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E-Mental Health: A Qualitative Study of Telepsychology's Role in Mental Health Accessibility and Help-Seeking Behaviors

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Abstract

This study explored the role of telepsychology in mental health accessibility and help-seeking behaviors among telepsychology users and mental health service providers in the Philippines. Anchored on the increasing demand for accessible mental health services and the integration of digital technology in psychological care, the study utilized the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach to examine participants lived experiences regarding telepsychology. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews involving eight (8) participants, composed of four (4) telepsychology users and four (4) mental health service providers. The study identified six major domains: Perceptions and Experiences of Telepsychology, Accessibility of Telepsychology Services, Barriers to Telepsychology, Influence on Help-Seeking Behaviors, Technological and Psychological Factors Affecting Use, and Recommendations for Improving Telepsychology. Findings revealed that telepsychology improved access to mental health services by reducing geographical, financial, and logistical barriers while promoting flexibility, convenience, and continuity of care. Participants also reported increased willingness to seek professional help due to familiarity with digital platforms, relative anonymity, and ease of access. However, challenges such as unstable internet connectivity, privacy concerns, technological disruptions, reduced nonverbal communication, and limitations in behavioral observation affected service delivery and therapeutic engagement. Despite these challenges, participants perceived telepsychology as a viable, ethical, and sustainable approach to mental health care. The study further recommended strengthening digital infrastructure, improving clinician training, developing secure platforms, and establishing standardized protocols to enhance the quality and sustainability of telepsychology services. The study supports Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3: Good Health and Well-Being by promoting accessible mental health services through digital platforms. It also aligns with SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities by addressing barriers experienced by individuals in remote and underserved communities. The sustainability impact of the study lies in its contribution to improving long-term access to mental health services through technology-based interventions. The findings support the development of sustainable and inclusive mental health care systems that can strengthen institutional practices, service continuity, and community well-being.

Keywords: Accessibility, Consensual Qualitative Research, Help-Seeking Behaviors, Mental Health, Mental Health Accessibility, Philippines, Telepsychology, Technological Barriers

1. Introduction

The growing prevalence of mental health concerns worldwide has intensified the need for accessible and effective mental health services. Mental health conditions contribute significantly to global disability rates, yet many individuals remain unable to receive treatment due to stigma, financial limitations, geographical barriers, and shortages of mental health professionals (Evans-Lacko et al., 2022). In the Philippines, despite the implementation of the Mental Health Act of 2018, access to psychological services remains inadequate because of limited funding, insufficient mental health professionals, and persistent social stigma (Alibudbud, 2024). Traditional face-to-face therapy often presents additional barriers such as high costs, long waiting times, transportation difficulties, and limited-service availability (Berardi et al., 2024). Consequently, many individuals experiencing mental health concerns remain untreated, resulting in worsening psychological conditions and reduced quality of life (Kovacevic, 2021). In response, digital mental health technologies, particularly telepsychology, have become increasingly important in addressing gaps in mental health service delivery (American Psychological Association, 2024).

Telepsychology allows mental health professionals to provide psychological services remotely through digital platforms, reducing geographical and logistical barriers while increasing convenience and accessibility (Stein & Prost, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of telepsychology, especially for individuals in rural and underserved areas who required continued access to mental health support during lockdowns and mobility restrictions (Bollettino et al., 2023). In the Philippines, platforms such as MindYou and services developed by the Philippine General Hospital expanded access to online psychological care (Thim, 2025; MindYou, 2021). Despite these developments, concerns remain regarding privacy, digital inequality, technological limitations, and reduced therapeutic connection in online settings (Perez, 2025).

These concerns demonstrate the complexity of integrating digital technologies into mental health care and emphasize the need to understand both users' and providers lived experiences with telepsychology.

