

A Study on the Role of Online Services in Mental Healthcare Access

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Abstract: Mental health (MH) has always been disassociated from physical health in the mainstream healthcare domain, and so has mental healthcare access. However, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not just about physical health; the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown highlighted the challenges people face with mental health issues. With a global pandemic, there was a sudden drastic change in the lives of the people, such as restricted movements, lack of human warmth/touch, change in work and study mode, loss of loved ones, heightened emotions and very few ways to process or express them resulted in the rise of mental health issues. For a problem to be resolved, acknowledgement is required first. An increase in MH issues came with a positive acknowledgement around of problem. Some with acceptance, some with initial denial, started to look for ways to deal with the changes. In this age of technology, seeking help regarding MH issues is also moving online, and this paper will deal with this question. We are going to look at the dimensional change in accessing MH care service in the age where most of the time of people is being spent online.

Keywords: Mental health, Online Services, Access, Dimensional change, Healthcare.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a shifting focus on mental health issues. As a result, research has been done on various types of mental health problems, their probable causes and probable solutions. The topic was side-lined, fenced with taboos and lack of accurate information for such a long period that there is still a long way to go to finally have a proper solution and infrastructure to deal with this global issue. The main focus of this paper is to understand the role of online services (with particular emphasis on apps and websites) in increasing access to mental health care.

Covid-19 pandemic, which affected the whole world, had visibilised the inability of the mainstream healthcare infrastructure to deal with such a pandemic even in 1st world nations which claim to have the best possible facilities. One more important thing that got much-needed attention was Mental Health, and its potential impact is of grave concern. The impact of COVID-19 on mental, neurological and substance use services: results of a rapid assessment report by WHO (2020) stated there was severe disruption of mental health services in more than 93% of countries. According to the WHO report 2020, depression being one of the most common mental health disorders, there are more than 264 million people affected with depression globally. Nearly 1 billion people have some kind of mental health issue (estimated 10% of the global population). In low-income

countries, the condition is much worse, with more than 75% of people dealing with MH issues do not even receive any kind of treatment (Kovacevic, 2021).

This also poses a question regarding the economic resources being spent in the mental health domain globally, as the Mental Health Atlas 2020, released by WHO, reports that just 51% of the member states were in line with the internationally prescribed guidelines and policies, they were lagging much behind the 2030 target of sustainable development goal 3 of good health and well-being. Citing mental health (where most common issues are anxiety and depression), the reason for loss or reduced productivity may cause a loss of \$6 trillion by 2030, which certainly was \$2.5 trillion annually for the global economy (Lancet, 2020).

All the above data highlights the seriousness of the issue and the attention that it needs. In these circumstances, access to mental health care becomes more critical than ever besides the fact that even without the severe economic concerns attached to it, good mental health is a need for humane existence and life. Danius Puras, who was a guest editor to United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to health, contributed to two UN resolutions affirming MH as a Human right while emphasizing the importance of mental health well-being in a hyper globalized world (Montag-Padilla, Kase, Woodbridge & Stein, 2016).

One emerging dimension of accessing MH care services is online services. Related to the same, not much scholarly data is available. Organisations like the National Institute of Mental Health, USA; American Psychological Association, USA; The Mental Health Foundation, UK; Lancet has been doing remarkable work in this area. For this research, we needed to focus on literature and data specifically dealing with access to mental health care in contemporary times regarding the use of the internet and technology. How they have been helpful (considering the positive role of technology and the internet) in reducing the gap that traditional healthcare infrastructure is still unable to fill in many parts of the world. Therefore, for this paper, the primary source of data by WHO (specifically the World Mental Health Atlas), The Lancet, National Institute of Mental Health, USA (being one the world's largest organisations working in the mental health domain), The Mental Health Foundation, EU (providing breakthroughs in MH in past two decades), scholarly research papers and specific other relevant as well as medically verified and trusted resources as per the requirement.

