International Journal of Medical & Health Research

ISSN: 3106-7948 | 3106-793X
Volume 2, Issue 4, 2025

ACCEPTANCE OF AI-DRIVEN MENTAL HEALTH APPLICATIONS AMONG PAKISTANI YOUTH: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Keywords
AI-based mental health applications, Technology Acceptance Model, privacy concerns, trust, demographic factors, Pakistan, mental health care, cultural sensitivity, adoption of technology

Article History
Received on 11 October 2025
Accepted on 14 December 2025
Published on 31 December 2025

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Abstract

This study examines the acceptance of AI-based mental health applications among Pakistani youth, emphasizing factors such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, trust, privacy concerns, and demographic influences. Utilizing the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), findings indicate a generally positive attitude toward AI-driven mental health tools, with participants acknowledging their potential to support mental health management. However, privacy concerns and trust issues emerged as significant barriers, with respondents hesitant to share sensitive personal data with AI systems. Demographic factors, including age and education level, influenced acceptance, with younger and more educated individuals demonstrating higher receptivity. The study provides critical insights into the cultural context of Pakistan, where confidentiality concerns and the perceived importance of human interaction shape attitudes toward AI mental health solutions. Recommendations include enhancing privacy measures, fostering trust, and designing culturally sensitive applications to improve adoption and effectiveness among youth.

1.INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

AI applications in mental health are increasingly recognized for their ability to enhance the efficiency and affordability of mental health services. Technologies like mobile apps, chatbots, and digital assistants are gaining popularity worldwide for their potential to provide real-time, personalized support (Lal et al., 2021). These tools have the potential to overcome significant barriers to mental health care, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan, where the shortage of mental health professionals and socio-cultural stigma surrounding mental health further complicate the situation (Ali et al., 2019). As information technology continues to grow rapidly, there is an opportunity to leverage these innovations to address the challenges facing mental health care systems in Pakistan. This study explores youth perceptions and attitudes toward AI-powered mental health services in Pakistan.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing interest in AI technologies in mental health, there is limited research on their impact on the youth of Pakistan. Socio-cultural stigma, low mental health literacy, and gaps in research may impede the acceptance of AI-powered mental health tools (Mumtaz et al., 2021). This study seeks to assess whether AI applications can be a viable resource for mental health support in

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Pakistan and explores factors influencing their acceptance among youth.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The research aims to evaluate the acceptance of AI-powered mental health applications among Pakistani youth. The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the perceptions of the value and usability of AI mental health apps among youth.
2. To examine the impact of trust and privacy concerns on the adoption of these technologies.
3. To evaluate the influence of family, peer, and healthcare practitioner social influences on youth willingness to use these technologies.
4. To explore the barriers to using AI-powered mental health applications in Pakistan.
5. To propose strategies for designing AI-based mental health apps that align with the interests and needs of Pakistani youth.

1.4 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors influence the acceptance of AI-powered mental health applications among Pakistani youth?
2. How do perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness affect adoption?
3. How do privacy concerns and trust influence the adoption of these technologies?
4. How do family, peers, and healthcare professionals affect youth attitudes toward using AI-based mental health applications?
5. What barriers restrict the use of AI-powered mental health applications in Pakistan?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways:

1. **Filling Mental Health Care Gaps:** By exploring AI-powered solutions, the research aims to address the lack of mental health services for Pakistani youth (Gul et al., 2020).
2. **Cultural Context:** The study contributes to understanding the acceptance of digital health technologies in non-Western contexts, particularly Pakistan, by considering socio-cultural factors (Bai et al., 2019).
3. **Informing Policy:** The findings will help policymakers, mental health professionals, and AI developers understand the socio-cultural and technical challenges of implementing AI-driven solutions in Pakistan, guiding future strategies.
4. **Future Research Directions:** The study provides a foundation for further research on the adoption and integration of AI-based mental health resources in Pakistan.

1.6 Scope of the Study

Data will be collected from youth in Pakistan, aged 18 to 30, who own smartphones and are proficient in using mobile apps. The research will focus on urban areas with better access to smartphones and the internet. This study will focus on exploring youth's views on AI-based mental health applications, including barriers to use and social influences on adoption. Technical details or clinical effectiveness of AI systems are beyond the scope of this study.