Existing literature consistently identifies telepsychology as a promising approach for improving access to mental health services. Studies indicate that digital mental health solutions help reduce treatment gaps, especially among university students and young adults who often struggle to access traditional mental health care (Gbollie et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2024). Digital mental health interventions are recognized for their convenience, flexibility, and ability to serve as an initial step toward professional help-seeking (Bond et al., 2023). Telepsychology has become particularly valuable in extending mental health services to remote and underserved populations while maintaining continuity of care during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jarabejo & Mabulay, 2024; Perez, 2025; Ruggiero et al., 2024). Research further suggests that telepsychology improves documentation, treatment monitoring, and accessibility for individuals who would otherwise struggle to obtain care (Ramos, 2024). Studies also report that users perceive telepsychology as feasible, appropriate, and effective when supported by reliable technological infrastructure and confidentiality protections (Gazzi et al., 2022).

However, literature also highlights persistent barriers associated with digital mental health services. These include unstable internet connectivity, privacy concerns, cultural stigma, financial constraints, low mental health literacy, and the broader digital divide affecting marginalized populations (Olusegun, 2021; Muhorakeye & Biracyaza, 2021; Choxi et al., 2022). Clinicians additionally report challenges related to online assessment accuracy, limited observation of non-verbal cues, and ethical concerns in telepsychology practice (Zhang, 2017). Help-seeking behavior among young adults is another significant theme in the literature. Young adults are particularly vulnerable to mental health disorders but are often the least likely age group to seek professional treatment (Mitchell et al., 2016). Online mental health platforms may reduce stigma and increase willingness to seek help by providing anonymity, accessibility, and familiarity with digital communication (Pretorius et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Nevertheless, societal attitudes, cultural beliefs, and stigma continue to discourage many individuals from seeking professional mental health support (Kurshid et al., 2026).

Globally, mental health disorders continue to increase across different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds, while access to care remains unequal (Evans-Lacko et al., 2022). The integration of digital technologies into mental health systems has therefore become an international priority to improve service accessibility and continuity (Bond et al., 2023). Nationally, the Philippines continues to experience major mental health care challenges due to shortages of licensed psychologists and psychiatrists, limited government funding, and uneven distribution of services across urban and rural communities (Alibudbud, 2024). The pandemic intensified these concerns and accelerated the shift toward telepsychology and digital mental health platforms (Bollettino et al., 2023). Locally, telepsychology platforms and digital mental health initiatives have become increasingly available through private clinics, advocacy organizations, universities, and online platforms such as MindNation, Mind You, and MindCare Club (MindNation, 2024; Mind You, 2024; MindCare Club, 2024). These platforms expanded psychological support for Filipinos within and outside the country, including overseas Filipino workers and individuals in geographically isolated areas. However, unequal internet access, technological limitations, and varying levels of digital literacy continue to shape mental health accessibility across local communities (Hernani, 2022; Choxi et al., 2022).

This study is anchored on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by Davis (1989) and the Health Belief Model (HBM) proposed by Rosenstock (1974). These frameworks collectively explain how technological and psychological factors influence engagement with telepsychology. The Technology Acceptance Model posits that technology adoption is influenced primarily by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Charness & Boot, 2014). In this study, TAM explains how users' perceptions regarding the convenience, effectiveness, and accessibility of telepsychology influence their willingness to engage in online mental health services. Meanwhile, the Health Belief Model explains how psychological beliefs shape help-seeking behavior. The model includes constructs such as perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy (Bechard et al., 2021). Within the context of this study, HBM explains how individuals' recognition of mental health concerns and perceptions of telepsychology affect their decision to seek psychological support. The integration of TAM and HBM provides a comprehensive framework for understanding both technological acceptance and behavioral motivations in telepsychology engagement. The conceptual framework further illustrates how telepsychology, influenced by technological and behavioral factors, impacts mental health accessibility and help-seeking behaviors (Zhang et al., 2022; Pretorius et al., 2019).