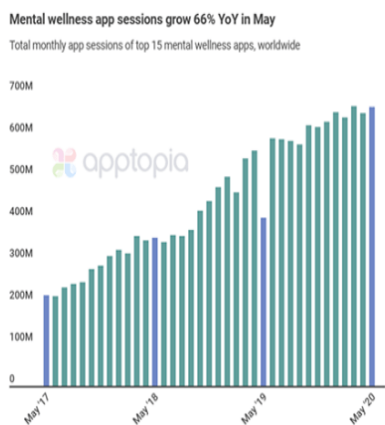
Research Question

In this research, we will try to find out whether the role of online platforms in providing access to mental health care has increased in the last two years (which coincides with the onset of the pandemic)? Then depending on the result, we will try to assess why and how that change is happening. We will also assess some widely used platforms like apps and websites and how their usage has changed over the past two years, basically pre-pandemic and post-pandemic levels.

This paper will also try to answer one crucial question that arises with the usage of these, are these helpful in meeting the purpose for which they are being used? Can these be helpful on both ends, one end being the medical health practitioners and the other receiver or people suffering from mental health? By the end, pitfalls/lacunas in online services will be discussed so that the work that needs to be done to provide better access can be done on every level possible, including policymaking.

II. TRANSFORMATION IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE ACCESS

Is Mental Health moving online?



Apptopia is a mobile market intelligence software providing services in data mining, app analytics and commercial intelligence for scrutinizing critical competitive indicators and providing insights in the tech industry. Their analyses showed a 66% increased engagement in the top 15 mental wellness apps sessions worldwide since the inception of a pandemic. Moreover, the engagement is constantly increasing if going by recent trends (Naresh, 2021)

According to App Annie, another platform for mobile insights and analytics, there was twice the download in apps related to mental health since mid-March 2019. Trends have also shown that more people spend nearly 85% more time using such apps than earlier. This is also pointing to one thing: while most businesses were at a halt or in their downfall phase, business in these apps was one among the few businesses having increased income than usual. In an interview, Puneet Manuja, the cofounder of YourDost, an

online counselling start-up, said, "We have added 60% new users over the last two weeks, and hundreds have reached out due to the Covid-19 outbreak.". Other popular mental health applications like Headspace, Calm, Sanvello, etc., have seen an upsurge in the streamflow of users since the Coronavirus outbreak. Megan Jones Bell, Chief Science Officer of Headspace, a stress-relieving meditation app, claimed a 19-fold increase in the number of app downloads from mid-March 2019 to mid-May 2020. Another app Sanvello, a mood tracker app, its chief medical officer Monika Roots said the app even started providing its premium contents free of cost as the Covid cases up surged during 2019 and the number of app downloads increased (Naresh, 2021).

Mental health apps are one of the few sectors that did not face downfall due to COVID-19 and its repercussion rather a massive increase in demand. The pace at which the business of these apps is growing since the pandemic opens up a huge domain in the role of online platforms in reducing the gap that mainstream healthcare infrastructure has yet not been able to fill. Media reports state that mental health apps attain major investors' attention and even grab a colossal round of investments. According to Mental Health Apps Market - Global Assessment 2021 - 2031, Industry Analysis 2016 - 2020 and Opportunity Assessment by Persistence Market Research, in the decade 2021-2031, the mental health app market is estimated to see the growth of nearly 27% CAGR (Compounded Annual Growth Rate), witnessing the highest progress. The upsurge in demand is primarily due to the rise in awareness about mental health and initiatives by key market players.

A study was conducted amongst licensed Psychotherapists in Austria to have the therapist-orientated understanding of online services points towards a positive attitude regarding online services. The study also highlights specific concerns as well as disadvantages (dealt with in subsequent chapter) which professionals stated during the study (Schuster, Pokorny, Berger, Topooco &Laireiter, 2018). The perspective of some other Professionals in this field- Nina Barlevy, California based clinical psychologist, said in an interview, "It looked like a good way to expand my practice here and there in my free time, if I was already going to be on my computer in the evenings or on my days off anyway", pointing out the ease of giving time to patients even after work hours. In this way, medical professionals can become more accessible. They can work according to the need of both patients and professionals. Another Professional, Jones, working as Chief Science Officer at Lantern, said, "It can be a nice first step in treatment for someone who needs more intensive therapy." (Novotney, 2017).