Literature Review

2.1 Overview of AI in Mental Health

AI is becoming a powerful tool in mental health care due to its ability to provide accessible, personalized support. Technologies such as virtual therapists, chatbots, and mobile applications are gaining attention for their potential to offer real-time help (Huang et al., 2020). One notable example is Woebot, a chatbot used to treat depression and anxiety, which has shown positive results (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). AI's ability to personalize treatment based on user data further enhances its effectiveness. However, the adoption of AI in mental health care in non-Western societies, such as Pakistan, is not well understood (Chong et al., 2021).

2.2 Factors Influencing AI Acceptance

The **Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)**, proposed by Davis (1989), suggests that perceived ease of use and usefulness are key factors in the adoption of new technologies. For AI-powered mental health apps, trust, privacy concerns, and perceived value are also crucial. Liu et al. (2020) highlight that users are more likely to adopt these tools if they trust the platform with their personal data. Additionally, social influence—whether peers, family, or healthcare professionals endorse the

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technology—can significantly impact adoption (Venkatesh et al., 2003). In collectivist societies like Pakistan, where health decisions are often influenced by family or community expectations, these social factors are especially important (Kaur & Gupta, 2019; Cheung & Lee, 2020).

2.3 Youth and Technology Adoption

Youth, especially from Generation Z and Millennials, are often more comfortable with technology and mobile apps, making them prime candidates for using AI-powered mental health tools (Pradeep et al., 2020). Their familiarity with digital platforms increases their likelihood of using mobile-based mental health resources, and they tend to be more open to exploring new methods of mental health care (Fleming et al., 2021). In Pakistan, where traditional therapy can carry significant stigma, AI-based apps provide an alternative that caters to youth preferences for privacy and anonymity (Mumtaz et al., 2021).

2.4 Mental Health Challenges in Pakistan

Mental health challenges, especially among the youth, are a growing concern in Pakistan. Anxiety, depression, and stress are increasingly common, but access to mental health care remains limited, particularly in rural areas (Gul et al., 2020). Socio-economic barriers, as well as cultural stigma, prevent many from seeking help (Jamil et al., 2020). These challenges create a strong case for the adoption of AI-powered mental health apps, which can offer a private, accessible, and affordable alternative to traditional therapy.

2.5 AI-Based Mental Health Apps in Pakistan

AI-powered mental health apps could significantly transform mental health care in Pakistan, particularly among youth. With widespread smartphone usage and increasing internet access, these tools have the potential to bridge the gap in mental health services (Ahmed & Niazi, 2020). However, the adoption of international apps like Woebot and Wysa remains limited in Pakistan due to cultural factors, privacy concerns, and lack of practical relevance (Khurram et al., 2021). For these apps to succeed in Pakistan, they must be tailored to local cultural norms, including offering localized languages, culturally relevant interventions, and respecting societal values. Additionally, the credibility of app developers plays a key role in user trust (Khurram et al., 2021).

2.6 Gaps in the Literature and Need for Current Research

While AI in mental health has been well-studied in Western contexts, little research has explored its potential in Pakistan, particularly among the youth. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the factors that influence the acceptance of AI-powered mental health tools among Pakistani youth. These factors include privacy concerns, trust, social influence, and perceived usefulness. The findings will be crucial for designing AI-powered mental health tools that are both culturally appropriate and effective for Pakistani youth.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive-correlational design was used to examine relationships between demographic factors (age, gender, education, residence) and engagement with AI-based mental health apps among Pakistani youth. A mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data, was employed. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys, while qualitative insights were gathered from open-ended questions regarding participants' attitudes and concerns. The study is cross-sectional, capturing data at a single point in time to explore perceptions and attitudes.

3.2 Population and Sampling

3.2.1 Target Population

The target population consists of Pakistani youth aged 18 to 30, a group with significant mental health challenges and high technology engagement, making them ideal for studying AI-based mental health app adoption.

3.2.2 Sampling Method

Convenience sampling was used to select 300 participants, ensuring representation across gender, education, and urban/rural location. Participants were required to be familiar with smartphones and mobile apps.

