



Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales
ICADE

**HUMAN VS AI-BASED
PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT:
PERCEPTIONS AND HELP-
SEEKING DECISIONS AMONG
YOUNG SPANIARDS**

Author: Rocío Platard de Quenin Escudero
Supervisor: Arancha Larrañaga Muguerra

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how young people in Spain perceive and evaluate human versus AI-based psychological support and how these perceptions influence their help-seeking decisions. As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly present in emotionally sensitive contexts, understanding how users interpret its value in comparison to human support has become particularly relevant. To address this, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach combining semi-structured interviews and a quantitative survey. The findings reveal that participants do not perceive human and AI assistance as interchangeable, but rather assign them various roles depending on the situation. While human psychological support is primarily associated with emotional depth, trust and relational understanding, AI-based tools are valued for their accessibility, immediacy and anonymity. The results also highlight concerns related to privacy, reliability and possible over-reliance on AI systems. Overall, the study contributes to current discussions on the responsible integration of artificial intelligence in psychological support contexts by indicating that AI is perceived as a complementary resource rather than a replacement for human help.

Keywords: Human psychological support; Artificial intelligence; Perceived value; Decision-making; Young adults

RESUMEN

Este estudio examina cómo los jóvenes en España perciben y evalúan el apoyo psicológico proporcionado por humanos frente al basado en inteligencia artificial, y cómo estas percepciones influyen en sus decisiones a la hora de buscar ayuda. A medida que la inteligencia artificial se vuelve cada vez más presente en contextos emocionalmente sensibles, resulta especialmente relevante comprender cómo los usuarios interpretan su valor en comparación con el apoyo humano. Para abordar este objetivo, la investigación adopta un enfoque de métodos mixtos que combina entrevistas semiestructuradas y una encuesta cuantitativa. Los resultados revelan que los participantes no perciben el apoyo humano y el basado en IA como intercambiables, sino que les asignan diferentes roles en función de la situación. Mientras que el apoyo psicológico humano se asocia principalmente con la profundidad emocional, la confianza y la comprensión relacional, las herramientas basadas en IA son valoradas por su accesibilidad, inmediatez y anonimato. Los resultados también ponen de manifiesto preocupaciones relacionadas con la privacidad, la fiabilidad y la posible dependencia excesiva de los sistemas de IA. En conjunto, el estudio contribuye a los debates actuales sobre la integración responsable de la inteligencia artificial en contextos de apoyo psicológico, al señalar que la IA se percibe como un recurso complementario y no como un sustituto del apoyo humano.

Palabras clave: Apoyo psicológico humano; Inteligencia artificial; Valor percibido; Toma de decisiones; Jóvenes adultos

2. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the increasing digitalization of society has significantly transformed the ways in which individuals communicate, access information and seek support. Within this context, the emergence of artificial intelligence in sensitive areas such as psychological assistance has attracted growing attention. While psychological support has traditionally relied on human interaction, AI-based tools are progressively being introduced as alternative or complementary resources raising important questions about how these new forms of support are perceived and used (World Health Organization, 2022; Smith et al., 2023).

Previous research has highlighted both, the potential and the limitations of these two types of support. Human psychological assistance is typically associated with empathy, trust and professional expertise, whereas AI-based systems are often valued for their accessibility, immediacy and anonymity (Ehsan & Hanif, 2025; Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2021; Marcu et al., 2022). However, despite these insights there is still a limited understanding of how individuals compare and evaluate these forms of support in real decision-making contexts (Smith et al., 2023). This gap is particularly relevant among younger generations who have grown up in a highly digital environment and are more familiar with technological tools including AI applications.

The main objective of this study is to analyze how young people in Spain perceive and evaluate the value created by humans versus AI-based psychological support and how these perceptions influence their decisions to use such services. More specifically, the study aims to identify the key factors that shape these perceptions, to examine the reasoning and criteria individuals use when comparing both forms of support, and to analyze the contexts in which each type is preferred. Additionally, the research seeks to explore patterns and trends in these evaluations according to participants characteristics, as well as to consider the ethical implications and perceived responsibilities associated with the use of AI in psychological support. Lastly, it aims to provide insights that contribute to a better understanding of the role of AI in this field and support its responsible integration in practice (Smith et al., 2023).

To address these objectives, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative phase is based

on semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring participants perception and reasoning, while the quantitative phase consists of a survey designed to identify broader patterns and trends. This combination allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how young Spaniards evaluate human and AI-based psychological support.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework, reviewing the existing literature on psychological support and artificial intelligence. This is followed by the research methodology including sample selection, data collection and analysis techniques. Moreover, the results are presented and discussed in relation to the literature. Finally, the thesis concludes with the main findings, study limitations and directions for future research lines.

3.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Concept of value in psychological and emotional support

In recent years, academic research in healthcare and psychological support has progressively shifted toward understanding how individuals define and evaluate the value of the care they receive. Rather than being understood only in terms of technical effectiveness or measurable outcomes, value in psychological and emotional support is widely recognized as a subjective and experience-based construct (Zeithaml, 1988; Vinot & Chellé, 2018; Zabkar et al., 2018). This shift reflects a growing awareness that individuals' evaluations of support depend not only on what is provided, but also on how care is delivered and perceived.

The literature consistently conceptualizes value in healthcare as a multidimensional notion that encompasses both tangible and intangible elements (Grönroos, 1984; Zabkar et al., 2018; Vinot & Chellé, 2018). From this perspective, perceived value extends beyond functional performance to include emotional responses, interpersonal interactions and the quality of the relationship established throughout the support process (Zubialde & Mold, 2001; Vinot & Chellé, 2018). This understanding is particularly relevant in psychological and emotional contexts, where trust, communication and personal engagement play a central role in shaping individuals' experiences of care.

One of the most prominent dimensions identified in the literature is relational value, which refers to the value generated through the relationship between the individual and the provider of support. According to Zubialde & Mold (2001), value emerges when individuals feel that their perspectives, their beliefs and many emotional needs are genuinely acknowledged within the care process. Therefore, psychological support is perceived as more valuable when it is grounded in meaningful interaction and mutual understanding, rather than in standardized or purely system-driven practices.

Relational value is very closely associated with the emotional dimension of value, which captures individuals' affective responses to psychological support. Research on perceived value in healthcare highlights that emotions such as empathy, emotional safety and reassurance significantly influence how support is evaluated (Vinot & Chellé, 2018; Ehsan & Hanif, 2025). In psychological contexts where individuals often seek help during periods of intensified emotional vulnerability, these emotional aspects become

particularly salient and may outweigh purely technical considerations (Vinot & Chellé, 2018; Ehsan & Hanif, 2025).

Furthermore, regarding relational and emotional dimensions, the literature also identifies a functional dimension of value, related to practical aspects like accessibility and perceived usefulness of the support provided. Studies on perceived value in healthcare suggest that individuals consider whether a service effectively responds to their needs and fits within their personal circumstances (Zabkar et al., 2018; Vinot & Chellé, 2018). Although functional value alone is insufficient to fully explain perceptions of value in psychological support, it interacts with emotional and relational factors to shape individuals' evaluations.

Taken as a whole, value in psychological and emotional support can be understood as a holistic and multidimensional construct. Rather than being determined by a single factor, value emerges from the interaction between emotional experiences, relational quality and functional considerations. This conceptualization provides a solid theoretical foundation for examining how individuals compare and evaluate different forms of psychological support, including human-provided and technology-mediated alternatives.

3.2. Human-provided psychological support: characteristics and perceived value

Human provided psychological support has traditionally constituted the primary form of mental health care and remains a central reference point in academic research. This form of support is characterized by direct interpersonal interaction between individuals and trained professionals allowing for the development of meaningful relationships, emotional understanding and context-sensitive responses (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Sandhu et al., 2015). As a result, human psychological support is associated with high levels of perceived value, particularly in situations where emotional vulnerability and personal engagement are central (Ehsan & Hanif, 2025; Grijak, 2018).

One of the most defining characteristics of human-provided psychological support is the therapeutic relationship often conceptualized through the notion of therapeutic alliance (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993). Previous studies consistently highlight the alliance between therapist and patient as a key factor influencing engagement and therapeutic outcomes. Horvath and Luborsky (1993) emphasize that a strong therapeutic alliance is built with

mutual trust, agreement on therapeutic goals and collaboration in the therapeutic process. This interpersonal bond facilitates emotional safety and openness which enhances individuals' perceptions of the support they receive.

In relation to the therapeutic alliance is the relational and reciprocal nature of human psychological support. Psychological care is not a one-directional process, but rather a relationship co-constructed through ongoing interaction between the individual and the professional. Sandhu et al. (2015) argues that, value emerges from this reciprocal dynamic as individuals perceive support as more meaningful when they feel emotionally acknowledged and actively involved. In this sense, the relationship itself becomes a source of value beyond the achievement of specific therapeutic outcomes.

Another core characteristic of human-provided psychological support is empathy, that plays a central role in shaping emotional experiences and perceived value (Ehsan & Hanif, 2025; Vinot & Chellé, 2018). It enables professionals to understand individuals beyond clinical symptoms responding sensitively to emotional states and personal circumstances. Research on empathy in mental health care indicates that individuals value feeling emotionally understood and not judged particularly when discussing sensitive or distressing issues (Ehsan & Hanif, 2025). Empathic interactions contribute to reassurance, trust and emotional safety which significantly influence how psychological assistance is evaluated.