Like the two sides of coin, impact of technology in different spheres is also two-sided. As we are dealing with health and medical domain in this paper, keeping our scope in this domain only let's look at the positive and negative effects of technology. While technology is seen as a potential tool for improving lives, but there are negative consequences as well.

Some critics are of the view that technology has led to more alienation kids isolating themselves in phone and virtual world; same goes with online mode of education (even if it was an alternative option when everything was shut). Negative effects on health includes digital eye strain, musculoskeletal problems, sleep problems leading to disrupted sleep cycles and much worse emotional problems due to hyper exposure and connectivity to world leading one to comparing themselves and their lifestyles to others and feeling inferior and left out. But it's not like technology is all bad. Other than major scientific revolutionary achievements technology in medical domain is seen to have many advantages. Virtual doctor visits, ease of research, online medical records, various health tracker apps (Pietrangelo, 2019).

State authorities have opted for telehealth (providing healthcare using the information and telecommunication technology to reach out even in the remote areas) for medical healthcare provisions. There are instances when states are opting to use telehealth to provide access to mental healthcare. One such example is I Matter Colorado (USA); this online resource offers children three free sessions with a trained professional and other sessions as per the need and condition of the kid. In this, above 12 years of age are accessing the therapy on their own terms. Here they do not even need parental consent, which helps maintain confidentiality. The already existing need for better access to mental health has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis has led many patients, professionals, and even the state to realise the full potential of technology (considering the positive role of technology). This is now being employed in the form of telehealth and e-therapy by the states to deliver the best possible response in this critical situation. Question about social justice and lack of access to technology in remote areas is still a hindrance that the state needs to deal with. Nevertheless, this still remains a significant step towards fulfilling the needs of future crises too. (Torous, Myrick, Rauseo-Ricupero & Firth, 2020).

Based on the above data consisting of evidence from various studies, perspectives of people from both sending and receiving end and lastly from quantitative analyses of the app, we can conclude that yes, access to mental health care is moving online. However, there are some genuine concerns from each party involved. We will be dealing with these concerns by the end of this paper but let us first try to answer why access to mental healthcare is getting a hold in the online world.

Why is Mental Health moving online?

As can be seen from the above-mentioned indications, the use of online Mental Health services is increasing.

¹ Health tracker apps is an umbrella term given to apps which includes period tracker, diet tracking app, medicine reminder apps, mood tracker apps and even the apps for chronic illness that can communicate with doctor.

Accordingly, let us look at some of the reasons why this dimension of the online world is attracting more user base:

- A. Firstly, they can be accessed without getting in the hassle of moving out. This also saves time that erstwhile used to waste travelling to the therapist and coming back. Restriction due to lockdown forced people to explore other options, which led them to these different kinds of online services. Remote access is one of the primary causes of increased engagement, even for trans persons or persons with some kind of physical impairments.
- B. Secondly, via apps, help can be accessed in anonymity. Considering the stigmas surrounding mental health, it becomes complicated for a person to seek help openly. This added facility of talking to 'strangers' anonymously creates an idea in one's head that someone with no personal benefit is sitting across the other end of the app to talk. Examples of such apps include 7 cups, which provides free online therapy and counselling with licensed therapists. It is basically like a diary entry, free emotional support about your worries, but you would get a reply and validations to your emotions.
- C. In general sense, online services have made mental healthcare accessible to a considerable number of people with varieties of means of options to explore, such as online theoretical resources, guides, overall mental health apps, online therapy, guided meditation programs, youtube channels dedicated to mental health and even chatbots².
- D. Moving into some technical terms of advantages, some apps such as Moodfit, Moodpanda, Mood Tracker, etc., also provide tools and techniques to keep track and understand the mood and behavioral change patterns, which helps people become self-aware. This self-awareness, in turn, helps people to know better about what kind of help they need.
- E. Another essential feature of these services is, one can get them in both paid as well as free depending on the user (Users are deciding authority whether they want paid service or wants to access from free resources) which as compared to traditional mental health services, is better in terms of giving options. Thus, making online services cheaper.
- F. These services can be availed anytime, i.e., 24-hour service. It makes it easier for people to deal with mental health issues anytime when the situation intensifies.
- G. Online services made to spread awareness are helpful to the people dealing with issues and the people surrounding them or anyone who wants to be helpful.

