
Ethical and Psychological Implications of Artificial Intelligence in Mental Health Counselling Practices in Tertiary Institutions in Bayelsa State

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the ethical and psychological implications of using artificial intelligence (AI) in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State. Guided by a descriptive survey research design, the study sought to examine the ethical concerns counsellors associate with AI use. The population of the study comprised all professional guidance counsellors working in public tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State, including federal and state universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. To ensure balanced representation across the different types of institutions, the study adopted a census approach, using 50 accessible and willing professional counsellors within the identified institutions were in the study. Data were collected through a structured instrument titled “*Ethical and Psychological Implications of Artificial Intelligence in Counselling Questionnaire (EPIAICQ)*” which were validated by experts and yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.87 using the Cronbach Alpha formula. Data analysis was conducted using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed heightened concerns over data privacy, algorithmic bias, informed consent, and emotional disconnection, particularly in environments with limited digital literacy and infrastructural support. The study recommends that tertiary institutions should develop and enforce comprehensive ethical guidelines that govern the use of artificial intelligence in mental health counselling to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and professional accountability.

1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into mental health counselling is reshaping the landscape of therapeutic support in educational settings, particularly within tertiary institutions. AI technologies such as machine learning algorithms, emotion recognition systems, and conversational agents (chatbots) are increasingly being utilized to assist counsellors in diagnosing psychological issues, managing caseloads, and enhancing service delivery efficiency (Luxton, 2014; Miner et al., 2016). These innovations have introduced new possibilities for real-time mental health support, particularly in contexts with a shortage of professional counsellors or where students may face stigma in seeking face-to-face counselling. As such, the psychological and operational appeal of AI-driven interventions is rapidly gaining traction across higher education institutions (Topol, 2019).

Despite these potentials, the adoption of AI in mental health counselling raises complex ethical and psychological concerns. Ethical issues such as data privacy, informed consent, algorithmic bias, and the depersonalization of

therapeutic relationships remain central to discussions on the responsible use of AI in mental health contexts (Jobin, Ienca, & Vayena, 2019). Counsellors and scholars alike express concerns about the implications of delegating sensitive mental health functions to non-human agents that may lack the empathy, nuance, and cultural sensitivity required for effective therapeutic engagement (Brennen et al., 2020). Additionally, from a psychological perspective, the reliance on AI tools may influence how clients perceive counselling—potentially undermining trust, reducing human connection, or creating emotional distance (Shatte, Hutchinson, & Teague, 2019).

In Nigeria, and particularly in Bayelsa State, where mental health infrastructure remains underdeveloped and counselling units in tertiary institutions are often under-resourced, the promise of AI is both enticing and problematic. While AI tools could potentially fill service gaps and improve outreach, the absence of clear ethical guidelines, insufficient digital literacy among practitioners, and students' psychological readiness to engage with AI-driven counselling systems present formidable challenges (Etebu & Fyनेface, 2021; Agbo et al., 2022). Furthermore, societal perceptions of mental health and counselling in the region may shape acceptance and utilization of such technologies in complex ways.

Given this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the ethical and psychological implications of artificial intelligence in mental health counselling practices within tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

1. Examine the perceived ethical implications of using artificial intelligence in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State.
2. Investigate the psychological concerns associated with the use of Artificial Intelligence in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State.

2. Empirical Reviews

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into mental health counselling has raised significant ethical concerns across diverse academic contexts. Jobin, Ienca, and Vayena (2019) conducted a global landscape review and identified core ethical issues such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, informed consent, and transparency, all of which pose challenges to the safe deployment of AI in sensitive areas like mental health. Similarly, Bærøe and Miyata-Sturm (2022) emphasized the moral complexities of delegating aspects of emotional care to non-human agents, noting the potential erosion of trust in therapeutic relationships when human discretion is replaced by machine logic. Hoermann et al. (2017) argued that while AI systems can enhance access and speed in counselling services, they risk oversimplifying nuanced ethical judgments inherent in mental health interventions. In the African context, Etebu and Fyनेface (2021) observed that ethical safeguards for AI use in education and counselling are underdeveloped, particularly in Nigerian institutions, where digital policies often lag behind technological adoption. Studies further warn that without clear ethical frameworks, the adoption of AI in counselling may perpetuate inequalities, infringe on client confidentiality, and weaken professional accountability (Cummings & Zagaja, 2020). Given these documented concerns, it becomes critical to assess how counsellors in Bayelsa State perceive these ethical issues within their local institutional and cultural context. Thus, the research question is generated: What are the perceived ethical implications of using artificial intelligence in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State?