Moreover, empirical evidence further suggests that empathy is strongly associated with positive patient experiences and higher perceived quality of care (Ehsan & Hanif, 2025). Emotional validation and reassurance reduce anxiety and resistance fostering a sense of acceptance and support. In psychological contexts where individuals often seek help during periods of emotional vulnerability, these emotional responses become especially salient. Consequently, empathy constitutes a fundamental component of the emotional dimension of perceived value in human psychological support (Ehsan & Hanif, 2025).

In addition to empathy, other key characteristics that distinguish human-provided psychological support are trust and authenticity. Authentic interpersonal engagement characterized by sincerity and emotional presence, has been shown to enhance trust and psychological well-being. Ryan and Ryan (2019) argue that authenticity in interpersonal relationships fosters deeper emotional connections and strengthens individuals' confidence in the support process. When professionals are perceived as genuine and

emotionally present, psychological assistance is experienced as more valuable and legitimate. Not to mention, authenticity also contributes to sustained engagement and openness within the therapeutic relationship. Individuals tend to respond more positively when interactions are perceived as sincere rather than procedurally detached. Research suggests that authentic interpersonal environments promote emotional openness and reinforce trust, enhancing the perceived value of human psychological care (Grijak, 2018).

Despite these strengths, previous studies also identify important limitations associated with human provided psychological assistance. A major constraint relates to accessibility as structural barriers such as cost, limited availability of professionals, long waiting times and geographical constraints that restrict access to face-to-face psychological care (Zabkar et al., 2018). These barriers may reduce the practical usefulness of human psychological support even when its relational and emotional quality is perceived as high (Zabkar et al., 2018).

Furthermore, social stigma remains a significant obstacle (Ehsan & Hanif, 2025). Fear of judgment, labeling or negative social consequences discourages many individuals from seeking face-to-face therapy. Research on stigma in mental health services indicates that help-seeking behavior is influenced not only by perceptions of effectiveness, but also by social attitudes and internalized beliefs. As a result, psychological support may be perceived as valuable in theory yet avoided in practice due to stigma-related concerns.

Overall, human provided psychological support is characterized by strong relational, emotional and interpersonal qualities that contribute significantly to perceived value. Therapeutic relationships, empathy, trust and authenticity play a central role in shaping individuals experiences and evaluations of psychological care. Nevertheless, structural and social limitations constrain the accessibility and use of such support highlighting the gap between perceived value and actual use.

3.3. AI-based psychological support and digital mental health tools

In this study, AI-based psychological support is understood in a broad and non-clinical sense. It refers to the use of digital tools designed to provide emotional support, facilitate self-reflection and help individuals make sense of psychological discomfort such

as stress, anxiety, uncertainty or emotional distress (Smith et al., 2023; Balcombe & De Leo, 2021). These tools are often used in early stages of help-seeking when individuals aim to better understand how they feel or to manage emotional difficulties, rather than to obtain formal diagnoses or clinical treatment (Smith et al., 2023; Tutun et al., 2023). This conceptualization aligns with contemporary research on digital mental health which emphasizes low-intensity psychological support and everyday emotional regulation rather than severe mental disorders (Smith et al., 2023; Tutun et al., 2023).

In recent years, digital mental health tools have gained increasing relevance as alternative or complementary forms of psychological support, partly in response to increasing demand and limitations in access to traditional mental health services (World Health Organization, 2022). Many advances in artificial intelligence have enabled the development of systems capable of providing mental health related assistance through digital platforms including mobile applications, conversational agents and algorithm-based interventions (Li et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). This growing interest reflects broader challenges faced by traditional mental health services, particularly those related to accessibility, availability and continuity of care (Li et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023).

AI-based psychological assistance generally refers to digital systems designed to assist individuals in managing emotional distress, monitoring mental health symptoms or engaging in low-intensity psychological interventions. Low-intensity interventions are understood as forms of psychological support aimed at emotional regulation, self-reflection and the development of coping strategies, without involving formal diagnosis or structured clinical treatment. Although these tools are designed as low-intensity forms of support, their actual use may vary depending on individual needs, and they may also be used by individuals experiencing higher levels of psychological distress (Smith et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2022). These tools are commonly positioned as supportive resources that can be used independently and flexibly. Existing research highlights that digital mental health tools aim to provide scalable and standardized forms of assistance that can be accessed independently of time and location, thus, addressing some of the structural limitations associated with face-to-face psychological services (Smith et al., 2023).

In this context, AI driven chatbots represent one of the most prominent forms of digital psychological support. These systems rely on natural language processing to simulate

supportive conversations with users, offering psychoeducation, structured coping strategies and emotional guidance (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2021; Balcombe & De Leo, 2021). Their continuous availability and immediate responsiveness differentiate them from traditional forms of psychological care and contribute to their increasing adoption. Studies suggest that such tools are particularly appealing for individuals seeking low-threshold support, reassurance or initial guidance before engaging with professional services (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2021; Balcombe & De Leo, 2021).

User perception plays a central role in shaping the perceived value of AI based psychological support. Empirical evidence indicates that users often perceive these tools as accessible, easy to use and non-judgmental (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2021). Moreover, anonymity has been identified as a key factor facilitating engagement, as it reduces fear of stigma and social evaluation especially in situations involving emotional vulnerability (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2021). For some individuals, interacting with an AI based system creates a sense of emotional safety that encourages openness and self-disclosure particularly during early stages of psychological distress. At the same time, trust emerges as a critical determinant of sustained engagement with AI based psychological tools. Acceptance is influenced not only by perceived usefulness, but also by concerns related to transparency, data privacy and reliability among others. Therefore, users may question how personal information is processed or whether AI systems are capable of responding appropriately in emotionally complex or high-risk situations (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2021; Marcu et al., 2022). Research suggests that limited trust can negatively affect perceived value and reduce long-term use of these tools (Marcu et al., 2022).

In terms of perceived benefits, digital mental health tools are frequently associated with increased accessibility and scalability. They offer immediate support, reduce geographical barriers and may lower costs for users. These characteristics align closely with functional dimensions of perceived value, particularly in contexts where access to human provided psychological support is constrained (Smith et al., 2023). For individuals experiencing uncertainty or need to moderate emotional distress, AI based tools may therefore represent a practical and accessible form of assistance.

However, the perceived value of these tools is also shaped by important limitations. Although these systems can simulate empathic responses, they do not possess genuine emotional understanding (Balcombe & De Leo, 2021). Emotional support is generated

through predefined algorithms and training data, which limits contextual sensitivity and depth. Several studies highlight that, while AI-based interactions may be experienced as supportive, they are often perceived as qualitatively different from human relationships particularly in situations involving complex emotions or long-term psychological difficulties (Balcombe & De Leo, 2021).

In addition to emotional limitations, ethical and safety concerns have been widely discussed in recent academic research. Issues related to data privacy, algorithm bias and the risk of overreliance on automated support, raise questions about the appropriate role of AI in psychological care (Conrad, 2024; Holm, 2024). Not to mention, scholars emphasize the importance of maintaining clear boundaries between AI based tools and professional intervention particularly when addressing vulnerable users or high-risk situations (Holm, 2024).

Taken as a whole, AI based psychological support and digital mental health tools offer meaningful advantages in terms of ease of access, immediacy and functional value for individuals seeking emotional support and self-understanding. At the same time, their perceived value is shaped by user perceptions, levels of trust and recognition of their emotional and ethical limitations. In consequence, these tools are most appropriately conceptualized as complementary forms of assistance within broader support seeking pathways.

To synthesize the main differences identified in the literature, Table 1 provides a comparative overview of key dimensions of perceived value in human-provided and AI-based psychological support.

Table 1: *Comparative overview of perceived value dimensions in human and AI-based psychological support.*

DIMENSION OF VALUE	HUMAN-PROVIDED SUPPORT	AI-BASED SUPPORT
Relational value	Based on therapeutic alliance , authenticity and reciprocal interpersonal bonds.	Based on simulated interaction without genuine interpersonal reciprocity.
Emotional value	Characterized by empathy , emotional validation and a strong sense of emotional safety.	Associated with a non-judgmental environment and perceived emotional safety, particularly in early disclosure.
Functional value	Constrained by structural factors such as cost, waiting	Characterized by high accessibility , immediate availability and scalability.

	times and geographical availability.	
Trust and ethics	Grounded in professional accountability , ethical standards and clinical legitimacy.	Dependent on system transparency , data privacy practices and perceived reliability.
Social barriers	Often influenced by social stigma and fear of judgment in face-to-face contexts.	Reduced barriers due to anonymity and low-threshold access .

Source: Own elaboration based on the literature reviewed in sections 3.2 and 3.3

In addition to these findings, recent developments within the AI industry further illustrate the growing interest in applying conversational technologies to health-related contexts. A relevant example is the recent announcement of ChatGPT Health by OpenAI, a version of conversational AI oriented towards health and well-being applications. This initiative has been presented as a tool oriented towards health-related information and support self-reflection and early guidance, rather than as a substitute for professional psychological support. Although such tools are still in early stages of development and their actual use remains limited, they reflect a broader trend towards the integration of AI into sensitive domains traditionally associated with human care (ChatGPT Salud 2026).

At the same time, the emergence of tools such as ChatGPT Health reinforces ongoing debates around trust, responsibility, data privacy and the appropriate boundaries between human and AI provided psychological support, which are addressed in the following section.