III. TYPES OF ONLINE RESOURCES USED FOR ACCESSING THE SUPPORT FOR MH

"These apps are so supportive! All the listeners listen very well and helps when you are down and just wanting someone to listen to you, without judgement. Moreover, the listening

² Later in this paper, some of these majorly used online services are discussed in detail.

sessions are totally unique... they are playing with our imagination to make us feel in present and not to think about past or negative thoughts...it is very refreshing. It changed my life for better.” - An Online service user.

As much as social media and the online world is said to be distancing from the real world, there are people for whom it turned out to be a support system for dealing with mental health issues. So, let us discuss some of the online resources whose use has increased in recent times.

- A. Online information
- B. Online Therapy
- C. YouTube
- D. Chat room (includes dating apps)
- E. Online communities
- F. Mental Health Apps

A. Online Information: Primary source of getting essential information has now become search engines like Google, Bing, yahoo etc. We can categorize further online resources as news websites, blogs, podcasts, information websites like APA (American Psychological Association), The Mental Health Foundation, World Health Organisation, NIMH, etc. People can use them to find information about MH problems, primary symptoms and feasible treatment options. These resources can be used to extract information about some apps, review any professional, government-provided resources, or even just about the plausible side effects and benefits of specific treatment options. Although it cannot be said that all the information available is reliable, one has to find trustworthy resources and do cross-checking before proceeding with any option.

B. Online Therapy: This is one of the most discussed topics in the role of online services in MH care other than mental health apps. Online therapy is also called e-therapy or telepsychology, or tele mental health. It can be accessed using the internet and devices such as phones, laptops, computers or tablets. Patients can avail the facility while sitting at home if they are uncomfortable going out and talking to someone in person. It is also conducive when there are movement and connectivity barriers (as happened during the COVID-19 pandemic). Many first-world nations such as the USA, UK, Finland, Norway etc., are adopting this way to provide mental healthcare access to a large number of people. Other than state-provided resources, there are many private therapists available who offer both paid and unpaid online therapy sessions. Depending on the need and comfort, one can choose their options.

It can be a hectic process at first for a person who is already dealing with MH issues to go on and research what is the issue, where to start and how to go about it. Another point of concern is that it is important first to know whether the therapist you are paying and consulting is licensed or not, registered with a professional body or not. For example, in Britain, this work is done by British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and the UK Council

for Psychotherapy (UKCP) (Mind, 2018). In the USA, American Psychological Association (APA) is the largest organisation of scientific professionals representing psychologists, so their information is one of the most reliable kinds when trying to find the trustworthy resource for starting the online therapy (McHugh, 2021).

Here are some platforms which provide paid online therapy-

- i. **Talkspace-** It is one of the most popular apps for online therapy. They provide affordable packages with an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Certified professional therapists allow a person to start the therapy quickly via video conferencing. The unique feature of the app is that it allows users to stay in contact with their therapists with ongoing text messaging.
 - ii. **Betterhelp-** Most fascinating feature of this app is that it provides the most updated technologies concerning utility and security optimizations. The user interface is designed in such a way that it categorizes the treatment segments into multiple brands with their ranges. For instance, brand Pride counselling offers counselling to users coming from the LGBTQI+ community, and Brand Teen counselling offers to counsel youngsters and their other brands having different criteria making it easier for the people to choose and have a safe space to get therapy from.
 - iii. **Tokitus-** It is a Lithuania based app. The sessions provided on this app are available in 14 languages making it the distinct feature of the app. This feature allows a user base from all over Europe. However, this feature also makes access to the app a bit costly because the charges are charged per session.
 - iv. **Online-Therapy.com-** This platform provides online services based on Cognitive behavioral therapy. Professionals available here are specialized in CBT therapy. Sessions are conducted via live chats, video as well as voice services. Although they do not provide live therapy sessions to their clients, the therapies session includes worksheets and interactive chat sessions via messaging. This platform is more affordable than other platforms because of not give access to live therapy sessions.
 - v. **Teen Counselling-** This is a platform specifically made to provide counselling to kids between 13-19 years age group. On this site, experienced licensed therapists are available to cater for the needs of youngsters unique to their age group. Therapists can talk with the parents of kids individually if they want to. Nevertheless, that does not mean at any point the confidentiality of the sessions is compromised; sessions are conducted constantly with complete confidentiality.
- The list is prepared after thorough research and testing lens based on price, package, qualifications of therapists available, and technical features. The overall investigation was to identify service providers' core values and efficacy (McHugh, 2021).
- C. **YouTube:** Content creation has seen an enormous upsurge

