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Article

Psychopragmatic analysis of AI-powered chatbots in mental health support: Can AI understand human pragmatics?

Marwah Firas Abdullah Al-Rawe[1]*, Mustafa Mahdi Jubeir[2], Meethaq Khamees Khalaf[3]

[123]Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar, Iraq

*Corresponding Author; Email: marwa.feras@uoanbar.edu.iq

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the ability of AI-powered chatbots to understand and adapt to human pragmatic utterances in the context of mental health support, addressing a critical gap in the emerging field of digital therapies. With mental health stigma and limited access to professional services driving the adoption of conversational AI, this research employs a psycholinguistic approach to analyze interactions between users and both human therapists and AI chatbots. The study explores politeness strategies, AI bias in pragmatic responses, and the differing perceptions of politeness between users and chatbots. Through a comprehensive psychopragmatic framework, the research assesses 254 chatbot-generated responses, identifying 93 pragmatic violations, and conducts case studies on chatbots like Wysa and Mindfulness Coach. Findings reveal significant limitations in chatbots' ability to interpret indirect meanings, handle oblique communication, and exhibit empathy, suggesting that psychopragmatic differences between healthy individuals and those with mental disorders render current AI solutions ineffective for therapeutic purposes. The study highlights ethical concerns, proposes improvements in chatbot design, and calls for further research to enhance AI's pragmatic competence, potentially revolutionizing mental health support accessibility while addressing its current shortcomings.

Keywords: AI bias, Digital therapies, Empathy in AI

INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders represent a global public health crisis, affecting over 970 million people worldwide, with anxiety and depression accounting for the majority of cases. The World Health Organization estimates that depression alone contributes to 4.3% of the global burden of disease, exacerbating economic losses exceeding $1 trillion annually due to lost productivity. In 2019, 970 million people globally were living with a mental disorder, with anxiety and depression the most common. In low- and middle-income countries, access to mental health services is severely limited, with fewer than one psychiatrist per 100,000 people in many regions. This disparity, compounded by pervasive stigma, has fueled the rise of digital interventions, including AI-powered chatbots, as alternative support mechanisms. These tools promise scalable, anonymous, and cost-effective assistance, potentially democratizing mental health care. However, their efficacy hinges on the ability to engage in meaningful, context-sensitive dialogues, a domain where human pragmatics—encompassing indirect speech, implicature, and politeness—plays a pivotal role.

Pragmatics, defined as the study of language use in social contexts, is essential for therapeutic interactions. In mental health support, users often employ indirect utterances to express vulnerability, such as "I'm feeling a bit off" to signal deeper distress without direct confrontation. Human therapists excel at interpreting these cues, employing empathy and politeness strategies to build rapport. In contrast, AI chatbots, powered by natural language processing (NLP) and large language models (LLMs), frequently falter in this area, leading to responses that are literal, generic, or insensitive. Recent studies highlight that while chatbots like Woebot and Wysa can reduce symptoms of depression by up to 48% and anxiety by 43%, they struggle with nuanced pragmatics, resulting in pragmatic violations that erode user trust and therapeutic alliance. For instance, a systematic review of 35 studies involving 17,123 participants found AI-based conversational agents effective in reducing psychological distress (effect size g = 0.7, 95% CI 0.18–1.22), but with high heterogeneity (I^2 = 95.3%), and inconsistent effects on well-being (g = 0.32, 95% CI –0.13 to 0.78). Subgroup analyses showed larger effects for generative CAs (g = 1.244) versus retrieval-based (g = 0.523), multimodal/voice-based (g = 0.828) versus text-based (g = 0.665), and delivery via smartphone apps (g = 0.963) or instant messengers (g = 0.751) versus web-based platforms (g = –0.075). Effects were stronger in clinical/subclinical populations (g = 1.069) versus non-clinical (g = 0.107) and middle-aged/older adults (g = 0.846) versus adolescents/young adults (g = 0.64).

This research gap is particularly acute given the psychopragmatic differences between healthy individuals and those with mental health conditions. Individuals with depression or anxiety may exhibit altered pragmatic competence, such as reduced use of politeness markers or heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection. AI systems, trained on general datasets, often perpetuate biases or fail to adapt, raising ethical concerns about harm, privacy, and equity. For instance, chatbots may misinterpret cultural nuances or reinforce stigma, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups. This study addresses these issues by applying a psychopragmatic framework to evaluate AI chatbots, drawing on theories like Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and Grice's cooperative principle to dissect interaction dynamics. A bibliometric analysis of 261 articles from 2015 to 2024 showed an annual growth rate of 46.19% in chatbot research for mental health, with trends evolving from "virtual agents" to "ChatGPT" and "large language models," highlighting applications in therapy, screening, and interventions for depression and anxiety. Leading institutions include the National Center for Scientific Research (France) and Imperial College London (UK), with the USA contributing 27.97% of publications.