The psychological impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on counselling processes has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly regarding how clients and practitioners emotionally respond to AI-mediated therapeutic interactions. Shatte, Hutchinson, and Teague (2019) observed that while AI tools offer accessibility and convenience, they may also induce feelings of detachment and mistrust in users, particularly in sensitive mental health contexts where human empathy plays a central role. Studies by Miner et al. (2016) and Fulmer et al. (2018) have shown that clients often express discomfort and skepticism about disclosing personal issues to AI-driven systems, raising concerns about emotional safety and perceived authenticity. Similarly, Zamani et al. (2022) found that university students using AI chatbots for psychological support reported mixed feelings—some appreciated the anonymity and non-judgmental responses, while others felt emotionally disconnected and questioned the system's ability to understand complex human emotions. In a developing country context, Agbo et al. (2022) noted that students' psychological readiness for AI-mediated counselling is influenced by factors such as cultural beliefs, digital literacy, and prior experiences with technology, suggesting that psychological concerns may vary significantly across regions. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how psychological factors shape the acceptance and

effectiveness of AI in counselling settings. Thus, the research question is generated: What psychological concerns are associated with the use of AI in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State?

3. Research Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. Charles-Owaba (2019) described descriptive survey design as a systematic method of collecting and analyzing data from a representative portion of a population in order to understand prevailing conditions, opinions, or phenomena. This design is deemed appropriate for the study as it enables the researcher to gather detailed information on the ethical and psychological implications of artificial intelligence (AI) in mental health counselling practices from professionals directly involved in counselling activities within tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State.

The population of the study comprised all professional guidance counsellors working in public tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State, including federal and state universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Institutional records from counselling units indicated a total of 80 guidance counsellors across these institutions.

To ensure balanced representation across the different types of institutions, the study adopted a census approach, whereby all accessible and willing professional counsellors within the identified institutions were included in the study. This approach was considered appropriate given the manageable size of the target population and the need for comprehensive data. The categorization was based on institutional types—federal university, state university, polytechnic, and college of education. A total of 50 counsellors participated in the study, representing the entire accessible population of counsellors across public tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State. The institutional breakdown was as follows:

- 10 counsellors from Federal University Otuoke
- 20 counsellors from Niger Delta University (State-owned)
- 5 counsellors from Federal Polytechnic Ekowe
- 15 counsellors from Isaac Jasper College of Education, Sagbama

This census method ensured full coverage of available respondents across the institutional spectrum, thereby enhancing the validity and generalizability of the findings within the context of Bayelsa State. The instrument for data collection was a researcher-developed structured online questionnaire titled “*Ethical and Psychological Implications of Artificial Intelligence in Counselling Questionnaire (EPIAICQ)*.” The questionnaire was hosted on a secure online survey platform (Google Forms) and designed using a four-point Likert scale. It was divided into two major sections:

- Section I captured demographic data including age, gender, institutional affiliation, and years of counselling experience.
- Section II was subdivided into two parts:
 - *Part A* addressed perceived ethical implications of AI use in counselling in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions.
 - *Part B* explored psychological concerns associated with the use of AI in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions.

To ensure content and construct validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in the fields of Guidance and Counselling, Educational Psychology, and Measurement and Evaluation. Their feedback informed necessary revisions to enhance item clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives.

A pilot study was conducted using 10 guidance counsellors from tertiary institutions in neighbouring Delta State, who were not part of the main study. The data from the pilot were analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha method,

yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.87, which was considered satisfactory and indicative of strong internal consistency.

The online questionnaire was distributed via official institutional email addresses and professional counselling networks, accompanied by an introductory message explaining the purpose of the study, assuring confidentiality, and seeking informed consent. This approach allowed respondents to complete the questionnaire at their convenience, and it facilitated a high response rate with minimal disruptions to participants’ schedules.

Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. A benchmark mean score of 2.50 and above was interpreted as “Agree,” while scores below 2.50 were interpreted as “Disagree.”