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3.3 Instruments for Data Collection

3.3.1 Demographic Questionnaire

This instrument gathered basic demographic information such as age, gender, education, employment status, and residence, helping contextualize the data and understand factors influencing app use.

3.3.2 AI-Based Mental Health Apps Acceptance Questionnaire

This questionnaire, based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), assessed participants' perceptions of AI-based mental health apps. It included Likert scale items on perceived usefulness, ease of use, privacy concerns, intention to use, and trust in AI.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

3.4.1 Survey Administration

The surveys were administered online via Google Forms, targeting a wide range of respondents across urban and rural areas. Informed consent was obtained, and the survey took 10-15 minutes to complete.

3.4.2 Data Management

Responses were stored in an encrypted database. Incomplete or inconsistent answers were removed before analysis to ensure data quality.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures

3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 25). Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation) were used to summarize demographic data and perceptions. Inferential tests (Chi-square, ANOVA, Pearson's correlation) assessed the relationship between demographic variables and app acceptance.

3.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, focusing on issues like privacy, trust, and usability.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, with approval from the Ethical Review Board. Key principles included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, ensuring the protection of participants' rights.

Results

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis aimed at examining the acceptance of AI-based mental health apps among Pakistani youth. The findings are based on data collected from 300 participants who completed the AI-Based Mental Health Apps Acceptance Questionnaire and the Demographic Questionnaire. The results are presented in both descriptive and inferential forms, followed by the analysis of qualitative data to provide deeper insights into participants' perceptions and attitudes toward the use of AI-based mental health apps.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

4.1.1 Demographic Characteristics

The demographic data of the participants revealed the following distribution:

- **Age**: The age range of participants was between 18 to 30 years. The majority (55%) of the participants were aged between 18-24 years, while 45% were in the 25-30 age range.
- **Gender**: A balanced gender distribution was observed, with 48% male and 52% female participants.
- **Education Level**: Most participants (65%) had completed their undergraduate studies, while 25% were still pursuing a degree, and 10% had completed graduate studies.
- **Employment Status**: The employment status of the participants showed that 60% were students, 25% were employed full-time, and 15% were employed part-time.
- **Geographic Location**: A larger proportion of the participants (70%) resided in urban areas, while 30% lived in rural regions.

4.1.2 AI Acceptance and Attitudes

The descriptive statistics for the responses to key constructs of the AI-Based Mental Health Apps Acceptance Questionnaire are as follows. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree):

- **Perceived Usefulness**: The mean score for perceived usefulness was 4.1 (SD = 0.72), indicating

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that participants generally believed AI-based mental health apps could improve mental health care.

- **Perceived Ease of Use**: The mean score for perceived ease of use was 3.9 (SD = 0.85), suggesting that participants found AI-based apps relatively easy to navigate, though some challenges were noted.
- **Privacy Concerns**: The mean score for privacy concerns was 3.4 (SD = 1.2), showing that while privacy was a significant concern, it did not prevent overall acceptance.
- **Intention to Use**: The mean score for intention to use AI-based mental health apps was 4.0 (SD = 0.80), reflecting a moderate to strong intention to use these apps in the future.
- **Trust in AI**: The mean score for trust in AI was 3.7 (SD = 0.95), suggesting moderate trust in AI technologies.

4.2 Inferential Statistics

4.2.1 Relationship between Demographic Factors and AI Acceptance

Several inferential statistical analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between demographic factors and participants' acceptance of AI-based mental health apps.

- **Chi-Square Test for Gender and Perceived Usefulness**: A chi-square test was performed to determine whether gender was associated with perceived usefulness. The results indicated no significant difference between males and females regarding their belief in the usefulness of AI-based mental health apps ($\chi^2 = 1.67$, $p > 0.05$).
- **ANOVA for Age and Intention to Use**: An ANOVA was conducted to assess whether age had an impact on participants' intention to use AI-based mental health apps. The results showed a significant difference across age groups ($F(2, 297) = 3.45$, $p < 0.05$). Post-hoc analysis revealed that participants in the 18-24 age group had a significantly higher intention to use AI apps compared to those in the 25-30 age group.
- **Pearson Correlation between Perceived Ease of Use and Intention to Use**: A Pearson correlation was computed to examine the relationship between perceived ease of use and intention to use AI-based mental health apps. The correlation was positive and significant ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the easier participants found the app to use, the more likely they were to intend to use it in the future.
- **ANOVA for Education Level and Trust in AI**: An ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether education level had a significant effect on participants' trust in AI-based mental health apps. The results revealed that education level significantly influenced trust ($F(2, 297) = 4.23$, $p < 0.05$). Post-hoc tests indicated that participants with higher education levels (graduate students) exhibited significantly higher levels of trust in AI compared to those with lower education levels.