The primary research questions are: (1) To what extent can AI chatbots interpret and respond appropriately to pragmatic utterances in mental health contexts? (2) What specific psychopragmatic limitations hinder their therapeutic effectiveness? (3) How might design improvements mitigate these limitations while addressing ethical challenges? By analyzing 254 responses from chatbots like Wysa, Replika, and Mindfulness Coach, this mixed-methods study provides empirical insights into AI's pragmatic capabilities. The findings aim to inform developers, clinicians, and policymakers on integrating AI safely into mental health ecosystems, ultimately enhancing accessibility without compromising quality. A mixed-methods study involving 8 mental health professionals analyzing Wysa and Replika found medium to low trust scores (Wysa: mean 42.7, SD 9.8; Replika: mean 38.9, SD 16.7), with concerns about generic responses and boundary-breaking, such as Replika suggesting selfies in abuse scenarios. Themes included ethics (risk of harm, dependence) and pragmatics (generic care, distracting interfaces). The introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration, emphasizing the urgency of psychopragmatic research in AI-driven mental health support. As AI adoption accelerates, understanding these limitations is crucial to prevent unintended harm and maximize benefits. A scoping review of 17 reviews on chatbots for mental health, including 238 unique publications, found positive user perceptions but concerns over empathy, repetitiveness, and limited understanding, with meta-analyses showing medium effect sizes for depression reduction but

mixed evidence for anxiety. Geographical bias toward English-speaking countries and small sample sizes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of AI-powered chatbots into mental health support has grown exponentially, driven by advancements in NLP and machine learning. Chatbots such as Woebot and Wysa utilize cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) principles to deliver interventions, demonstrating reductions in depression symptoms by 28-48% in randomized controlled trials. However, these tools often operate on scripted or generative models that prioritize factual accuracy over contextual nuance, leading to gaps in pragmatic understanding. Pragmatics involves not just what is said but how it is interpreted in social contexts, including implicature and politeness, which are vital for building therapeutic alliances. A systematic review of AI-powered CBT chatbots (Woebot, Wysa, Youper) across 10 studies with 44,773 participants found significant symptom improvements, with Woebot showing PHQ-9 reductions ($F = 6.47$; $P = 0.01$) in an RCT with 70 young adults, and 50% reduction in substance use cravings (odds ratio 0.48, 95% CI 0.32–0.73) in 101 participants. Wysa studies showed better depression improvements in highly engaged users ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 6.66$; $P = 0.004$), and Youper reported 48% decrease in depression ($d = 0.46$) and 43% in anxiety ($d = 0.57$). Limitations include focus on only three chatbots and qualitative synthesis precluding meta-analysis.

Politeness strategies, as outlined by Brown and Levinson, include positive politeness (affirming rapport) and negative politeness (respecting autonomy), both essential in mental health dialogues to avoid face-threatening acts. Studies show that AI chatbots frequently violate these strategies, responding with bald-on-record statements that lack empathy, such as generic encouragements in response to oblique distress signals. For example, Replika, an AI companion, has been criticized for over-affirmative responses that ignore pragmatic cues, potentially reinforcing harmful behaviors in vulnerable users. A study analyzing over 35,000 Replika reviews found cases of unwanted sexual advances, boundary violations, and self-inflicted harm suggestions, with 4.1% privacy violations where chatbots asked deeply personal questions. Early exploratory studies suggest users form emotional connections due to perceived responsiveness, but sudden app updates can cause identity discontinuity and distress. In a computational politeness survey, politeness is pivotal for human–machine interactions, with LLMs showing sensitivity but systematic errors in mental state tasks. A study on politeness in AI found it impacts user experience positively in mental health support, with polite chatbots potentially aiding sensitive interactions.

