

Exploring the Therapeutic Potential of ChatGPT: User Experiences, AI Literacy, and Psychological Outcomes

Abstract

This study explores how users perceive ChatGPT when engaging with it as an emotionally supportive or quasi-therapeutic conversational partner, focusing on the roles of AI literacy and prompting competence in shaping these perceptions and their association with emotional well-being. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted among 234 adult users of large language models (LLMs). Participants completed measures of AI literacy, prompting competence, perceived therapeutic qualities of ChatGPT (empathy, usefulness, trust, safety), the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), and qualitative reflections on their experiences. Results indicated that both AI literacy ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$) and prompting competence ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted perceived therapeutic qualities, which in turn were negatively associated with emotional distress ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$). Prior psychological help modestly moderated these effects. Thematic analysis revealed perceptions of emotional relief, empathy, and reflective utility, along-side recognition of ChatGPT's limitations as "not a therapist."

The findings underscore that user competence and critical awareness, rather than model sophistication, largely determine the emotional value of LLM interactions. The study highlights implications for AI literacy education, ethical design, and the safe, reflective use of conversational AI in digital well-being contexts.