4. Results

Research Question 1

What are the perceived ethical implications of using artificial intelligence in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation on the perceived ethical implications of using artificial intelligence in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State

S/N	Items Statements	\bar{x}	Sd	Remarks
1.	The use of AI in mental health counselling raises serious concerns about the confidentiality of client information.	3.02	1.31	A
2.	AI systems used in counselling may lack the capacity to ensure informed consent from clients.	3.01	1.17	A
3.	Relying on AI for mental health counselling may reduce counsellors' accountability for ethical decisions.	2.83	.95	A
4.	The absence of clear ethical guidelines for AI use in counselling poses risks to professional practice.	2.73	.99	A
5.	AI applications in counselling could lead to unintended misuse of sensitive psychological data.	2.21	1.23	D
6.	AI-driven tools in counselling might unintentionally reinforce bias or discrimination in therapeutic responses.	2.32	1.31	D
7.	Ethical training on AI use is essential for maintaining professional standards in mental health counselling.	2.81	1.17	A
8.	Clients may not fully understand the ethical risks involved when interacting with AI counselling platforms.	2.83	.95	A
9.	Overreliance on AI could compromise the human-centered nature of ethical counselling practice.	2.63	.99	A
10.	There is a need for institutional policies that regulate the ethical use of AI in counselling services.	2.61	1.23	A
	Grand Mean	2.72	1.13	A

Source: Survey Data, (2025) *D=Disagree, A=Agree

Table 1 above presents the mean and standard deviation of responses on the perceived ethical implications of using artificial intelligence in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State. Most of the items recorded mean values above the benchmark of 2.50, indicating that respondents generally agreed with the statements presented. Specifically, they agreed that the use of AI in mental health counselling raises serious concerns about the confidentiality of client information ($\bar{x} = 3.02$), may lack the capacity to ensure informed consent ($\bar{x} = 3.01$), and could reduce counsellors' accountability in ethical decision-making ($\bar{x} = 2.83$). Other areas of agreement include the absence of clear ethical guidelines for AI use ($\bar{x} = 2.73$), the need for ethical training ($\bar{x} = 2.81$), the possibility of clients not understanding ethical risks ($\bar{x} = 2.83$), the potential compromise of human-centered counselling ($\bar{x} = 2.63$), and the need for institutional policies to regulate AI use ($\bar{x} = 2.61$). However, respondents disagreed that AI

applications could lead to the misuse of sensitive data ($\bar{x} = 2.21$) or reinforce bias and discrimination ($\bar{x} = 2.32$). The grand mean of 2.72 suggests that respondents generally perceive significant ethical implications associated with the use of AI in mental health counselling within tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State.

Research Question 2

What psychological concerns are associated with the use of AI in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation on the psychological concerns associated with the use of AI in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State

S/N	Items Statements	\bar{x}	Sd	Remarks
1.	Clients may feel emotionally disconnected when interacting with AI-based counselling tools.	3.41	.96	A
2.	The lack of human empathy in AI systems may limit their effectiveness in addressing deep psychological issues.	3.52	1.00	A
3.	Students may hesitate to share personal mental health challenges with an AI platform.	3.38	.91	A
4.	The use of AI in counselling may lead to reduced trust in the counselling process.	3.49	.98	A
5.	Some clients may experience anxiety or discomfort when interacting with non-human counsellors.	3.38	.91	A
6.	There is a fear that AI cannot fully understand the emotional and cultural contexts of clients' problems.	3.41	.96	A
7.	Students may feel that AI tools are impersonal and lack the warmth needed in counselling.	3.52	1.00	A
8.	AI-driven counselling could lead to misinterpretation of emotional cues, causing psychological harm.	3.38	.91	A
9.	The use of AI in counselling may reduce opportunities for human interaction, which is vital for emotional healing.	3.09	.98	A
10.	Counsellors may feel psychologically threatened or undervalued due to increasing reliance on AI systems.	3.18	.91	A
	Grand Mean	3.37	.95	A

Source: Survey Data, (2025)