3.4. Ethical considerations and responsibility in AI psychological support

The use of artificial intelligence in psychological support raises important ethical considerations due to the sensitive nature of the context in which these tools operate. As a result, ethical considerations extend beyond technical performance and involve questions related to responsibility, user protection and the appropriate boundaries between human and artificial forms of support (Saeidnia et al., 2024).

One of the most frequently discussed ethical issues concerns the risk of emotional dependency and misinterpretation of AI based support. When users engage with digital tools for emotional guidance, AI systems may be perceived as emotionally competent or authoritative despite their lack of genuine understanding. The literature highlights that users can overestimate the capabilities of these tools, particularly when their limitations

are not clearly communicated which may lead to inappropriate reliance in situations that require professional psychological intervention (Meady et al., 2025).

Another ethical dimension would be responsibility. Artificial intelligence systems do not possess moral agency and cannot be held accountable for psychological outcomes. Ethical responsibility therefore remains with the developers, providers and institutions responsible for designing and regulating these tools. Scholars emphasize the importance of clearly defining roles and responsibilities to ensure that AI based systems function as supportive resources rather than autonomous decision-makers within psychological care (Holm, 2024). This ethical concern also extends to questions about how AI-based psychological systems are developed and trained including who is responsible for their design, the type of data used to train them, and whether psychological or clinical expertise is adequately incorporated into these processes (Holm, 2024).

Related to responsibility, there are concerns regarding privacy and data protection. Digital mental health tools often rely on the collection and processing of highly sensitive personal and emotional data. Ethical challenges emerge when users lack a clear understanding of how the information is stored, analyzed or shared. Insufficient transparency in data practices can undermine trust and negatively affect perceptions of safety and value. Consequently, robust data governance frameworks and explicit communication about confidentiality are considered essential ethical requirements in AI based psychological support (Meady et al., 2025).

Furthermore, ethical discussions also stress the importance of maintaining human oversight and clear boundaries in the implementation of these AI tools. While these systems can enhance accessibility and provide low intensity support, as addressed before, they should not replace professional judgment. Several studies underline the need for escalation mechanisms and referral pathways to ensure that users are directed toward appropriate human support when necessary (Meady et al., 2025; Holm, 2024; Rubeis, 2022).

Overall, ethical considerations play a decisive role in shaping the responsible use of AI-based psychological assistance. How issues related to responsibility, privacy, transparency and user protection directly influence trust and acceptance of these tools. Ethical reflection is therefore not an external constraint, but a central component in determining whether AI based psychological support can be integrated responsibly into

contemporary psychological care.

3.5. Gaps in the literature and research justification

The existing literature provides valuable insights into psychological support and the growing role of artificial intelligence in its domain. Previous studies have extensively examined the characteristics and perceived value of human-provided psychological support, as well as the potential benefits and limitations of AI-based tools when considered independently. Research has also addressed key ethical concerns related to the use of artificial intelligence in sensitive psychological contexts, however, when these strands of research are considered together, several relevant gaps remain.

First of all, although human and AI based assistance have both been widely studied, much of the existing research approaches them as separate phenomena. There is limited evidence directly comparing these two forms of support from the perspective of users. In particular, few studies examine how individuals evaluate, contrast and choose between human and AI psychological support when both options are available. This lack of comparative research limits understanding of how perceived value is constructed in real-life decision-making contexts.

Secondly, a substantial portion of the literature focuses on technical performance, clinical effectiveness or professional perspectives. While these approaches are important, they often overlook the subjective experiences of users. Not to mention, less attention has been paid to how individuals perceive emotional support, trust, accessibility and relational aspects when engaging with different forms of assistance. As a result, user centered evaluations of psychological support especially in non-clinical everyday contexts remain underexplored.

Moreover, existing studies tend to concentrate on clinical populations or structured digital mental health interventions. There is little research examining the use of general-purpose AI tools are used and perceived as sources of emotional support, self-reflection and early help seeking. This is particularly relevant in light of the increasing use of conversational AI systems by young adults to explore emotional concerns, manage psychological discomfort and make sense of their feelings outside formal therapeutic settings. Therefore, the everyday use of such tools especially among younger populations, has not

yet been sufficiently captured in empirical research.

Finally, contextual factors remain underrepresented in the literature. Few studies focus on specific cultural or national contexts, and research addressing young adults in Spain is particularly scarce. This limits the representativeness of existing findings and highlights the need for context sensitive research that accounts for social, cultural and generational differences in attitudes towards psychological support and artificial intelligence.

In response to these gaps, the present study aims to examine how young Spaniards perceive and evaluate human provided and AI based psychological support. By adopting a user-centered perspective, this research seeks to explore perceived value, trust and decision-making processes associated with different forms of assistance. In doing so, the study contributes to the existing literature by addressing an underexplored comparison, incorporating everyday uses of AI based assistance and situating the analysis within a specific cultural and generational context.

While the literature reveals several relevant gaps in relation to psychological support and the use of artificial intelligence, the present study focuses specifically on the subjective evaluation of perceived value in human-provided versus AI-based psychological support. This focus is justified by the central role that individual perceptions, emotional experiences and personal preferences play in decisions related to help-seeking, particularly in non-clinical and everyday contexts. By narrowing the scope to how users compare and assign value to different forms of psychological support, the study avoids addressing issues beyond its empirical reach and provides a clear, coherent contribution aligned with its research objectives.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodological approach used to investigate the research questions outlined in the previous sections. It describes the research design, the data collection procedures and the analytical methods employed to examine how young Spanish people perceive human and AI-based psychological support.

4.1 Research approach and mixed methods design

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach in order to analyze how young people perceive the value of human and AI support. The topic involves both, subjective experiences and broader behavioral tendencies which makes it difficult to address using only one methodological approach. For this reason, combining qualitative and quantitative methods allows the study to capture the reasoning behind participants perceptions and the general trends present within the target population.

Mixed-methods research is particularly appropriate when examining emerging technologies in socially sensitive contexts such as psychological support (Creswell, 2014). Perceptions of AI tools are often shaped by emotional reactions, ethical considerations and practical factors such as accessibility or privacy. Qualitative method allows participants to express these perceptions in their own words and explain the reasoning behind their opinions, on the other hand, quantitative method makes it possible to observe whether similar perceptions appear across a broader group of individuals. By integrating both approaches, the research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how young Spaniards evaluate the role of artificial intelligence in psychological support.

The study follows a sequential research design consisting of two stages. First, the qualitative phase that was conducted through semi-structured interviews in order to explore participants attitudes, experiences and concerns towards the topic of investigation. The aim of this stage was exploratory in order to identify the key themes that shape participants perceptions. Among the most relevant dimensions that emerged were emotional understanding, trust, accessibility, anonymity, privacy concerns and ethical considerations that will be discussed in the following chapters. After the qualitative stage, a quantitative phase was implemented through an online survey. The questionnaire was developed using the themes identified during the interviews, which

ensured coherence between both phases of the research. The survey allowed to examine whether the perceptions identified in the interviews could also be observed across a larger group of respondents.

Lastly, from a methodological perspective, the research combines both inductive and deductive reasoning. The qualitative phase follows an inductive logic allowing themes to emerge from individuals' narratives without imposing rigid predefined categories, while the quantitative phase then translates these themes into measurable variables that can be analyzed statistically.

4.2 Qualitative method

4.2.1 Sample selection

The qualitative phase consisted on eight semi-structured interviews conducted with young Spanish participants between the ages of 18 and 22. This age group was selected because it belongs to Generation Z, and represents a generation that has grown up in a highly digital environment and is therefore particularly familiar with technological tools and artificial intelligence systems (Smith et al., 2023). At the same time, individuals within this age range frequently experience academic and social pressures that may lead them to seek different forms of psychological support, making them a relevant population for the purpose of the study.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, meaning selecting individuals who possess characteristics that are particularly relevant to the chosen topic. In this case the goal was to include individuals who could provide meaningful perspectives on both traditional psychological support and AI-based tools.

Regarding the sample, participants had varying degrees of familiarity with psychological support and digital technologies. Some of them had previous experience with psychological therapy while others had not or had interacted with AI tools for advice in certain occasions. Including participants with different experiences allowed the research to capture a wider range of perspectives regarding trust, usefulness and perceived emotional understanding among others.

Although the qualitative sample was relatively small, it was appropriate for the exploratory objectives of the study. Data collection continued until the interviews began to produce similar ideas and no substantially new themes were emerging from the conversations. This stage, often referred to as thematic saturation, indicated that the interviews had generated sufficient insights into the main perceptions relevant to the research questions.

4.2.2 Data collection techniques: Interviews

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted using the Zoom platform. The length of the interviews was approximately between 30 and 45 minutes and conducting them online also facilitated scheduling and made it possible to record the conversations for later analysis.

Each interview began with a brief introductory conversation aimed at creating a relaxed atmosphere. Since the topic of psychological support can involve personal reflection, it was very important that participants felt comfortable sharing their point of view.

The interview guide was organized into several thematic sections. The first section included general questions designed to understand participants familiarity with psychological support and their previous experiences seeking emotional advice. The second section focused on perceptions of human psychological support including questions related to empathy, emotional understanding and trust in professional psychologists. The third section addressed individuals' attitudes towards AI tools used for emotional support or advice, they were asked to reflect on the perceived usefulness of these tools, their advantages, limitations and the situations in which they might consider using them. The last part of the interviews consisted on hypothetical situations involving different types of emotional challenges in order to explore which type of support they would prefer depending on the seriousness of the situation. Asking participants to explain their reasoning helped the research capture the underlying motivations behind their preferences.