during the COVID-19 pandemic owing to being locked up at homes and having to explore several works from home options. Although there was a diversity of content generated even before, the scale intensified to a greater degree. One dimension was the videos related to guided meditation, calming music and even whole channels dedicated to talks and episodes related to mental health.

In March 2020, Sundar Pichai, CEO of Alphabet, Google's parent company, noted the increased engagement on guided meditation videos which was 40% more than usual during that year. There were more than 26 million views on an average of videos with classic titles such as "Let go of fear, overthinking & worries" (Lekach, 2020). Even the longer duration videos (more than 2hours) going by the title "Relaxing music, Calming Music to sleep" have views in millions. Soothing Relaxation channel has 313 million views on a video for deep sleep relaxing music.

There are YouTube channels such as Rashawnda James, a licensed MH professional making videos related to MH and issues surrounding them; Orcha, this channel shares the reviews of the apps they find most appropriate and useful out of a bucket of hundreds of apps related to MH. App reviews are shared by Dr Tom Micklewright, an NHS doctor and digital health specialist. Orcha channel is supportive to Orcha organisation which primarily assess and offer reviews of care and health apps.

D. *Chat rooms*: The research conducted by Maria Luis Small, a Harvard sociologist, discloses that in a small group or a core discussion network, people tend to confide in people whom they don't know personally much or not at all. The researcher claims that this fact is not appreciated highly enough and has much greater importance in understanding the nature of human connections to fight isolation (Denworth, 2017). This study more or less justifies why the engagements with chatting sites and even the dating apps such as Bumble, Tinder and OkCupid etc., saw escalation during the COVID-19 pandemic followed by lockdown (Kulkarni, 2021). Features such as having the power to choose whom to talk to or not, what to show or not, who can visit one's profile or not, let a person go on and use the platform freely. They can talk to those they do not know without fear of being judged.

Chatbots are also becoming popular. They are computer programs having conversations like real human beings over the internet. Some chatbots are used to help people with MH issues. A few examples include Woebot, Wysa and Pacfica.

E. *Online communities*: Online communities are referred to a group of persons sharing everyday experiences and interests to communicate with each other using the internet. There are emerging communities specific to Mental Health. People tend to share with those people quickly who have similar kinds of experiences, and peer support helps people to process the feelings and whatever that is happening with them with a bit of ease. A few examples of such communities include Beat Message Boards, Bipolar UK

ecomunity and Side by side.

F. *Mental Health Apps*: Another very important online resource gaining a more user base is Mental health apps. Although some of the apps are already discussed above in the Online therapy sections, those can also be counted in this section because this is a kind of overlapping situation. There are so many apps available in the market that it becomes challenging to choose any reliable one as well as pocket friendly (if the services are paid). Mental health apps can be categorized based on the purpose they are designed, such as overall MH app or apps designed for specifically teens or people belonging to the LGBTQI+ community. Other kinds of apps can also fall in the category of MH apps, such as mood tracker and meditation apps. While thinking about the MH apps, the first thing that pops up is the great meditation apps like Calm or Headspace. But there are a whole lot of bucketsful of MH apps available; here, we are going to discuss the top 4 apps reviewed by Orcha (Dr Tom Micklewright discusses top mental health apps, 2020)

i. *Chill Panda*- It is designed for young kids to manage feelings of anxiety and worry. Their interface is kids' user friendly in the form of a game pattern, with the main character being the panda. Based on various activities assigned to the panda, a mood tracker helps to identify the mental condition of kids, and it even has a heartbeat tracker just by tapping a finger on the camera. Other features include simple questions about how they feel and accordingly various panda exercises and even the breathing exercises. All exercises, whether it be movement, breathing or distractions. These are all well-structured activities to help children manage their worries and anxieties.