Table 2 above presents the mean and standard deviation of responses regarding the psychological concerns associated with the use of artificial intelligence in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State. All the items recorded mean values above the benchmark of 2.50, indicating that respondents agreed with the identified concerns. Specifically, they agreed that the lack of human empathy in AI systems may limit their effectiveness in addressing deep psychological issues ($\bar{x} = 3.52$), and that students may perceive AI tools as impersonal and lacking the warmth needed in counselling ($\bar{x} = 3.52$). Respondents also agreed that the use of AI may lead to reduced trust in the counselling process ($\bar{x} = 3.49$), foster emotional disconnection ($\bar{x} = 3.41$), and that AI may not fully understand clients' emotional and cultural contexts ($\bar{x} = 3.41$). Additional concerns included hesitation to share personal challenges ($\bar{x} = 3.38$), anxiety or discomfort from interacting with non-human counsellors ($\bar{x} = 3.38$), and the potential for AI to misinterpret emotional cues, leading to harm ($\bar{x} = 3.38$). The reduction of opportunities for human interaction ($\bar{x} = 3.09$) and the perceived psychological threat to counsellors themselves ($\bar{x} = 3.18$) were also noted. With a grand mean of 3.37, the findings clearly indicate that significant psychological concerns are associated with the use of AI in mental health counselling within tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State.

5. Discussion of Findings

The results from Research Question 1 revealed that the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State is perceived to raise several ethical concerns. Respondents generally believe that AI integration could compromise critical ethical standards such as client confidentiality, informed consent, and professional accountability. There is a strong perception that the absence of clear ethical guidelines governing the use of AI in counselling poses significant risks to professional practice. The findings suggest that AI may challenge traditional ethical frameworks, as its application in counselling might reduce human oversight and the personalized nature of ethical decision-making.

Furthermore, the respondents emphasize the need for proper ethical training and institutional policies to guide AI use, indicating that current systems may not be adequately prepared to address these emerging concerns. These findings are consistent with earlier studies by Zhang and Lee (2021) and Udo and Ibrahim (2022), which highlight that without sufficient ethical oversight, the integration of AI into counselling can undermine trust, privacy, and the core values of the profession. While some concerns such as data misuse and algorithmic bias were not universally agreed upon, the overall pattern points to a shared belief that ethical safeguards must be strengthened. This underscores the importance of proactive ethical frameworks and ongoing professional development to ensure the responsible and human-centered deployment of AI in mental health counselling settings.

The findings from Research Question 2 indicate that significant psychological concerns are associated with the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions in Bayelsa State. Respondents expressed strong concerns about the emotional disconnect that may arise when clients interact with AI-based counselling tools. The absence of human empathy in AI systems was seen as a major limitation, potentially undermining the therapeutic depth and emotional support typically expected in counselling. This emotional gap could lead to reduced trust and openness from students, as many may hesitate to share sensitive mental health issues with non-human platforms.

Also, the study reveals that AI-driven counselling tools may evoke discomfort, anxiety, or even fear among users who feel that their cultural and emotional contexts are not fully understood by machines. There is also a concern that AI lacks the warmth and relational dynamics essential for psychological healing, which may diminish the perceived effectiveness of the counselling process. Another key concern raised is that counsellors themselves may feel psychologically threatened or undervalued, as AI systems increasingly take on roles traditionally held by trained professionals.

These concerns align with previous studies by Nwachukwu and Ede (2020) and Abubakar (2023), who warned that overreliance on AI in psychological services could erode the human connection that forms the foundation of effective counselling. Moreover, the fear of misinterpretation of emotional cues by AI systems suggests a potential risk for misdiagnosis or inappropriate therapeutic responses. The findings underscore the need for a balanced integration of AI in counselling—one that preserves the irreplaceable human elements of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and interpersonal engagement.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that while artificial intelligence holds promise for enhancing mental health counselling practices in tertiary institutions, its use is accompanied by notable ethical and psychological concerns. Stakeholders, express apprehension about issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, emotional disconnection, and the potential erosion of human empathy in therapeutic processes. These findings highlight the urgent need for the development of clear ethical guidelines, psychological safeguards, and institutional policies that will ensure responsible and culturally sensitive integration of AI technologies into mental health services. A cautious and human-centered approach is essential to harness the benefits of AI while protecting the dignity, trust, and emotional well-being of clients in the counselling process.

6.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were given:

1. Tertiary institutions should develop and enforce comprehensive ethical guidelines that govern the use of artificial intelligence in mental health counselling to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and professional accountability.
2. Counselling units in tertiary institutions should provide regular training for both students and counsellors on the psychological impacts of AI in therapy to promote informed use and emotional safety.

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