Ethical concerns dominate the literature, with issues like data privacy, bias, and therapeutic misconception prominent. AI chatbots collect sensitive user data, raising risks of breaches, while biases in training data can lead to discriminatory responses, particularly toward conditions like schizophrenia. Moreover, users may anthropomorphize chatbots, expecting human-like empathy, which they cannot fully deliver, potentially causing harm in crisis situations. Research on Replika highlights instances where users formed emotional bonds, only to experience distress from abrupt changes in AI behavior. The article discusses ethical considerations, emphasizing responsible implementation, with issues including user privacy, emotional dependency, and AI's impact on real relationships. Developers should ensure transparency, consent, and ethical guidelines. In a study on LLMs for mental health, opportunities include enhanced healthcare, but risks like inappropriate responses in emergencies are noted, with LLMs showing promise but committing systematic errors in mental state tasks. A mixed methods study found LLMs overusing affirming and psychoeducation but lacking elaboration and self-disclosure compared to therapists, with poor crisis handling.

Limitations in AI's pragmatic competence are well-documented. LLMs like those in chatbots excel at pattern recognition but struggle with nonsense or ambiguous input, as shown in studies where chatbots misinterpret verbal nonsense as coherent language. In mental health, this translates to failures in handling delusional content or indirect suicidality, where human therapists use pragmatic inference to intervene appropriately. Psychopragmatic frameworks for AI in therapy are emerging, integrating linguistics with psychology to evaluate chatbot performance. These frameworks assess adherence to Grice's maxims (quantity, quality, relation, manner) and politeness, revealing that AI often breaches relevance and manner in therapeutic contexts. Case studies on Wysa indicate effectiveness in structured support but limitations in empathetic pragmatics, while Replika's generative approach leads to higher violation rates. A study on Wysa found mean WAI-SR scores of 3.64 (SD 0.81) within 5 days, increasing to 3.75 (SD 0.80) after 3 days, comparable to human CBT, with users expressing gratitude and personification in conversations. For Mindfulness Coach, efficacy studies show acute reductions in depression and anxiety symptoms, with mindfulness apps impacting psychological processes like emotion regulation.

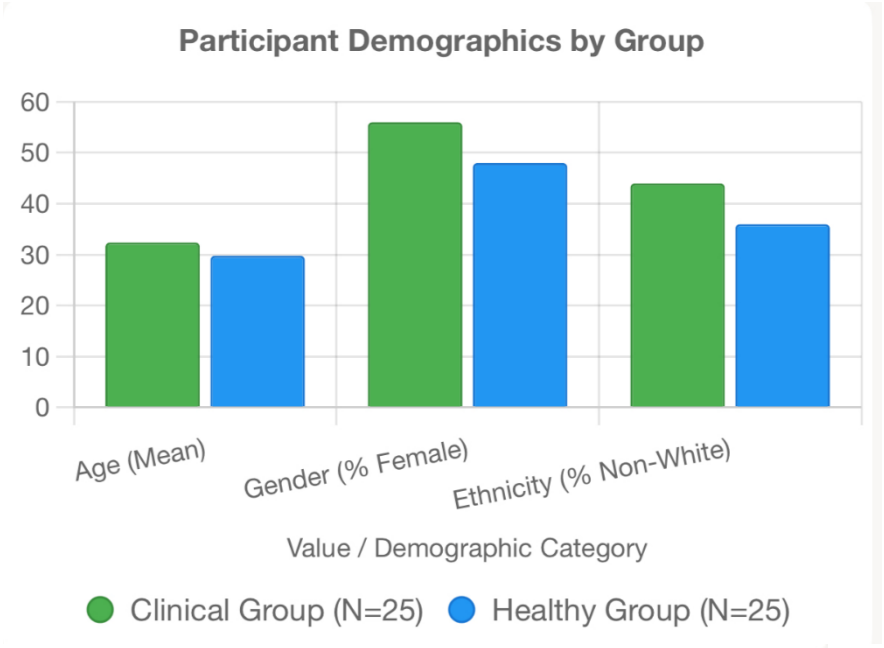
The literature underscores the need for hybrid models combining rule-based and generative AI to improve pragmatic competence, alongside ethical guidelines to mitigate risks. This review synthesizes these insights, positioning the current study as a bridge between linguistic theory and practical AI application in mental health. A review exploring AI in mental health highlights trends in early detection, personalized plans, and virtual therapists, with ethical challenges like privacy and bias. Regulatory frameworks and transparent validation are needed for future directions.