The interview guide is included in appendix 1

4.2.3 Data analysis: Thematic analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytical method is widely used in qualitative research because it allows the researcher to identify patterns and recurring themes across participants responses.

The analysis process began with a careful review of the transcription of interview recordings and notes in order to become familiar with the content of the conversations. During this stage, attention was given to recurring ideas, similarities between participants responses and notable differences in their perspectives. Relevant statements were then grouped according to common themes related to the use of artificial intelligence in psychological contexts. Once these themes were identified, they were organized into broader conceptual categories that structured the qualitative findings of the study. This process allowed the analysis to move from individual responses toward a more systematic interpretation of the data.

4.3 Quantitative method

4.3.1 Survey design and implementation

The quantitative phase of the study was conducted through an online survey created using Google Forms in March 2026. The questionnaire was distributed digitally through messaging platforms and social networks allowing participants to complete it quickly and anonymously from their electronic devices. The survey had 18 questions and the estimated duration to fill it in entirely is approximately of 2 to 3 minutes. In this case the total answers collected were over 100 within Gen Z around 18 to 22 years old.

The survey was designed based on the insights obtained from the qualitative interviews. The themes that emerged during the interviews were translated into measurable variables that could be analyzed across a larger sample.

The questionnaire focused on several key dimensions related to the evaluation of psychological support. Two of the central variables examined were emotional

understanding and trust, also additional variables included accessibility and anonymity. The survey also explored privacy concerns related to the use and storage of sensitive personal information and ethical considerations in emotional contexts when interacting with AI systems.

The questionnaire contained several types of questions in order to capture these dimensions effectively. Likert-scale questions were used to measure participants level of agreement with statements, ranking questions allowed respondents to prioritize different attributes associated with each type of support. Lastly, multiple choice and scenario-based questions were included to explore how participants might respond to different emotional situations and which form of support they would prefer.

Finally, the survey also collected basic demographic information such as age and gender, as well as background information regarding participants previous experience with therapy and use of AI tools. This contextual information helped provide a clearer understanding of the factors that might influence participants perceptions.

The questionnaire is included in appendix 2

4.3.2 Data analysis: Descriptive statistics

The data collected through the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques.

The analysis began with an examination of the demographic characteristics of the sample, including age and gender distribution, as understanding the composition of the sample helped contextualize the survey results. Following this, the responses to the perception-based questions were analyzed in order to identify general tendencies related to the key variables explored in the study. As previously mentioned, Likert-scale responses were examined to determine the level of agreement with statements regarding emotional understanding, trust and privacy concerns and ranking questions were analyzed to observe which attributes respondents associated most strongly with human psychological support or AI-

based tools. Furthermore, by presenting respondents with different emotional and scenario-based situations the survey allowed the research to explore whether individuals' willingness to rely on AI tools varies depending on the seriousness of the issue being addressed.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were an important component of the research design, although the study did not involve collecting sensitive personal information or discussing participants individual mental health stories, the topic of psychological support still required careful attention to participants comfort and privacy.

Participation in both the interviews and the survey was entirely voluntary. Before taking part in the study, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the general nature of the questions involved. They were free to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences.

Moreover, anonymity and confidentiality were also ensured throughout the research process, participants were asked to sign a consent form before participating or taking part in the interviews. Individuals were identified using codes rather than their real names in order to protect their identities. Similarly, the survey was conducted anonymously through Google Forms, meaning that no personally identifiable information was collected from respondents.

Lastly, all responses were analyzed collectively and presented in aggregated form, these ethical safeguards were important for creating a research environment in which participants could express their views honestly and without concern about privacy.

5. QUALITATIVE RESULTS

This section presents the findings obtained from eight in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with young Spanish participants. The analysis followed a thematic approach allowing recurrent patterns, shared perceptions and key tensions to emerge across participants' narratives. The findings are arranged according to fundamental aspects of perceived value and decision-making processes concerning psychological assistance provided by humans as opposed to AI-based psychological support. Rather than presenting individual cases, the findings focus on common themes illustrated through verbatim quotations from participants, identified using anonymized codes (R1–R8).

To provide contextual information about the interview sample, *Table 2* summarizes the main characteristics of the participants, including age, gender and prior experience with psychological support and AI-based tools. These criteria were selected due to their relevance for understanding participants' perceptions of human and AI-based psychological support.

Table 2. Description of informants

	AGE	GENDER	FIELD OF STUDY	TYPE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT EXPERIENCE	EXPERIENCE WITH AI TOOLS
R1	19	Male	Psychology	Informal	Frequent
R2	21	Female	Medicine	Informal	Occasional
R3	21	Female	Law	Professional	Frequent
R4	18	Female	Pharmacy	Professional	Occasional
R5	21	Female	Law and International relations	Professional	Frequent
R6	22	Male	Biotechnology	Informal	Frequent
R7	20	Female	Dentistry	Informal	Occasional
R8	18	Female	Business Administration	Professional	Occasional

Source: Own elaboration

5.1 Perceived value of human psychological support

Across the interviews, participants consistently associated human-provided psychological assistance with a higher level of emotional depth and relational value,

especially when it came to circumstances involving complicated emotional experiences or personal vulnerability. Rather than focusing on the immediate resolution of problems, participants emphasized the importance of feeling emotionally understood, supported and genuinely accompanied throughout the process. This perception reflects a strong alignment with the emotional and relational dimensions of perceived value identified in the theoretical framework.

“For me, psychological support is not about fixing a problem quickly, but about feeling supported and understood throughout the process.” – R8

A central theme that emerged across participant’s narratives was the clear distinction between being listened to and being understood. Listening was described as a relatively common and superficial action; however, understanding was framed as a deeper process that requires empathy, contextual awareness and emotional involvement. Participants explained that feeling understood implies that the other person can understand not just what is being said but also how and why the individual experiences a situation in a particular way. As respondent 3 affirmed:

“Anyone can listen to you, but being understood is something else. It means that the other person really knows how you are, your values, and how you might be feeling in that situation” - R3

This distinction was repeatedly linked to empathy, which participants described as a fundamental source of value in human psychological support. Many interviewees highlighted that emotional validation and the absence of judgment were more important than receiving direct advice or quick solutions. Feeling safe to express emotions openly was often described as a necessary condition for any form of guidance to be perceived as meaningful.

“For me, the most important thing is feeling understood and not judged. Advice comes later, but first you need to feel that the other person is really there for you”- R4

Trust, also emerged as a key dimension shaping respondents’ evaluations of human psychological support. It was closely associated with professional legitimacy, confidentiality and the belief that the psychologist acts responsibly and ethically. Several participants explained that, knowing the professional is trained and bound by ethical

standards increases their willingness to open up and discuss sensitive personal issues.

“I trust a psychologist because they have studied for it and know how to handle situations properly. That gives me confidence to open up” – R8

“With a psychologist, you feel that they really know what they’re doing, and that makes you take the process more seriously”- R3

Another recurrent element highlighted by participants was the importance of physical presence and non-verbal communication. Face-to-face interaction was perceived as particularly valuable because it allows professionals to interpret emotional cues beyond verbal expression, such as tone of voice, facial expressions and body language. These elements were described as essential for establishing a strong therapeutic connection that goes beyond what can be achieved through words alone.

“A professional can see your gestures, your expressions, even what you don’t say. A machine can only work with what you tell it” – R2

Moreover, continuity over time further reinforced the perceived value of human psychological support. Participants explained that ongoing interactions with the same professional strengthen the therapeutic relationship, as the psychologist becomes familiar with their personal history, emotional patterns and ways of coping. This accumulated understanding was perceived as improving both the effectiveness and the emotional depth of the support provided.

*“When you have been going to the same psychologist for a while, they already know how you react and how you feel. That makes the support much more helpful”
- R3*

Overall, human psychological support was perceived as an intrinsic value in situations involving emotional vulnerability, long-term difficulties or complex personal issues. Its value was primarily grounded in empathy, trust, emotional understanding and relational depth, reinforcing the emotional and relational dimensions of perceived value discussed previously.

5.2 Perceived value of AI-based psychological support

Participants perceptions of AI based psychological support were notably more

ambivalent and context-dependent than those expressed towards human psychological support. Interviewees typically characterize those tools utility as situational rather than categorically rejecting them, limited and closely tied to specific functional advantages. Across interviews AI based support was primarily associated with immediacy, accessibility and ease of use while it's emotional and relational value was consistently perceived as constrained.

A recurring theme was the idea that AI based tools may be useful in momentary or low intensity situations, such as temporary stress, academic pressure or minor interpersonal conflicts. In these contexts, participants valued the possibility of receiving immediate responses without the need to wait for an appointment or involve another person. Several interviewees described AI as a form of “first outlet” that allows them to externalize thoughts and organize ideas in the moment.

“For something momentary, like being stressed about exams or having a small issue with a friend, I think AI can help you calm down or organize your thoughts”- R1

Immediacy, and constant availability were repeatedly highlighted as the main sources of value associated with AI-based support. Participants emphasized that these tools are accessible at any time and require minimal effort, which makes them particularly appealing in situations of urgency or emotional overload.

