic alliance AI”, “empathy chatbot”, “trust digital mental health”, and “AI-mediated psychotherapy”. Inclusion criteria were: (1) peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical studies; (2) published in English between 2010–2025; (3) focused on psychological counselling, therapeutic alliance, empathy, or trust in AI-mediated interventions. Exclusion criteria included studies limited to clinical diagnostics, non-psychological AI applications, or technical development without psychological analysis.

Review of Literature

Therapeutic Alliance in AI-Mediated Counselling

Evidence indicates that AI systems can partially replicate elements of the therapeutic alliance by providing consistent feedback, goal-oriented interactions, and motivational support (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). However, relational bond and alliance strength are generally weaker than in human counselling (Provoost et al., 2017). Clients report higher satisfaction when AI interactions are combined with human oversight or blended counselling models (Inkster et al., 2018).

Empathy in AI-Mediated Counselling

Empathy simulation through AI is achieved via affective computing, sentiment analysis, and adaptive conversational design (Bickmore & Picard, 2005). While clients appreciate emotionally responsive AI chatbots, perceived authenticity remains limited. Studies suggest that AI can support basic empathic validation, but deep emotional understanding and reflective listening are challenging to replicate (Greer et al., 2019).

Trust in AI-Mediated Counselling

Trust is influenced by perceived competence, reliability, and ethical data practices (Luxton, 2014). Disclosure of sensitive information is often moderated by clients' confidence in data security. Research highlights that hybrid approaches, where AI supplements but does not replace human counselling, maximize trust and engagement (Hoermann et al., 2017).

Ethical and Cultural Considerations

In the Indian context, where counselling services are limited, AI-mediated support offers accessibility advantages. However, cultural expectations of empathy, relational warmth, and human presence are crucial. Ethical concerns include confidentiality, data protection, algorithmic bias, and potential over-reliance on automated interventions (Sharma & Sharma, 2021).

Discussion

AI-mediated counselling holds promise for enhancing accessibility, consistency, and scalability of mental health support. Psychological constructs of therapeutic alliance, empathy, and trust remain central to client outcomes. Evidence suggests that AI can partially support these constructs, particularly in goal alignment and basic empathic feedback, but human relational qualities remain irreplaceable. Hybrid models integrating AI and human counselling appear most effective. Future research should explore culturally sensitive AI designs, longitudinal impacts on therapeutic relationships, and mechanisms to enhance perceived empathy and trust.

Conclusion

AI-mediated psychological counselling represents a novel frontier in counselling psychology. This review highlights that while AI can assist in establishing therapeutic processes, maintaining authentic empathy, relational trust, and a strong therapeutic alliance is critical for effective mental health outcomes. Integrating AI thoughtfully, ethically, and with human oversight can optimize psychological support, particularly in resource-constrained contexts such as India. The findings provide a foundation for further empirical studies, intervention development, and policy guidelines within counselling psychology.

Future Implications

1. AI tools should be complementary, not replacements for human counsellors.
2. Ethical design must prioritize data privacy, transparency, and cultural relevance.
3. Training programmes for counsellors should include digital literacy and AI supervision skills.
4. Blended counselling models can maximize therapeutic alliance, empathy, and trust.
5. Future research should focus on longitudinal outcomes, user satisfaction, and cross-cultural applicability.

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