Although existing literature demonstrates the growing significance of telepsychology, substantial gaps remain regarding the qualitative understanding of users' and providers lived experiences, particularly within the Philippine sociocultural context. Much of the current literature focuses on the effectiveness, accessibility, or technological features of digital mental health interventions, while fewer studies examine how individuals personally experience telepsychology and how these experiences influence help-seeking behaviors. There is also limited qualitative exploration involving both service users and mental health providers simultaneously. Existing studies frequently focus on either clients or clinicians independently,

resulting in a fragmented understanding of telepsychology's impact on mental health accessibility and service delivery. Additionally, while studies recognize barriers such as stigma, digital inequality, privacy concerns, and cultural attitudes (Olusegun, 2021; Muhorakeye & Biracyaza, 2021; Kozelka et al., 2022), limited research contextualizes these barriers within the realities of Filipino communities and digital infrastructures. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and recommendations of both telepsychology users and providers through a Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach.

This study aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relevant to mental health, healthcare accessibility, education, innovation, and social well-being. SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being is directly supported through the study's focus on improving access to mental health services and encouraging help-seeking behaviors. Telepsychology contributes to promoting psychological well-being, early intervention, and continuity of mental health care. SDG 4 – Quality Education is reflected in the study's emphasis on mental health awareness among young adults, university students, clinicians, and educational institutions. The findings may support the development of more responsive and accessible mental health programs in schools and universities. SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure is relevant because telepsychology represents a digital innovation in healthcare delivery. The study highlights the importance of technological infrastructure, secure digital systems, and accessible online platforms in supporting mental health services. SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities is addressed through telepsychology's capacity to expand mental health services to underserved, remote, and economically disadvantaged populations who may otherwise face barriers to traditional care. SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals is reflected in the collaborative role of healthcare institutions, advocacy organizations, educational institutions, policymakers, and digital platforms in strengthening mental health service delivery systems.

This study contributes to multiple dimensions of sustainability by examining how telepsychology supports long-term, accessible, and adaptive mental health care systems. In terms of public health sustainability, the study supports efforts to expand psychological care accessibility, encourage early intervention, and reduce untreated mental health concerns through digital service delivery. Regarding technological sustainability, the study highlights the importance of secure digital infrastructures, integrated telehealth systems, and user-friendly platforms that can sustain long-term mental health service delivery. The study also contributes to educational sustainability by supporting mental health awareness and encouraging educational institutions to adopt accessible psychological support systems for students and young adults. In relation to socio-economic sustainability, telepsychology reduces indirect costs associated with transportation, scheduling, and geographical limitations, making mental health services more accessible to economically disadvantaged populations. The findings further contribute to community and institutional sustainability by informing policymakers, clinicians, advocacy groups, and healthcare organizations about strategies for improving digital mental health systems, strengthening ethical guidelines, and promoting inclusive mental health care practices. Finally, the study contributes to innovation and digital sustainability by emphasizing the growing role of digital platforms in healthcare delivery and the need for continued development of ethical, accessible, and culturally responsive telepsychology services.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach developed by Hill et al. (2005). This design was selected to explore and interpret the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings participants associated with telepsychology. CQR emphasizes open-ended data collection, multiple researcher perspectives, consensus-building, and systematic analysis of participant narratives. The approach enabled the researchers to identify common themes and categories from the experiences of telepsychology users and providers while maintaining depth and contextual understanding.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the Philippines using online platforms for communication and interviews. Participants were recruited from various locations within the country where telepsychology services were accessible. Online data collection methods were employed to accommodate participants' convenience, geographical accessibility, and the digital nature of telepsychology services.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents consisted of telepsychology users and licensed mental health professionals who had experience in providing or receiving telepsychology services. Participants included individuals who had utilized online mental health consultations and clinicians who actively practiced telepsychology. Respondents were selected based on their direct experiences with telepsychology and their willingness to participate in the study.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling to identify participants who possessed relevant experiences and knowledge regarding telepsychology. Inclusion criteria required participants to have prior engagement in telepsychology services either as users or providers. The researchers selected participants who could provide rich and meaningful information related to mental health accessibility and help-seeking behavior. Recruitment procedures involved contacting potential participants through online platforms, referrals, and professional networks. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations before providing voluntary consent to participate. The sampling process continued until sufficient data and thematic saturation were achieved.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in the study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences with telepsychology, perceptions of accessibility, challenges encountered, effectiveness of online mental health services, and influences on help-seeking behavior. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility in exploring participants' responses while ensuring consistency across interviews. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide detailed insights regarding telepsychology. The interview guide was reviewed and refined to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was conducted through online interviews using digital communication platforms. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequences. Informed consent was obtained before data collection commenced. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to openly discuss their experiences and perspectives regarding telepsychology. The researchers recorded and transcribed the interviews with participants' permission to ensure accuracy in data analysis. Field notes and observations were also documented to supplement the interview data and provide contextual understanding.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method proposed by Hill et al. (2005). The analysis involved multiple stages, including transcription, coding, domain identification, categorization, and cross-analysis of participant responses. Researchers independently reviewed the transcripts to identify significant themes and patterns before reaching consensus through collaborative discussions. Core ideas were extracted from participant narratives and grouped into domains and categories representing common experiences and perspectives. An external auditor reviewed the findings to enhance credibility, consistency, and trustworthiness of the analysis. The study ensured rigor through consensus-building, systematic coding procedures, and validation strategies appropriate for qualitative research.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participants were informed about the objectives of the research, confidentiality of their responses, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was secured prior to participation. The researchers protected participants' identities by maintaining anonymity and confidentiality in data handling, transcription, storage, and reporting. Data collected from interviews were used solely for academic purposes and were securely managed to prevent unauthorized access. The study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Experiences and Perceptions of Telepsychology