“If it’s very late or you don’t have anyone to talk to at that moment, it’s very easy to just open your phone and talk to the AI”- R6

Another factor that participants associated with AI based psychological support was anonymity. Several interviewees explained that, interacting with an AI can feel emotionally safer in certain situations because it reduces fear of judgment and social exposure. This aspect was particularly relevant when discussing topics that participants considered embarrassing or difficult to share with people in their immediate social environment.

“People sometimes use AI because there’s no face in front of you and you don’t feel judged. You don’t feel as vulnerable as when you talk to someone”- R5

Despite these perceived advantages, respondents consistently emphasized the limitations

of AI based psychological support. A central concern related to the lack of genuine emotional understanding. Interviewees often described AI responses as superficial, automatic or overly agreeable, noting that such tools tend to provide comforting messages rather than challenge users or address underlying issues.

“I feel like AI often tells you what you want to hear, not what you actually need to hear, and that can be dangerous”- R3

“Even if it’s cheaper and more accessible, I wouldn’t choose AI over a person when it comes to something emotional”- R7

This perceived absence of authentic empathy led many participants to question the appropriateness of AI based support in emotionally complex or serious situations. Not to mention several interviewees explicitly stated that they would not rely on AI when facing significant personal difficulties, emphasizing that emotional depth and human sensitivity cannot be replicated by a machine.

“For serious problems, I wouldn’t talk to an AI. It doesn’t really understand you, and it can’t replace a human who knows how you feel”- R8

The attractiveness of AI-based technologies was also noted to be influenced by cost and accessibility. Particularly for young people who may face financial or structural barriers to accessing professional psychological support. However, participants generally framed these advantages as secondary to emotional considerations, rather than as decisive factors.

As a whole, AI based psychological support was perceived as offering functional value rather than emotional or relational value. Participants recognized its usefulness for immediacy, anonymity and low-threshold support but clearly limited its role to specific, low intensity contexts. These perceptions highlight a clear boundary between the functional advantages of AI based tools and the emotional depth attributed to human psychological support.

5.3 Trust, privacy and ethical boundaries in AI-based psychological support

Beyond functional considerations, issues related to trust, privacy and ethical responsibility emerged as central factors shaping participants evaluations of AI based

psychological support. While interviewees acknowledged the practical advantages of these tools, many expressed clear concerns regarding the implications of using artificial intelligence in emotionally sensitive contexts. These concerns became particularly salient when AI was discussed as a potential form of psychological or health-related support rather than as neutral informational tool.

Across the interviews, several participants expressed discomfort with the idea of sharing highly personal or emotionally intense information with an AI system. This hesitation was often linked to uncertainty about how personal data might be stored, processed or used. Even when participants recognized that AI does not judge users in a social sense, concerns about data privacy limited their willingness to fully engage with these tools on an emotional level.

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable telling very personal things to an AI because you don’t really know where that information goes or what happens with your data”-
R4

Similarly, other respondents pointed out that, in moments of emotional distress, privacy concerns may initially be overlooked, but eventually start to cause discomfort. This reflects a tension between the immediacy offered by AI tools and the long-term implications of data exposure.

“In the moment you’re only thinking about the problem, but afterwards you do start to wonder what happens with everything you’ve told the AI”- R2

In addition to privacy, trust emerges as a fragile unconditional element in participants perceptions of AI based psychological support. Several respondents questioned the reliability of AI systems when dealing with emotionally complex situations emphasizing that, these tools lack genuine understanding and professional accountability. Unlike human psychologists, AI systems were not were not thought to be able to appropriately adjust to different personalities or fully comprehend emotional nuances.

“AI doesn’t really understand you. It just responds based on what you tell it, and that’s risky if the problem is serious”- R8

A recurring ethical concern raised by participants was the risk of emotional dependency. Some interviewees warned that the constant availability and agreeable tone of AI tools

and platforms could encourage repeated use in ways that may not be psychologically healthy. This concern was particularly strong when respondents imagined individuals relying on AI as a primary source of emotional support instead of seeking human help.

“I think it can create dependency, because you keep asking the AI over and over again and you enter a kind of loop”- R1

Closely related to this issue was the perception that AI tends to provide responses that prioritize comfort over confrontation. Several participants observed that AI often reinforces what users want to hear, rather than challenging them or encouraging a deeper reflection. This tendency was viewed as potentially misleading, especially in situations that require emotional growth or difficult decision making.

“It usually tells you what you want to hear, and that can confuse people instead of really helping them”- R3

During the interviews, participants were briefly shown an example of an emerging AI tool positioned within a health-related context, referred to as ChatGPT Health, launched this January 2026, in order to prompt reflection on the future role of AI in psychological support. Their reactions to this example reinforced concerns already expressed throughout the interviews. While participants recognized the potential usefulness of such tools for initial guidance or low-intensity situations, they consistently emphasized the need for clear boundaries and safeguards.

“It could be useful for something very specific or momentary, but I wouldn’t trust it for anything serious”- R6

Several respondents also highlighted the risk that tools like ChatGPT Health could be misused or misunderstood by users, particularly if they are perceived as substitutes for professional care. This concern reflects broader ethical questions about responsibility and the appropriate framing of AI based psychological tools.

“The problem is that people might start using it as if it were a psychologist, and that’s dangerous”- R7

“Someone who is not in a good mental state could misunderstand what the AI tells them, and that can make things worse”- R2

Taken together; trust, privacy and ethical considerations played a decisive role in shaping participants acceptance of AI based psychological support. Although AI tools were acknowledged as accessible and non-judgmental, concerns about data protection, reliability and emotional dependency imposed clear limits on their perceived value. Participants repeatedly emphasized that, in the absence of genuine empathy, professional accountability and ethical responsibility, AI based psychological support should remain a complementary and carefully limited resource rather than a replacement for human care.

5.4 Decision-making and contextual choice

Participants did not characterize the decision between AI-based and human psychological assistance as a binary or absolute one when considering their decision-making processes. Instead, their accounts revealed a contextual and situational logic, in which the perceived seriousness of the problem, emotional intensity and personal vulnerability played a decisive role. Rather than asking whether AI or human support is better, participants consistently focused on when each option might be appropriate.

A dominant criterion guiding participants decision was the severity of the emotional issue. For situations perceived as serious, emotionally complex or long-lasting, participants overwhelmingly expressed a preference for human psychological support. In these cases, the need for empathy, trust and professional responsibility outweigh the functional advantages offered by AI based tools.

“If it’s something serious or something that really affects you emotionally, I think you need a human who can really understand you”- R8

“For deep or long-term problems, I would always choose a psychologist. AI just isn’t enough for that”- R3

In contrast, AI based psychological support was primarily considered appropriate in situations characterized by low emotional intensity, immediacy or temporary stress. Respondents described using AI as a first step, a complementary outlet or a short-term resource when human support was not immediately available. This use was often framed as instrumental rather than emotional.

“Sometimes you just need to get something off your chest quickly, and in that

moment, AI can help you think more clearly” – R1

“It’s useful when you don’t have anyone to talk to right away, but it’s not the same as talking to a person”- R6

Furthermore, another factor influencing decision-making was emotional exposure. Several interviewees explained that, in certain situations interacting with AI felt emotionally safer than speaking to another person. Fear of judgment, embarrassment or social consequences led some participants to temporarily prefer AI based tools, particularly when discussing sensitive or comfortable topics.

“With AI you don’t feel judged, so sometimes it’s easier to say things you wouldn’t say out loud to someone”- R5

However, this perceived emotional safety did not translate into long-term preference. Participants repeatedly emphasized that, once the emotional intensity increased or the issue required deeper reflection, AI based support was no longer considered sufficient. The absence of genuine empathy and the inability to engage in meaningful emotional dialogue imposed clear limits on its use.

“At some point you realize that it’s not really helping you move forward, because it doesn’t truly understand what you’re feeling” – R2

Cost and accessibility also played a role in participants decision-making, particularly among younger individuals facing structural or financial barriers to professional care. While AI based tools were recognized as more affordable and accessible, these advantages were rarely described as decisive when emotional well-being was at stake.

“It’s cheaper and easier, yes, but when it comes to mental health, that’s not the most important thing” – R7

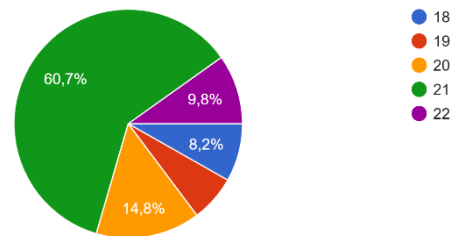
Taken as a whole, the participants narratives show a complex decision-making process based more on contextual evaluation than on preferred technology. Human psychological support was consistently prioritized in situations involving emotional depth, vulnerability or long-term difficulties, whereas AI based tools were positioned as situational, low threshold resources. This distinction highlights how young Spanish individuals actively negotiate their role of AI in psychological support, establishing clear boundaries based on emotional needs and perceived risk.

5.2 QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The survey included a total of 18 questions designed to measure perceptions of human and AI-based psychological support, including emotional understanding, trust, accessibility, anonymity, privacy concerns and decision-making preferences.

