The Effect of AI Therapy on Perceptions Related to Therapy Usage

Annie Alexander, Skylar Branson, and Dr. Aubrie Adams
Communication Studies Department

Keywords: Online therapy, AI therapy, disclosure, trust, emotional support, media richness theory

Theoretical Lens

This experiment tested whether identifying an online therapy service as AI-based or human-based changed how people evaluate the service.

Theoretical Lens: Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986)

- **Communication effectiveness depends on selecting the richness of a communication medium that best corresponds to the message being conveyed.**

Research Questions

RQ1: Does provider type affect willingness to self-disclose?

RQ2: Does provider type affect intention to use the services?

RQ3: Does provider type affect perceived emotional support?

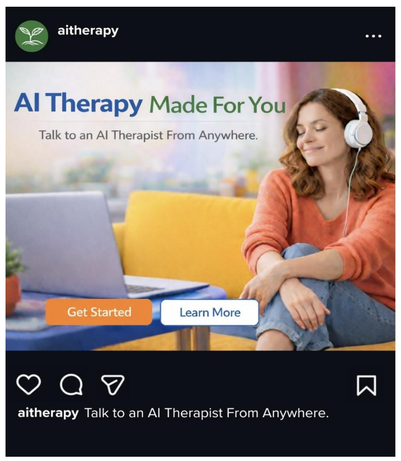
Study Design

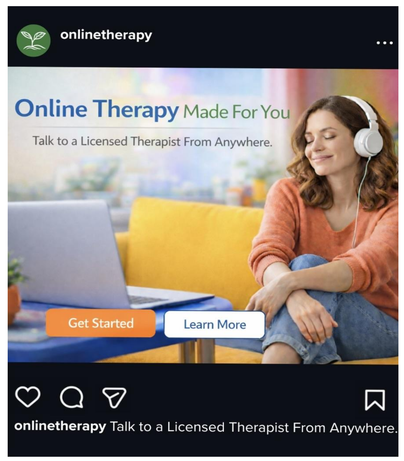
- **Followed a posttest experimental design**
- **1-7 Likert Scale (1-7 Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)**
- **Recruited convenience and volunteer participants (online questionnaire)**
- **Participants:**
- **N = 62**
- **Gender: 74.2% Female 25.8% Male**
- **Age: 29.65 years old**

Hypotheses

Participants who view an advertisement for a human-based online mental health service will report a greater willingness to self-disclose, a higher intention to use the service and higher perception of emotional support, than participants who view an advertisement for an AI-based online mental health service.

Stimulus





Statistical Findings

All three hypotheses were supported:

Willingness to self-disclose p=.011

- **Human ad: M=3.73 SD=1.52**
- **AI ad: M=2.83 SD=1.45**

Intention to use service: p=.003

- **Human ad: M=3.31 SD=1.57**
- **AI ad: M=2.28 SD=1.26**

Perception of emotional support: p=.002

- **Human ad: M=4.03 SD=1.25**
- **AI ad: M=2.97 SD=1.49**

Key Findings

Labeling a therapy service advertisement as AI-based reduced perceptions of trust, openness, and emotional capability.

Discussion

- **People respond differently to AI therapists vs. human therapists.**
- **Participants who saw an ad for human-based online therapy reported higher: willingness to disclose, intention to use the service & perceived emotional support.**
- **Overall, participants consistently preferred human therapists over AI therapists.**

Implications

- **AI therapy platforms may face skepticism about trust and emotional support.**
- **Marketing should clearly communicate privacy practices, safeguards and ethical standards.**
- **AI might work best as support alongside human care rather than as a replacement.**

Limitations

- **Current public concern about AI and social desirability may have increased preference for human based therapy.**
- **Participants responded to an advertisement, so their answers may not reflect actual long term therapy behavior.**

Future Research

Future research studies could examine impressions over time, compare people with different levels of AI familiarity, and explore whether social anxiety or comfort with face-to-face interaction changes preferences.

Conclusion

AI may expand access to mental health support, but people in this study still viewed human providers as more trustworthy and emotionally capable.