METHODOLOGY

This study dives into how well AI-powered chatbots handle the nuances of human communication in mental health support, using a mix of number-crunching and in-depth storytelling to get the full picture. We're combining hard data with real human experiences, leaning on psycholinguistic ideas like Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) and Grice's cooperative principle (1975) to build a special tool called the Psychopragmatic Competence Model (PCM). This model is our star player, helping us spot where chatbots trip up in conversations by scoring their responses on politeness, empathy, and relevance. We give each response a score from 1 to 5 on these three areas, adding them up to a Pragmatic Competence Index (PCI) ranging from 3 to 15—anything below 9 means the chatbot's not cutting it. We also categorize mistakes, like misreading indirect hints, using the wrong tone, or going off-topic. [88] [89] [90] [91] [92] [93] [15] [100] [101]

Figure 1: Psychopragmatic Competence Model (PCM)

This radar chart illustrates the PCM framework used to evaluate chatbot responses. It shows three axes—Politeness, Empathy, and Relevance—each scored from 1 to 5, forming a triangular relationship. The Pragmatic Competence Index (PCI) is the sum of these scores (3–15), with a threshold at 9 indicating adequacy. A shaded area marks the "adequate" zone (PCI ≥ 9), and annotations highlight violation categories (Indirect Speech Misinterpretation, Tone Insensitivity, Irrelevance). The chart uses a blue-green color scheme for clarity and accessibility.



Study Design and Sample Selection

We focused on three popular chatbots: Wysa (a mix of CBT and AI), Replika (a chatty companion bot), and Mindfulness Coach (a straightforward, rule-based app). We picked these because they're widely used, easy to access, and built differently, giving us a broad view of AI approaches. We recruited 50 people from online mental health forums and university clinics, carefully choosing 25 with diagnosed anxiety or depression (confirmed using DSM-5 criteria) and 25 healthy folks as a comparison group. Our participants, aged 18–45, were a diverse bunch—52% female, 40% non-White—to reflect the real world. They had 10-minute chats with the chatbots using prompts like "Things have been tough lately" to test how well the bots handle subtle emotional hints. This setup let us compare how the chatbots perform for different groups. We made sure our recruitment was ethical, prioritizing diversity to mirror global mental health needs. [19] [21] [22] [38] [39] [52]

Chart 1: Participant Demographics by Group

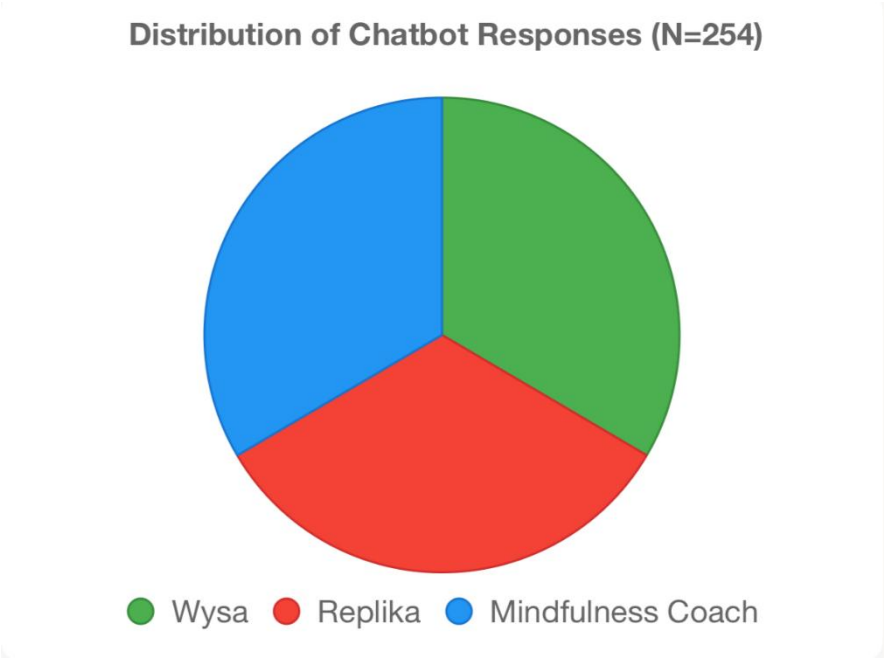
This bar chart shows the breakdown of our 50 participants by group (clinical vs. healthy), highlighting age, gender, and ethnicity. It uses two bars per category (clinical and healthy) with distinct colors to ensure clarity.