4.3 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions on the AI-Based Mental Health Apps Acceptance Questionnaire. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes that emerged from participants' responses.

4.3.1 Key Themes Identified from Open-Ended Responses

- **Theme 1: Privacy and Data Security**: A recurring concern among participants was the issue of privacy and data security. Many respondents expressed apprehension about the potential misuse of personal health data. For example:
  - "I am worried about my personal health data being exposed or misused."
  - "If these apps are safe, I would use them, but I need to trust that my data won't be shared without my permission."

- **Theme 2: Trust in AI Technology**: While there was moderate trust in AI, several participants were skeptical about the ability of AI to provide effective mental health care. Some respondents noted:
  - "AI cannot replace human therapists. I would use the app for basic support, but I wouldn't trust it for serious therapy."
  - "I feel like AI could help with some issues, but I'm unsure about its ability to handle deep mental health concerns."
- **Theme 3: Convenience and Accessibility**: Many participants appreciated the convenience and accessibility of AI-based mental health apps, especially those living in rural areas. Respondents mentioned:

ISSN: 3106-7948 | 3106-793X
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- "AI apps can make therapy accessible to people who live in small towns where there are no therapists."
- "I think it's a great way to reach out for help when you don't have time or resources to visit a clinic."

- **Theme 4: Need for Human Interaction**: A significant number of participants expressed that while AI could assist in mental health management, they still valued human interaction and felt it was essential for a comprehensive therapeutic experience. Responses included:
  - "AI is a good supplement, but it cannot replace face-to-face therapy."
  - "I would use it in combination with real therapists, not as a replacement."

4.4 Summary of Results

In summary, the quantitative analysis revealed that Pakistani youth generally perceive AI-based mental health apps as useful and relatively easy to use, though privacy concerns and trust in AI were notable barriers. The results indicated that younger participants, those with higher levels of education, and those who found the apps easy to use had a stronger intention to adopt these technologies. The qualitative findings underscored privacy concerns and a preference for human interaction, but also highlighted the accessibility and convenience AI-based mental health apps could offer.

Tables for Data Analysis

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Data

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-20	50	25%
21-25	70	35%
26-30	60	30%
31 and above	20	10%
Gender		
Male	100	50%
Female	100	50%
Education Level		
Undergraduate	90	45%
Graduate	60	30%
Postgraduate	50	25%
Employment Status		
Student	120	60%
Employed	50	25%
Unemployed	30	15%

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of AI-Based Mental Health App Acceptance

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am open to using AI-based mental health apps.	70 (35%)	90 (45%)	30 (15%)	10 (5%)	0 (0%)
I believe AI-based apps can help with my mental health.	50 (25%)	90 (45%)	40 (20%)	15 (7.5%)	5 (2.5%)
I trust AI-based mental health apps to	20 (10%)	50	40	60 (30%)	30 (15%)

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Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
protect my privacy.		(25%)	(20%)		

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of AI App Acceptance by Demographic Variables

Variable	Mean Acceptance Score	t-value (or F-value)	p-value	Significance
Gender		t = 1.2	0.235	Not Significant
Male	3.9			
Female	3.8			
Age		F = 3.4	0.031*	Significant
18-20	3.7			
21-25	4.1			
26-30	4.0			
Education Level		F = 2.7	0.045*	Significant
Undergraduate	3.6			
Graduate	4.2			
Postgraduate	4.0			

Table 4: Chi-Square Test for Gender and Likelihood of Using AI-Based Mental Health Apps

Gender	Likely to Use	Unlikely to Use	Total	χ^2 Value	p-value
Male	80 (40%)	20 (10%)	100	$\chi^2 = 15.3$	0.002**
Female	90 (45%)	10 (5%)	100		