5.2.1 Sample characteristics

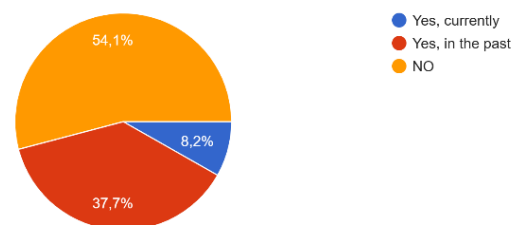
The survey targeted young individuals within the age range defined between 18 and 22 years old. The age distribution shows that the majority are in the early adulthood stage particularly between the late teenage years and early twenties. The majority of participants are 21 years old (60%), followed by individuals aged 20 (14%) and 22 (9%), while younger respondents aged 18 represent 8% of the sample. This relatively homogeneous age distribution profile, aligns with the study's objective of examining perceptions among young people who are currently navigating academic, social and emotional challenges which are typical of this life stage.



Graph 1: Age distribution of respondents

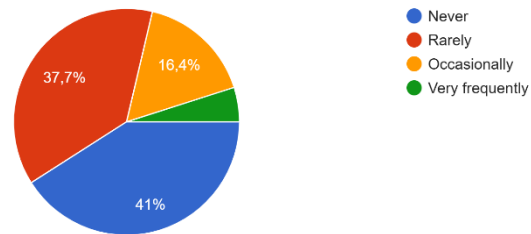
Regarding gender distribution, the sample shows a clear predominance of female respondents that represent 77% of the sample, while male participants represent a 23% of the total responses. When interpreting the results this should be considered, however it remains consistent with patterns observed in research related to psychological support and mental health discussions, where female participants tend to be more represented.

The survey also explored previous exposure to psychological support services, responses indicate that slightly more than half of respondents have never attended psychological therapy 54%, while 37% reported having attended therapy in the past and 8% indicated that they are currently receiving psychological support. The familiarity with professional psychological support is relevant when interpreting later responses regarding trust, emotional understanding and perceived effectiveness of different types of support.



Graph 2: Exposure to professional psychological support

Moreover, respondents were asked whether they had ever used artificial intelligence tools such as conversational AI systems for emotional support or advice. The results show that a large share of respondents reported that they had never used AI tools for discussing personal or emotional topics (41%), while 37% indicated that they had used them rarely and 16% occasionally, only a small portion reported a frequent use. This finding is particularly relevant for the present research as it suggests that many respondents already possess some level of experience interacting with AI-based systems when reflecting on their perceived usefulness.



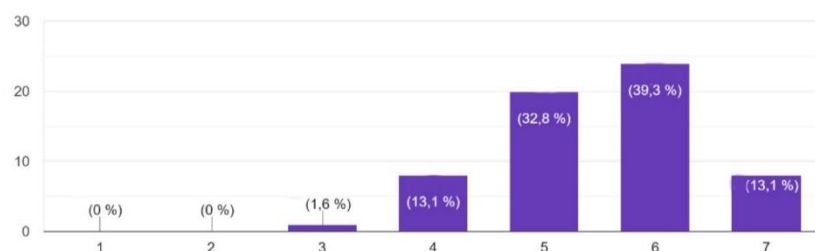
Graph 3: Previous usage of AI tools

5.2.2 Descriptive Statistics of key variables

The survey included several Likert-scale questions designed to measure participant's perceptions of both human psychological support and AI-based psychological tools. These variables were derived from the themes identified in the qualitative phase of the research, particularly emotional understanding, trust, accessibility and ethical concerns.

One of the clearest patterns observed in the data relates to the perceived emotional understanding provided by human psychologists. As responses show a strong concentration in the upper range of the scale, with more than 70% of respondents selecting values 5 or 6, indicating that participants largely perceive human professionals as capable of understanding complex emotional situations. This pattern reinforces the strong association between human psychological support and emotional depth identified in the qualitative phase. A similar pattern appears in relation to trust; participants expressed significantly higher levels of trust in human psychologist in contrast with AI-based tools. High agreement levels dominate the responses, reflecting

A human psychologist can genuinely understand my emotions in depth. Answer from 1 to 7



Graph 4: Participants answer distribution

the importance of professional expertise, training and interpersonal interaction in establishing trust in psychological contexts.

In order to further explore the perceived value of human psychological support, respondents in the survey were asked to rank the main advantages associated with consulting a human psychologist. The results showed that long-term support and empathy are among the most valued attributes. While empathy was frequently mentioned as an important characteristic, professional expertise also appears to be consistently ranked among the top positions. Another relevant aspect highlighted is the feeling of being accompanied during difficult situations. This factor suggests that individuals value the relational dimension of human psychological support which involves emotional presence and the ability to establish a meaningful interpersonal connection. Confidentiality was also perceived as an important attribute, although it tended to appear slightly less frequently among the highest ranked advantages.

Table 3. *Perceived importance of the main advantages associated with human psychological support based on the ranking results.*

FACTOR	MOST SELECTED (TOP RANKS)
Long-term support	High
Empathy	High
Professional expertise	High
Feeling accompanied	Moderate
Confidentiality	Moderate

Source: own elaboration

A similar ranking question was included to explore the perceived advantages of AI-based tools. In contrast to human support, the results highlight a stronger emphasis on functional attributes. The most prioritized advantages were immediacy and accessibility, suggesting that individuals value the ability of AI systems to provide fast responses and continuous availability. Anonymity also emerged as an important characteristic indicating that some individuals perceive AI tools as a safe space where personal concerns can be shared with less fear of judgement. In comparison, low cost was identified as a potential advantage but appeared slightly less central in the rankings compared with accessibility and immediacy. The responses overall show that individuals associate AI based support primarily with convenience and practical accessibility rather than emotional depth.

Table 4. *Perceived importance of AI-based psychological support advantages based on the ranking results.*

FACTOR	MOST SELECTED (TOP RANKS)
Accessibility	High
Immediacy	High
Helps organize thoughts	Moderate-high
Anonymity	Moderate
Low cost	Low-moderate

Source: own elaboration

The descriptive results also reveal important concerns regarding the use of AI in psychological contexts. Privacy appears as an important issue and many respondents expressed uncertainty about how personal information and data might be handled when interacting with AI systems. Not to mention, reliability concerns are also evident in the responses, suggesting that participants may question the accuracy or appropriateness of advice generated by automated systems.

Finally, some participants were asked about the potential risk of emotional dependency associated with AI tools. The results show that 37% of respondents strongly agree with this statement, while 23% selected the second highest level of agreement, suggesting that many participants are aware of the potential psychological risks associated with frequent reliance on AI systems.

5.2.3 Relationships between variables

Beyond the descriptive analysis, several patterns emerge when considering how different variables interact. These relationships provide further insight and understanding into how respondents evaluate human and AI-based psychological support.

A particularly clear pattern can be observed between emotional understanding and trust. The respondents who rated human psychologists highly in terms of emotional understanding, also tended to report higher levels of trust in human professionals. Meaning, this relationship suggests that perceived empathy and emotional comprehension play a central role in building trust in psychological support contexts.

On the other hand, AI based tools tend to be valued more strongly in relation to functional attributes rather than emotional qualities. The participants who rated AI highly in terms of accessibility and immediacy did not necessarily attribute the same level of emotional understanding to these systems. So, this indicates that respondents perceived AI primarily as a practical support tool instead of a substitute for human emotional interaction.

Another relevant relationship emerges between privacy concerns and willingness to rely on AI systems. Respondents who expressed stronger concerns about data privacy or information security showed lower levels of confidence in AI based support tools. This highlights the role that ethical and technological concerns may play in shaping the adoption of AI systems in sensitive areas such as mental health support. At the same time, anonymity appears to moderate some of these concerns. Participants who valued anonymity offered by AI systems were more open to using these tools for certain types of emotional support, particularly in situations where discussing personal issues with another person might feel uncomfortable.

Overall, these relationships suggest that respondents differentiate clearly between the emotional value associated with human psychological support and the functional advantages provided by AI tools. While human professionals are associated with emotional depth, trust and professional expertise, AI systems are primarily valued for their accessibility, convenience and anonymity.

Table 5: Summary comparison of key variables: human vs AI support

This Table summarizes the main differences observed between perceptions of human psychological support and AI-based psychological tools across the key variables analyzed in the survey.

DIMENSION	Human psychological support	AI-based psychological tools
EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING	High perceived emotional understanding	Limited perceived emotional understanding
TRUST	High trust associated with professional expertise	Lower trust due to reliability concerns

ACCESSIBILITY	More limited due to appointments and availability	Highly accessible and available at any time
IMMEDIACY	Dependent on professional availability	Immediate responses
ANONYMITY	Lower level of anonymity	Higher perceived anonymity
PRIVACY CONCERNS	Lower perceived privacy concerns	Higher concerns about data privacy
EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY RISK	Rarely associated with dependency	Some concern about emotional dependency

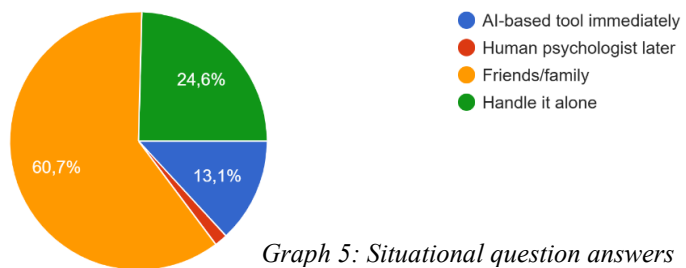
Source: own elaboration

5.2.4 Decision-making scenarios

The survey also included several situational questions designed to explore how participants would choose between human and AI tools in different contexts. These scenarios provide additional insight to how individuals evaluate the role of AI in psychological assistance.

Firstly, regarding situations involving relatively common academic stress, such as preparing for an exam, the majority indicated that they would first turn to friends or family members 60%.