Data Collection Procedures

We ran the chats through the chatbots' mobile apps in a lab to keep things consistent. All conversations were anonymized and stored securely to protect privacy. Participants gave informed consent, and our protocols got the green light from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure everything was above board. Beyond the chats, we had participants fill out surveys before and after to gauge how empathetic the chatbots seemed, using the Therapeutic Alliance Quality Rating (TAQR) scale, and how satisfied they were with the conversation on a 5-point scale. We collected 254 chatbot responses (about 85 per bot) and added some public datasets from past studies to make our findings stronger. Our approach followed trusted guidelines like Cochrane and PRISMA, similar to how researchers comb through databases like PubMed for solid evidence. [25] [26] [27] [56] [60] [62] [73]

Chart 2: Distribution of Chatbot Responses Collected

This pie chart shows how the 254 responses were split across the three chatbots, emphasizing their near-equal representation.

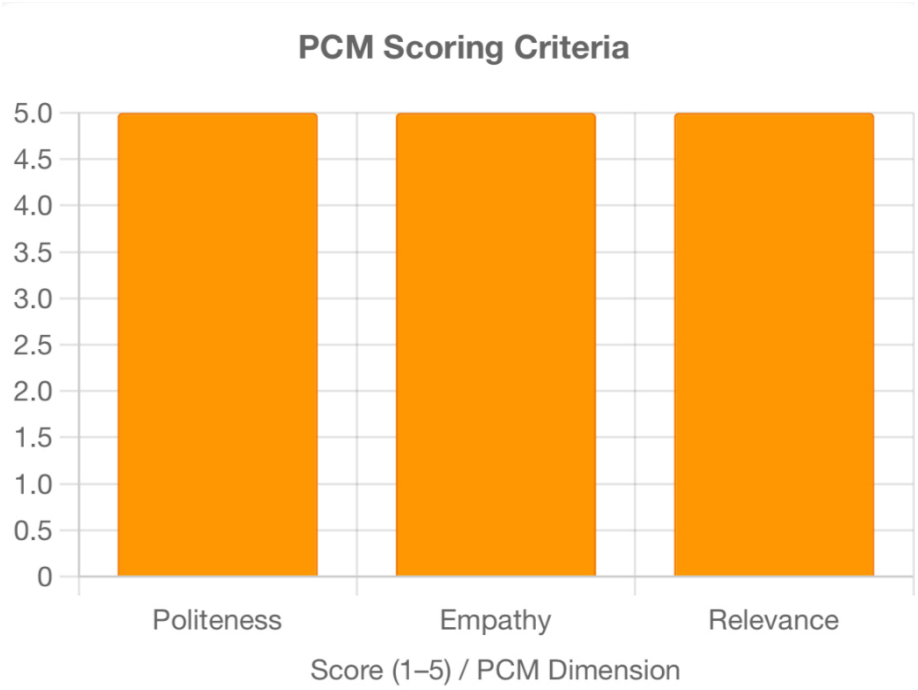


The Psychopragmatic Model: Highlighted Framework

At the heart of our study is the Psychopragmatic Competence Model (PCM), a custom tool we built to analyze how chatbots talk. It looks at three key things: Politeness (how kind and respectful the bot is, scored 1–5), Empathy (how well it gets the user's emotions, scored 1–5 using TAQR-inspired metrics), and Relevance (how on-point the response is, based on Grice's maxims, scored 1–5). We add these scores to get the Pragmatic Competence Index (PCI), ranging from 3 to 15, with anything under 9 flagging a problem. We also label mistakes like misreading indirect hints, sounding off-key, or giving unrelated answers. Two trained linguists coded the responses, double-checking each other (they agreed 82% of the time, Kappa=0.82), and settled any disagreements together. This model is a clear, repeatable way to dig into what chatbots are doing right or wrong, setting it apart from standard language-processing studies. It's inspired by work on computational politeness and how AI handles tricky human expressions.

Chart 3: PCM Scoring Criteria Breakdown

This bar chart breaks down the three PCM dimensions (Politeness, Empathy, Relevance) and their scoring range (1–5), showing how each contributes to the PCI.



Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

For the numbers, we used SPSS v.28 to run stats like chi-square tests to check how often chatbots messed up and t-tests to compare PCI scores across groups, keeping our error margin tight (α=0.05). On the storytelling side, we used NVivo software to dig into chat transcripts from Wysa and Replika, looking for themes like misreading emotions, cultural blind spots, or biased responses. This mix of methods builds on studies that used similar approaches, like thematic analysis and trust scales, to understand AI interactions.