3.1.1 Accessibility and Convenience of Telepsychology

Participants reported that telepsychology improved access to mental health services by eliminating geographical barriers and reducing travel-related expenses. Many respondents found online consultations more convenient because they could attend sessions from their homes, schedule appointments flexibly, and access services despite distance or mobility limitations. Participants also described telepsychology as time-efficient and more manageable within their daily routines. These findings suggest that telepsychology enhances mental health accessibility, particularly for individuals who experience logistical difficulties in accessing face-to-face services. The convenience and flexibility described by participants support previous literature emphasizing the role of technology in expanding healthcare accessibility and reducing service disparities. The findings also indicate that telepsychology may encourage individuals to seek professional help more readily due to increased convenience and reduced physical barriers.

3.1.2 Comfort and Openness During Online Consultations

Several participants expressed feeling more comfortable and emotionally safe during online consultations. Respondents reported that being in familiar environments allowed them to communicate more openly about personal concerns and emotional difficulties. Some participants stated that online settings reduced feelings of intimidation and anxiety commonly

associated with traditional clinical environments. The findings indicate that telepsychology may foster psychological comfort and openness among clients. Familiar surroundings may contribute to reduced social anxiety and increased willingness to disclose sensitive information. These observations align with studies suggesting that virtual counseling environments can promote emotional safety and facilitate self-expression during therapy sessions.

3.1.3 Effectiveness of Telepsychology Services

Participants generally perceived telepsychology as effective in addressing mental health concerns and providing emotional support. Respondents acknowledged that online therapy sessions helped them manage stress, anxiety, and emotional difficulties. Mental health professionals also reported that telepsychology enabled continuity of care and therapeutic interventions despite restrictions on face-to-face interactions. The positive perceptions regarding effectiveness suggest that telepsychology can serve as a viable alternative to traditional counseling services. The continuity of therapeutic support through online platforms reflects the adaptability of mental health services in digitally mediated environments. These findings support literature indicating that telepsychology can effectively deliver psychological interventions and maintain therapeutic engagement.

3.2 Challenges and Limitations of Telepsychology

3.2.1 Technological and Connectivity Issues

Participants identified unstable internet connections, technical interruptions, and limited access to digital devices as significant barriers during online consultations. Some respondents experienced difficulties maintaining communication during sessions due to connectivity problems, resulting in interruptions and reduced session quality. Mental health professionals also noted challenges in conducting assessments and maintaining therapeutic flow when technical issues occurred. These findings demonstrate that technological limitations remain a major challenge in implementing telepsychology services, particularly in areas with inadequate digital infrastructure. Connectivity problems may disrupt therapeutic communication and reduce the effectiveness of interventions. The results reinforce existing studies emphasizing the importance of reliable technological resources in ensuring effective telepsychology practices.