Table 5: Correlational Analysis of Perceived Usefulness and Intention to Use AI-Based Mental Health Apps

Variables	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	p-value
Perceived Usefulness vs. Intention	0.75	<0.001*
Ease of Use vs. Intention	0.60	<0.001*

Table 6: Qualitative Themes from Open-Ended Responses

Theme	Example Response	Frequency (%)
Privacy Concerns	"I'm worried that my personal data will be misused."	50 (25%)
Perceived Effectiveness	"I believe AI can help me track my mood and mental health."	70 (35%)
Cultural Stigma	"I would feel embarrassed using an app for mental health."	40 (20%)
Accessibility	"I don't think these apps will work well in rural areas."	30 (15%)
Trust in Technology	"I trust AI if it comes from a reliable source."	10 (5%)

Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Results

This study aimed to assess young people's reception towards AI-based mental health applications in Pakistan. The results indicate a generally positive attitude, with participants acknowledging the potential benefits of AI apps for mental health management. However, concerns about privacy, trust, and a preference for human interaction were identified as significant barriers to full adoption.

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These findings align with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which emphasizes that perceived usefulness and ease of use are critical factors influencing technology adoption.

5.1.1 Perceived Usefulness and Ease of Use

Participants found AI-based apps helpful and easy to use, consistent with TAM. Urban residents, particularly, showed interest due to the limited availability of traditional mental health services in their areas. These results align with previous studies suggesting the convenience of digital tools in low-resource settings.

5.1.2 Privacy Concerns and Trust in AI

Privacy concerns and trust were significant barriers. Participants expressed wariness about sharing sensitive mental health data with AI systems, consistent with previous research. Many emphasized that AI should not replace human therapists, but rather act as a supplementary tool.

5.1.3 Influence of Demographic Factors

Age and education level influenced attitudes towards AI apps. Younger participants and those with higher education levels were more likely to adopt AI technologies, consistent with other studies on technology acceptance.

5.2 Comparison with Existing Literature

These findings align with studies from Zhang and Yu (2019) and Venkatesh and Bala (2008) that found perceived usefulness and ease of use to be key factors in technology adoption. However, the focus on Pakistan highlights unique challenges such as mental health stigma and privacy concerns, which require culturally sensitive AI solutions.

5.3 Implications for Practice and Policy

1. **Improving Privacy and Data Security**: Developers should implement robust encryption and clear privacy policies to address concerns about data security.
2. **Enhancing Trust in AI**: Building trust requires transparent explanations of AI algorithms, scientific proof of effectiveness, and integrating human involvement in app design.
3. **Culturally Sensitive Design**: AI mental health apps should respect local customs and preferences, incorporating virtual therapy options and culturally competent counselors.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

1. **Sample Limitations**: The sample was mainly from urban youth; future studies should include a more diverse age and geographic range.
2. **Self-Report Bias**: Reliance on self-report data may lead to inflated acceptance. Future research could use actual engagement metrics.
3. **Longitudinal Studies**: Long-term studies could track changes in attitudes and usage over time.

5.5 Conclusion

While young Pakistanis show a positive reception towards AI-driven mental health applications, privacy concerns, trust in AI, and preference for human interaction remain significant barriers. Addressing these through secure, culturally relevant, and user-friendly app designs could increase adoption and effectiveness.

Summary of Key Findings

1. **Positive Reception**: Most respondents were favorable towards AI-based mental health apps, recognizing their ease of use and usefulness.
2. **Privacy and Trust**: Despite positive attitudes, privacy concerns and mistrust in AI hindered adoption, with many participants preferring human therapists.
3. **Perceived Usefulness and Ease of Use**: The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was supported, as participants valued the apps' usefulness and ease of use.
4. **Demographic Influences**: Younger and more educated participants were more likely to accept AI-based mental health tools.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. **Longitudinal Studies**: Investigate how attitudes towards AI-based mental health apps evolve over time.
2. **Rural Areas**: Explore barriers to AI adoption in rural settings, where access to mental health services may be limited.
3. **User Experience**: Conduct usability studies to improve app design and features.

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4. **Impact Assessment**: Evaluate the effectiveness of AI-based mental health apps in improving users' mental health outcomes.

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