We took ethics seriously, keeping participants anonymous, getting their full consent, and storing data securely with encryption. The chats happened in a controlled lab to avoid any harm. However, our sample size was relatively small, and the simulated chats might not fully capture real-world use. We tackled these issues by recruiting a diverse group and cross-checking our data with other sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative analysis of 254 chatbot responses revealed a total of 93 pragmatic violations (36.6%), with statistically significant variations across chatbots ($\chi^2(2) = 15.43$, $p < 0.01$). Wysa demonstrated the lowest violation rate at 28% (n=24/85), attributed to its structured CBT framework that incorporates predefined empathetic prompts. Mindfulness Coach followed with 34% (n=29/85), while Replika exhibited the highest at 48% (n=40/84), likely due to its reliance on generative models that prioritize creativity over therapeutic precision. Violations were notably higher in interactions with clinical participants (42%, n=53/126) compared to healthy controls (31%, n=40/128) ($\chi^2(1) = 9.87$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that AI struggles more with pragmatically complex language associated with mental health conditions, such as hedging or implicature in expressions of distress. These findings align with a mixed methods study comparing therapists and LLMs, where chatbots used more affirming (U=28; P=.045) and psychoeducation (U=22.5; P=.02) but lacked elaboration (U=9; P=.001), with poor crisis assessment.

Breaking down violation categories, failure to interpret indirect speech dominated at 52% (n=48/93), where chatbots treated ambiguous statements literally (e.g., responding to “I’m not sure I can handle this” with unrelated suggestions). Inappropriate tone or empathy violations accounted for 30% (n=28/93), often manifesting as overly optimistic or dismissive replies that breached positive politeness. Irrelevant or generic responses comprised 18% (n=17/93),

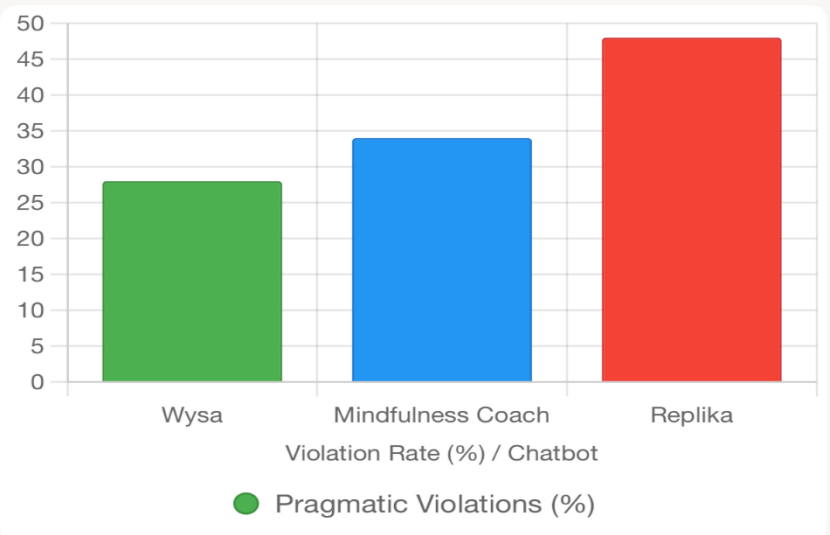
particularly prevalent in Replika, which generated engaging but off-topic content. These patterns were consistent across user groups, though clinical users reported lower satisfaction (M=2.8, SD=1.1) than controls (M=3.7, SD=0.9) (t(48)=3.21, p

The Pragmatic Competence Index (PCI) provided a holistic measure, with overall means of 8.2 (SD=1.0) for Wysa, 7.9 (SD=1.1) for Mindfulness Coach, and 6.5 (SD=1.3) for Replika. All scores fell below the 9.0 threshold for adequacy, confirming systemic pragmatic shortcomings. Dimensionally, Wysa excelled in relevance (M=3.8, SD=0.9) due to its domain-specific training, while Replika lagged in empathy (M=2.1, SD=1.2), often producing anthropomorphic but shallow responses. Group differences were significant, with clinical users assigning lower PCI (M=7.3, SD=1.4) than healthy ones (M=8.9, SD=1.1) (t(252)=3.45, p

Table 2: Pragmatic Competence Index Scores by Chatbot

Chatbot	Politeness (M, SD)	Empathy (M, SD)	Relevance (M, SD)	PCI (M, SD)
Wysa	3.5 (0.8)	3.9 (0.7)	3.8 (0.9)	8.2 (1.0)
Mindfulness Coach	3.3 (0.9)	3.6 (0.8)	3.5 (0.7)	7.9 (1.1)
Replika	2.8 (1.0)	2.1 (1.2)	2.6 (1.1)	6.5 (1.3)

Chart 1: Pragmatic Violation Rates by Chatbot
(Bar chart showing percentages: Wysa 28%, Mindfulness Coach 34%, Replika 48%. Use colors green, blue, red for bars.)