ii. *MeeTwo*- This app is a kind of safe space to discuss MH specifically for teenagers and young adults. It is an online forum like Quora where people can ask questions, and someone from a broad user base can answer that question or even show solidarity. The best thing about this app is that every comment, question, or post in general before going online is reviewed by trained moderators, making it safer than any other medium. A 24/7 helpline is available if needed. Links to counsellors and other websites are also available. Lastly, the feature of adding up local resources by the University pages helps youngsters reach out for safe space not only in the online world but outside of it as well that is too near to them.

iii. *Student Health App*- This app is designed by doctors with the students collecting all the essential information about health in general and presenting it in one place. The collection of information and design of the app makes access a lot easier. Key definitions of the illness, warning signs and self-help advice, including the information related to MH from reliable sources with references.

iv. *Distract*- Distract is also designed by the team of Student Health App thus have many features similar to that apps. But this is specifically for the people having suicidal

thoughts or having self-harm tendencies. Thus, it is a kind of online library, sometimes with references to some other apps as well.

v. *Brain in Hand*- This is explicitly developed for patients with autism or learning difficulty. Because this group of patients can have anxiety even in doing the day-to-day tasks.

So far, research has shown that Online Therapy has successfully treated a variety of diagnoses based on conditions and symptoms. These include mood disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, psychotic disorders, trauma-related disorders and substance abuse disorders. The commonly employed therapy modalities in online sessions are Psychodynamic Therapy, Behavioral Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Cognitive Therapy, Humanist Therapy, Integrative or Holistic therapy (McHugh, 2021). It is vital for the people dealing with MH issues and people surrounding them to get educated about mental distress. Because this allows them to know that problems of such kind exist and their solutions. More importantly, it tells them that they are not alone, thus becoming helpful to each other (Stiefel, 2018). One interesting thing that I noticed while conducting this research is that the comment section of youtube videos, it was filled with so many positive and supportive comments that the aura itself became positive. The channels, videos and comment sections are a community for encouraging people, cheering them up and spreading positivity which feels great whenever anyone visits there. This is a different marker for anyone dealing with MH issues as it fills them up with a sense of community, belongingness, and overall feeling good.

"I do not know if I'm the only one shocked by the comments. These frequencies made me feel better, but what topped it off for me were all the positive comments. I normally do not read the comments, but something made me click on it tonight, u all are really amazing people. Keep strong and be positive!"
– A subscriber on a relaxing music video.

This data points towards the fact that people are not sticking to traditional ways for seeking help for MH, they are trying alternative ways³, and YouTube is one of them. Even the institutes like NIMH are working to find new alternative ways rather than just focusing on existing ways to deal with mental health issues using technology (NIMH Technology and the Future of Mental Health Treatment, 2019) (Torous, Jan Myrick, Rauseo & Firth, 2020).

IV. EFFICACY AND PITFALLS OF ONLINE SERVICES

Are online services really helpful?

A study conducted by NCBI (National Center for Biotechnology Information), USA, assessed the different

³ Alternative ways are referred to ongoing research projects with partnership of engineers and clinicians. Evaluation of existing mental health apps for improving the lacunas as well as to use technological developments as per the requirement of clinicians and patients.

practices of online meditation apps adopted by men and women. The statistics of Mindfulness apps revealed that nearly 90% of male users and 94% of female users found meditation helpful. Another study by NCBI also revealed that meditation is of greater help in dealing with severe pain issues. (Arsenovic, 2021). This data justifies the surge in meditation app downloads and engagement time.

Another study was conducted by NCBI for 12 months to determine the efficacy of app-based treatment for three major MH related problems- anxiety, depression and schizophrenia. The overall result based on analysis of the study shows that medical professional has a positive response, they pointed towards more advantages over disadvantages of using the apps for mental health issues treatment. They see potential in apps. In the case of depression, apps were helpful and provided promising results to patients with mild and moderate depression; not highly effective for severe cases. In case of anxiety, apps assisting using CBT-based treatment and specific other methodologies such as mindfulness and relaxation training helps in decreasing the symptoms. It was found that there was not much difference in efficacy rates compared to in-person therapy treatment. Even in the case of schizophrenia, the app-based treatment gave positive outcomes from users' perspectives. The study also highlighted that patient frequently engage with apps and try maintaining consistency by themselves using the usage reminders (Chandrashekar, 2018).