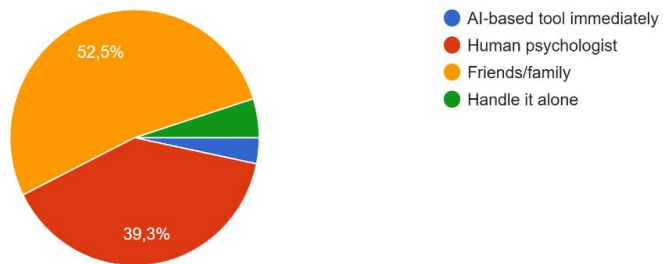
A notable proportion of participants 24% stated that they would prefer to manage the situation on their own, while 13% reported that they would consider using an AI-based tool. In these contexts, the convenience and immediacy of AI appear to be particularly relevant; respondents may perceive these tools as useful for obtaining quick suggestions, study strategies or general reassurance.



Graph 5: Situational question answers

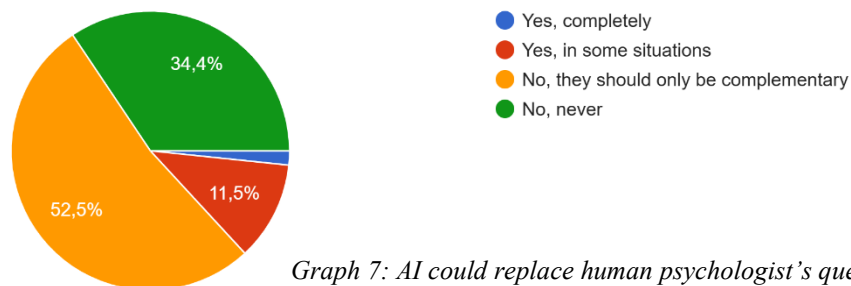
A notable proportion of participants 24% stated that they would prefer to manage the situation on their own, while 13% reported that they would consider using an AI-based tool. In these contexts, the convenience and immediacy of AI appear to be particularly relevant; respondents may perceive these tools as useful for obtaining quick suggestions, study strategies or general reassurance.

However, the pattern changes significantly when participants were asked to consider more serious emotional situations. When they were confronted with scenarios involving deeper emotional distress or personal difficulties, individuals indicated a preference for seeking support from a human psychologist rather than relying on AI systems. In this case, 39% indicated that they would prefer to speak with a human psychologist, while 52% would turn to friends or family members. Only a very small portion of respondents selected AI tools as their preferred source of support in this context. This means that the perceived emotional competence and professional training of human psychologists remain essential in situations involving complex emotional needs.



Graph 6: Long-term emotional issue question

Moreover, respondents were asked whether AI could potentially replace human psychologists in the future. The results indicate a strong level of skepticism regarding this possibility. More than a half of respondents rejected the idea that AI systems could fully substitute professional psychological support. Instead, responses suggest as mentioned previously that AI is more likely to be perceived as a complementary tool rather than a



replacement.

Graph 7: AI could replace human psychologist's question

Taken together, these findings reinforce the broader pattern observed throughout the survey. While AI tools are recognized for their accessibility and convenience, human psychological support continues to be associated with deeper emotional understanding, trust and professional credibility.

5.3 Complementary views of qualitative and quantitative findings

The comparison between the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research

reveals several consistent patterns regarding how young people perceive human psychological support and AI based tools. While each methodological approach provides a different perspective on the topic, the results are mainly focused around a similar set of themes.

First of all, one of the most evident points of convergence concerns the perceived emotional value of human psychological support. During the qualitative interviews participants frequently associated human psychologists with empathy, emotional understanding and the ability to provide meaningful relational support. These perceptions are strongly reflected in the survey where respondents rated human psychologists highly in terms of emotional understanding and trust. Together, these findings suggest that emotional depth and relational support remain central elements in how individuals evaluate professional psychological care.

Secondly, the results also show strong agreement regarding the perceived strengths of AI-based tools. In the interviews individuals highlighted the accessibility and immediacy as key advantages of AI systems. Similar patterns appear in the survey results, where these same attributes were consistently identified as the main benefits of AI tools, indicating that respondents recognize the practical value of AI systems particularly from obtaining quick responses or guidance.

At the same time, both phases of the research reveal several concerns regarding the use of AI for emotional support. Interviewees expressed doubts about the reliability of AI generated advice and raised concerns about privacy and reliability when interacting with these systems. In addition, some respondents indicated concern about the possibility of emotional dependence when AI tools are used frequently.

Moreover, a similar pattern also emerges regarding the role of AI in psychological support. In the interviews, individuals generally did not perceive AI as a replacement for psychologists but rather as a complementary resource and the survey results supports this view as most respondents indicated that AI should serve as a supportive tool.

To conclude, the situational questions included in the survey further reinforce this distinction, while AI tools may be considered useful in situations involving everyday stress or minor concerns, respondents show a stronger preference for human psychological support when facing more serious emotional problems. Lastly the key idea

as mentioned previously is that human psychological support is associated with empathy, trust and relational understanding whereas AI-based tools are mainly valued for their accessibility, immediacy and anonymity.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Discussion in relation to previous literature

The findings of this investigation provide a complex comprehension of how young Spaniards evaluate human and AI-based psychological support, reinforcing and extending the theoretical framework developed in previous sections. Instead of simply replicating existing knowledge the results highlight how different dimensions of perceived value are activated depending on the context in which support is considered.

In line with prior literature, human psychological support is consistently associated with emotional and relational value. Participants emphasis on empathy, trust and feeling genuinely understood strongly support existing research on the therapeutic alliance as a central component of perceived value (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Ehsan & Hanif, 2025). However, the findings go a step further by showing that these elements are not only valued in general terms, but become decisive specifically in situations involving complexity or vulnerability, which suggests that emotional and relational dimensions are not equally relevant across all contexts but become more intense as the perceived seriousness of the situation increases.

By contrast, the perceived value of AI-based tools aligns with the functional dimension described in the literature (Smith et al., 2023; Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2021), but the findings clarify the limits of its value. Accessibility, immediacy and anonymity are clearly recognized as advantages but they do not translate into a perception of emotional adequacy. Moreover, participants do not reject AI as such, but rather position it within a restricted scope of use, so this distinction refines previous research by showing that the limitation of AI is not only technical, but also perceptual: users do not attribute to these systems the kind of understanding required in emotionally demanding situations.

This boundary is further reinforced by ethical concerns and trust. According to previous consistent research (Holm, 2024; Meadi et al., 2025) issues related to data security, privacy and reliability make users less inclined to interact with AI in delicate situations. Nevertheless, the findings reveal a more complex dynamic, anonymity reduces obstacles to self-disclosure at first, but it also creates uncertainty about data usage which can undermine trust over time. This conflict shows that perceived safety in AI-based interactions is conditional and sometimes conflicting rather than constant.

One of the most significant contributions of this research lies in how it conceptualizes decision-making. Unlike much of the literature, which tends to evaluate human and AI support separately, the results show that individuals adopt a situational approach. The choice between human and AI support is not framed as a preference between two alternatives, but as a contextual judgement based on different factors like emotional intensity, urgency and perceived risk. This indicates that the perceived value is not fixed but dynamically constructed depending on the situation.

This insight directly contributes to the research question as it demonstrates that young people do not evaluate AI and human support in absolute terms, instead they evaluate it through a process of comparison shaped by context. While AI is utilized as an instantaneous, low-threshold resource, human help is always preferred when emotional depth, accountability, and long-term understanding are needed. In this sense, AI is seen as an additional tool in a larger support-seeking process rather than as a replacement.

Furthermore, this study addresses key gaps identified in the literature. It provides direct comparison between human and AI psychological support from a user-centered perspective, which is something that remains limited in the existing literature. In addition, by focusing on every day, non-clinical use among young Spanish people, the results offer a more realistic account of how AI is integrated into daily emotional practices. Not to mention, the Spanish context also adds a cultural dimension that is often underrepresented in previous studies. Therefore, this study contributes by demonstrating that the evaluation of psychological support is not based on a fixed hierarchy of preferences, but on a dynamic assessment of situational needs.

Overall, the results support the idea that perceived value in psychological support is context-dependent and intrinsically multifaceted. AI-based tools play a clearly defined functional role, while human psychological support continues to hold a commanding position in terms of emotional and relational value. According to the study, young individuals actively negotiate the role of AI by setting boundaries based on perceived constraints, emotional needs and trust. This contributes to a more comprehensive knowledge of how artificial intelligence can be included into psychological assistance without taking the place of essentially human aspects of care.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Summary of the main findings

This study set out to examine how young Spaniards perceive and evaluate human and AI-based psychological support, focusing on how these perceptions shape their decisions when looking for assistance or help. The findings show that individuals do not consider these two forms of support as interchangeable but as fundamentally different resources that fulfill distinct roles depending on the context and the nature of the emotional need.

One of the most consistent findings across both the qualitative and quantitative phases is the strong association between human psychological support and emotional and relational value. Participants emphasized the importance of empathy, feeling genuinely understood and trusted in situations involving emotional vulnerability or complexity. Moreover, human psychologists were not only perceived as technically competent but also as capable of offering a deeper level of understanding that goes beyond surface interaction. Therefore, this suggests that relational dynamics, emotional validation and professional legitimacy serve as solid foundations for the perceived value of human support.