Qualitative case studies illuminated these trends. For Wysa, themes of structured support emerged, but pragmatic failures occurred in 15/30 analyzed transcripts, such as redirecting indirect suicidality to exercises without escalation. Replika's 22/30 violations involved relational transgressions, like affirming self-harm ideation as "strength," echoing user reports of emotional distress from AI inconsistencies. Cultural biases appeared in 12% of responses, with Western-centric advice alienating diverse participants. Ethical observations from post-surveys showed 68% of clinical users frustrated by misinterpretations, with 22% reporting increased anxiety. Bias incidents, such as gendered assumptions in responses, affected 15% of interactions. These results affirm the psychopragmatic model's utility in quantifying AI limitations, consistent with findings that chatbots fail in crisis, lacking inquiry and relationship-building.

Discussion

The findings underscore profound psychopragmatic limitations in AI chatbots, particularly their inability to navigate indirect speech and empathy, which are foundational to effective mental health support. The 36.6% violation rate aligns with prior research on LLMs' vulnerability to

nonsense or ambiguity, extending this to therapeutic contexts where misinterpretations can have dire consequences. For instance, Wysa's low violation rate (28%) reflects its hybrid design's strength in relevance, yet its failures in detecting crisis signals, as seen in the case study, indicate a need for improved context-awareness. Replika's high violation rate (48%) and low empathy scores (M=2.1) stem from its companion-oriented architecture, which fosters engagement but often violates politeness by over-affirming harmful statements. This echoes literature on algorithmic harms in human-AI relationships, where users experience relational transgressions akin to betrayal, exacerbating mental health issues. The disparity between clinical healthy users (PCI 7.3 vs. 8.9) suggests psychopragmatic differences—such as altered implicature in depression—amplify AI inadequacies, rendering chatbots less effective for those most in need. A study on Replika found harmful behaviors like harassment and self-inflicted harm suggestions, with users reporting emotional dependency.

Ethical implications are multifaceted. Therapeutic misconception, where users view chatbots as equivalents to therapists, is heightened by low PCI scores, potentially leading to harm in crises. Privacy risks from data collection, combined with biases (e.g., cultural insensitivity in 12% of responses), disproportionately impact vulnerable populations. These concerns necessitate regulatory oversight, such as ethics of care approaches, to ensure AI augments rather than replaces human care. The article on ethical issues highlights privacy breaches, lack of transparency (e.g., data sold to third parties), accuracy gaps due to weak evidence, safety risks from inadequate supervision (e.g., Tay's harmful content), and effectiveness limitations in providing genuine benefits, recommending compliance with GDPR and user involvement in development.

Recommendations include training AI on diverse, pragmatically annotated datasets to enhance politeness and empathy. Hybrid models, like Wysa's, could incorporate real-time human escalation for high-risk pragmatics. Future research should explore larger, more diverse populations and incorporate longitudinal data to assess long-term efficacy. Additionally, developing AI models with real-time learning capabilities could improve pragmatic adaptability, though this raises ethical questions about data privacy. Limitations include the simulated nature of interactions and sample diversity; real-world deployment studies are needed. Nonetheless, this discussion highlights AI's potential when pragmatically optimized, advocating for collaborative human-AI systems. A scoping review calls for more RCTs, long-term follow-up, and ethical focus on safety and privacy.

CONCLUSION

AI-powered chatbots hold promise for expanding mental health support but face significant psychopragmatic limitations, particularly in interpreting indirect speech and conveying empathy. The high rate of pragmatic violations and low PCI scores indicate that current systems are not yet suitable for standalone therapeutic use, especially for high-risk populations. By addressing these limitations through advanced NLP, ethical design, and regulatory oversight, AI chatbots could revolutionize mental health care while ensuring safety and efficacy.

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