Researches have been using AI (Artificial Intelligence) based suicide prediction model to save more lives. Looking at the potential of online therapy and MH apps, it is predicted that there is also scope in AI-based suicide prediction (Marks, 2019).

MH apps are proliferating consistently. The unique features, trained professionals, treatment employing various methodologies, and constantly modifying technological interventions attract a broad user base. A focus group study points out that the increasing user base is owing to the above-mentioned features. The focus group also showed a positive response in outcome experiences (Schueller, Neary, Loughlin & Adkins, 2018).

Although there is still a lack of primary scholarly data concerning apps the efficacy, the potential is recognised. The market surrounding MH and online services related to the same is predicted to have a bright future, a glimpse of which is already seen above, evidently owing to the global pandemic. Both patients and medical professionals are optimistic about online services in reducing the gap that mainstream healthcare infrastructure is trying to fill.

Pitfalls in Online Services

In a study done by NIMH, US (2018) for understanding the perspective of practising psychotherapists, the results were mixed, including both positive and negative attitudes, but the number of advantages certainly outnumbered the number of disadvantages. As seen in earlier chapters, the scope of

accessing mental health is widened with the introduction of online services and platforms, which comes with many advantages, and with the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health issues along with accessing the help in online mode have increased drastically. However, there is still some degree of doubts and concerns due to which online mode cannot be considered an alternative to traditional services. One main reason is that whether or not to go for the online option depends on the severity of one's condition and symptoms considering a psychotherapist's viewpoint. Now let us look at some other reasons that put online mental health services in a disadvantaged position.

- A. If a person needs emergency physical assistance and hospitalization but due to lack of sufficient information and reach to the patient, problems may arise because of service provider/ professional is the located out stationed. If there is a crisis in case the client has suicidal thoughts, lack of response or being distant of a professional from the client is another cause of concern. Furthermore, as already mentioned above, this scenario points to one thing: online therapy is not suitable for people with severe mental health issues.
- B. From this point, we arrive at another problematic point concerning psychologists- differing regional boundaries, psychology professionals and respective laws. According to Deborah Baker, a legal expert to American Psychological Association, some state laws permit psychologists to provide mental health services transcending the state boundaries but for a limited period. This can be problematic when one certified professional is dealing with patients, and once the period is over, patients have to juggle in between their psychologists, and this whole process can be really exhausting getting in the comfort zone with a new person all over again for the person already dealing with mental health issues. (Cherry, 2021)
- C. Speaking about technology- personal information, reliability on technology, and confidentiality- comes into the discussion arena. However, online treatment augments the complexities. There is a need to share some critical personal information to get better treatment, but the information is being shared online, and concerns regarding hacking and privacy leaks amplify.
- D. Body language understanding issues- if a person is using a text-based service, it is highly likely that the person on the other side may not understand the emotions completely like they can be understood in an in-person based service.
- E. Usually, other than counselling services, other kinds of online resources are self-guided; in this case, the efficiency, as well as the impact of that resource, is

in a questionable position.

- F. Keeping in mind the financial aspect, if one is going to opt for paid online services, there is a higher chance that insurance coverage does not include therapy as well the service provider is also not willing to accept the insurance as payment.
- G. Talking about the population who do not have access to technology or devices, online services is not even an option.

V. CONCLUSION

Yes, there are some issues in considering online services as a viable option for seeking MH care, but these cannot be stated as a reason not to opt for the online services when we have the evidence on efficacy and viability of these services. It is still debatable whether online services can be considered as an alternative to in-person therapy? The point is there is a need for more research and intervention from the medical field, along with the state in removing or to say reducing the lack of online services. WHO data shows that mental health issues cover 17% of the global burden of disease, and over 75% of the population affected in low-income countries have less or no access to essential treatment. The world is made a global village with advancements in information and technology. By the state intervention in increasing the connectivity and communication technology, people can access what until now was not accessible to them. This will be beneficial for both patients and the medical practitioners. Moreover, the economic burden coming with global burden of disease can also be reduced if this option of online services is utilized strategically.

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