In contrast, AI tools were primarily associated with functional value rather than emotional depth as individuals identified clear advantages like accessibility and anonymity which make these tools useful in situations requiring quick support or low-intensity emotional regulation. Furthermore, AI was often described as a first step or an initial outlet that allows individuals to externalize thoughts or organize ideas. However, it was consistently perceived as limited in its ability to provide genuine emotional understanding which restricts its use in more complex situations.

A key finding of this thesis is that the relationship between human and AI is characterized by its complementarity not by substitution. Both forms are integrated into individuals decision-making processes depending on the situation, rather than replacing one another. AI tools are used as accessible and immediate resources while human psychological support is the chosen option in cases involving emotional depth or long-term difficulties. Therefore, decision-making emerges as a central element in understanding how these forms of support are evaluated as participants determine their choice based on factors such as urgency and emotional intensity. While AI may be sufficient in low-intensity

contexts, more complex situations increase the need for empathy and professional responsibility leading individuals to prioritize human support.

Finally, the thesis highlights important concerns related to trust, privacy and ethical implication in the use of AI-based tools. Although anonymity can facilitate openness it also generates uncertainty regarding data handling and system reliability. In addition, potential risk of emotional dependency and limitations of AI responses reinforce the idea that these tools should remain as a complementary resource and not as a replacement for human care. Overall, young individuals adopt a context-dependent approach where human support remains central and AI is understood as a complementary resource

7.2 Study limitations

Despite providing valuable insights into young people's perceptions of psychological support, this study also presents several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First of all, the qualitative phase involved a relatively small number of participants, while interviews provided rich and detailed insights into participants reasoning and experiences, it cannot be considered representative of the whole population. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than generalizable.

Secondly, the quantitative sample was concentrated within a specific age group (18-22 years old) and although this focus aligns with the objectives of the research, it limits the extent to which the findings can be extended to other age groups, whose attitudes towards psychological support and AI might differ. Another limitation concerns the demographic composition of the survey respondents, as the sample contained a higher proportion of female than male, which may influence certain attitudes toward psychological support and help seeking behavior. Finally, the quantitative analysis is descriptive in nature, although this approach was appropriate for identifying general trends, it does not allow for deeper examination of causal relationships between variables. Future research with larger and more diverse samples could apply more advanced statistical techniques to explore these relationships in greater depth.

Overall, despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach adopted in this study

provides a useful exploratory framework for examining young people's perceptions of psychological support in both human and AI-based contexts. By combining qualitative insights with quantitative trends, the research captures both the reasoning behind participants preferences and the broader patterns within the sample.

7.2.1 Future research lines

Building on the limitations identified, several directions for future research can be proposed.

First, future studies could expand the sample to include a more diverse population in terms of age, cultural background and level of experience with psychological support. This would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of how perceptions of AI and human support vary across different demographic groups.

Secondly, in order to better understand the links between characteristics like trust, emotional understanding and desire to use AI solutions, future study could employ more sophisticated quantitative techniques such as regression analysis or experimental designs. These techniques would facilitate the transition from descriptive patterns to more exploratory insights.

Additionally, future research might explore a longitudinal approach, examining how individuals' opinions and use of AI-based psychological assistance evolve over time, especially as these technologies become more integrated into everyday life.

8. DECLARATION OF USE OF GENERATIVE AI TOOLS

I Rocío Platard de Quenin Escudero, student of the Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and Management at Universidad Pontificia Comillas, I declare that, in the preparation of my Final Degree Project entitled "*Human VS AI-based psychological support: perceptions and help-seeking decisions among young Spaniards*", I have used Generative Artificial Intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT or similar, exclusively as a complementary support in specific stages of the writing process.

More specifically, these tools were used to improve the clarity, coherence and grammatical accuracy of the text particularly in relation to academic writing in English. In addition, they were used to receive suggestions for refining the structure and formulation of certain sections and to assist in the initial structuring of some elements such as tables or formats which were adapted and completed independently, as well as to brainstorm ideas or possible areas of investigation. In some cases, AI tools were also used to support the translation and revision of specific fragments between Spanish and English in order to ensure linguistic precision.

I declare that these tools have not been used to generate original academic content, neither development of results, analysis or conclusions presented in this work. All ideas, interpretations and contributions are the result of my own research and effort.

Finally, I confirm that all information included in this project is original, except where properly cited and that I have complied with the academic and ethical standards established by the university. I am aware of the academic and ethical implications of submitting non-original work and accept the consequences of any violation of this declaration.

Date: 26 March 2026

Signature : Rocío Platard de Quenin Escudero

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rocio', with a stylized flourish underneath.

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10. ANNEXES

APPENDIX 1. *INTERVIEW GUIDE*

BLOCK 1. Initial approach to emotional and psychological support

1. To begin with, how do you usually manage moments of high stress or emotional overload, either personally or among your friends? Do you tend to talk about it or keep it to yourself?
2. For you, what does it really mean to receive emotional or psychological support?

BLOCK 2. Perceived value of human psychological support

3. If you decided to seek support from a professional psychologist, what aspects would you value most in that person?
4. What difference do you see between someone “listening to you” and someone truly “understanding you”? How can you tell when a professional is genuinely connected to you?
5. Why do you think many young people do not attend face-to-face therapy, even when they might need it?

BLOCK 3. Perceived value of AI-based psychological support

6. Have you heard of or do you know anyone who uses ChatGPT or other AI-based tools to vent or clarify their thoughts? Why do you think people turn to these tools before speaking to another person?
7. Imagine you are feeling emotionally distressed late at night. Would you consider talking to an AI-based tool? What advantages would you see compared to waiting to speak with a human professional?
8. Regarding privacy, would you feel more comfortable sharing something personal with an AI because it does not judge, or would you be more concerned about what happens to your data?

BLOCK 4. Direct comparison, ethical considerations and decision-making

9. In an emotionally difficult situation, what factors would influence your decision to choose human psychological support or AI-based support?

10. Do you think the value provided by a psychologist and by an AI-based tool is fundamentally different, or does it depend on the situation?
11. Thinking only about human psychological support, what would you say are the three most important factors for you? How would you rank them?
12. Now thinking only about AI-based psychological support, what would you say are the three most important factors for you? How would you rank them?
13. Do you think an AI can ever show real empathy, or is it simply imitating what it has learned? Would it matter to you if that empathy were artificial as long as it made you feel better?
14. If you were facing a minor problem, such as exam-related stress, what option would you choose: a short conversation with an AI immediately or a longer session with a psychologist at a later time? Why?
15. When dealing with a serious or long-term emotional issue, who would you trust more: a human professional or an AI-based tool? Why?
16. After briefly being shown how an emerging AI health-oriented tool (ChatGPT Health) works, what is your opinion about using this type of technology for psychological or emotional support? What potential benefits and risks do you associate with it?

BLOCK 5. Future perspective and closure

17. Looking ahead, how do you imagine the role of artificial intelligence in providing psychological support to young people in the future?
18. Finally, and only if you feel comfortable answering, have you ever used professional psychological support or AI-based tools for emotional support?
 - *If yes:*
 - At what moment in your life?
 - How was the experience overall?
 - *If no:*
 - What has led you not to use them so far?

19. Is there anything about this topic that I have not asked you and that you think is important to mention?

APPENDIX 2. QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1. Select your age

- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22

Q2. Choose your gender

- Male
- Female
- I don't want to disclose

Section 2: Perceived value

Q3 A human psychologist can genuinely understand my emotions in depth. Answer from 1 to 7 (Likert scale question, 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Q4 An AI-based psychological tool can genuinely understand my emotions in depth. Answer from 1 to 7 (Likert scale question, 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Q5 I would trust a human psychologist with very personal emotional issues. Answer from 1 to 7 (Likert scale question, 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Q6 I would trust an AI-based tool with very personal emotional issues. Answer from 1 to 7 (Likert scale question, 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Q7 Human psychological support is easily accessible when I need it. Answer from 1 to 7. (Likert scale question, 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Q8 AI-based psychological support is immediately accessible when I need it. Answer from 1 to 7.

Q9. What is the MAIN advantage of human psychological support? Rank them from 1(most important) to 5(least important)

- Emotional understanding and empathy
- Professional expertise
- Feeling accompanied
- Confidentiality
- Long-term support

Q10. What is the main advantage of AI-based psychological tools? Rank them from 1(most important) to 5(least important)

- Immediate response
- Anonymity
- Ease of access
- Low cost
- Helps organize thoughts

Section 3: Ethics and boundaries

Q11. I am concerned about how AI-based psychological tools handle personal data.
(Likert scale question, 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Q12. AI-based psychological tools could create emotional dependency if used frequently.
(Likert scale question, 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Q13. Do you believe AI-based psychological tools could ever replace human psychologists?

- Yes, completely
- Yes, in some situations
- No, they should only be complementary
- No, never

Section 4: Decision making

Q14. Imagine you feel stressed about exams late at night. What would you choose first?

- AI-based tool immediately
- Human psychologist later
- Friends/family
- Handle it alone

Q15. Imagine you are facing a serious long-term emotional issue. What would you choose first?

- AI-based tool
- Human psychologist
- Friends/family
- No one

Q16. The more serious the emotional problem, the more likely I am to choose human psychological support over AI. (Likert scale question, 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree)

Q17. Have you ever used professional psychological support?

- Yes, currently
- Yes, in the past
- No

Q18. How often have you used AI tools to talk about personal or emotional topics?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Very frequently