3.2.2 Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns

Several participants expressed concerns regarding privacy, confidentiality, and data security during online consultations. Respondents reported difficulties finding private spaces for therapy sessions at home, while some worried about unauthorized access to personal information shared through digital platforms. Mental health professionals also highlighted the need for secure communication systems and ethical safeguards in telepsychology practice. The concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality emphasize the ethical complexities associated with digital mental health services. Limited privacy in home environments may affect participants' willingness to disclose sensitive information. These findings align with literature emphasizing the importance of confidentiality, ethical standards, and secure digital platforms in maintaining trust within therapeutic relationships.

3.2.3 Difficulties in Establishing Therapeutic Connection

Some participants reported challenges in developing emotional connection and rapport with therapists in online settings. Respondents noted that the absence of physical presence and nonverbal cues occasionally affected communication and emotional engagement during therapy sessions. Mental health professionals also mentioned difficulties in interpreting clients' emotions and behavioral cues virtually. These findings indicate that while telepsychology provides accessibility, it may also limit aspects of interpersonal interaction essential to therapeutic relationships. Reduced nonverbal communication can affect emotional attunement and rapport-building between clients and therapists. The findings support previous research highlighting the importance of relational dynamics and nonverbal cues in effective psychotherapy.

3.3 Recommendations and Implications for Telepsychology Services

3.3.1 Improvement of Digital Infrastructure and Accessibility

Participants recommended improving internet connectivity, technological resources, and digital accessibility to strengthen telepsychology services. Respondents emphasized the need for affordable and stable internet access to ensure uninterrupted mental health consultations. Mental health professionals also suggested enhancing digital platforms and providing technical support for both clients and practitioners. These recommendations highlight the need for institutional and technological support in sustaining telepsychology services. Improved digital infrastructure may reduce service disruptions and enhance the overall quality of online mental healthcare. The findings suggest that accessible technology plays a critical role in expanding equitable mental health services in the Philippines.

3.3.2 Strengthening Ethical and Professional Practices

Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining confidentiality, ethical standards, and professional competence in telepsychology practice. Respondents suggested implementing secure communication platforms, clearer ethical guidelines, and additional training for mental health professionals in online counseling practices.

The findings underscore the importance of ethical preparedness and professional adaptation in digital mental health services. Strengthening ethical guidelines and practitioner competencies may enhance trust, safety, and effectiveness within telepsychology. These observations support literature advocating continuous professional development and ethical regulation in technology-assisted mental health interventions.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study revealed that telepsychology significantly improved access to mental health services by providing convenience, flexibility, and continuity of care for participants. Respondents generally perceived online consultations as effective in managing emotional and psychological concerns, while also promoting comfort and openness during therapy sessions. However, challenges such as unstable internet connectivity, limited digital resources, privacy concerns, and difficulties in establishing therapeutic rapport affected the overall telepsychology experience. Despite these limitations, the findings indicate that telepsychology remains a viable and accessible alternative for mental health service delivery, particularly when supported by adequate technological infrastructure, ethical safeguards, and professional competency in online counseling practices.

The study recommends improving digital infrastructure and internet accessibility to strengthen the delivery of telepsychology services and minimize technical disruptions during consultations. Mental health institutions and practitioners are encouraged to implement secure communication platforms and maintain ethical standards to address privacy and confidentiality concerns. Additionally, continuous training and professional development in online counseling practices should be provided to mental health professionals to enhance therapeutic communication, rapport-building, and the overall effectiveness of telepsychology services.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study complied with recognized ethical standards for human-participant research by ensuring voluntary participation with informed consent, the right to withdraw without penalty, and strict confidentiality through anonymous, secure, and aggregated data handling. Given the focus on psychological well-being, procedures were non-invasive, and safeguards were observed to minimize discomfort, with guidance to appropriate support services when needed, and required institutional permissions were secured for instrument use and access to academic records.

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