



Toward sustainable student support in digital education: A phenomenological study of technology and AI-supported counselling practice

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Abstract

The study explored how student counsellors integrate digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI) into their practicum experience. Using an exploratory phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with fifteen postgraduate counselling students at the University of Education, Winneba. The study examined the types of tools used, perceived benefits, challenges encountered and the implications for the counselling relationship. Findings indicate that student counsellors frequently rely on basic digital tools for communication, documentation and preparation while AI applications are used more selectively to support planning, idea generation and case conceptualization. Participants reported that these technologies improved efficiency, enhanced preparation, and increased confidence before sessions. However, several challenges emerged including limited infrastructure, unreliable internet access, lack of formal training and concerns about the cultural relevance of AI-generated content. Importantly, participants maintained clear boundaries by avoiding the use of AI during live counselling sessions, emphasizing the need to preserve empathy, trust and relational depth. The study highlights the growing role of technology in counsellor training while underscoring the importance of ethical awareness, contextual sensitivity and human centred practice. It recommends the integration of AI literacy, ethical guidelines and improved digital infrastructure into counsellor education to better prepare trainees for contemporary practice.

Keywords: Counselling training; Counsellor education; Digital counselling; Student counsellors; Therapeutic alliance; Therapeutic relationship

1. Introduction

Counselling has traditionally relied on face-to-face interaction, with trust, empathy, and therapeutic alliance serving as the foundation of effective practice (Corey, 2016). However, rapid technological advancements and the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated a shift toward digital service delivery, introducing teletherapy, virtual reality, and AI-powered mental health tools that are reshaping how counselling is conceptualized and experienced (Amos, 2022; Amos et al., 2020; Bell et al., 2020). The counselling profession is particularly affected by this digital transformation, which affects healthcare, education, and social services in general (Korytko & Piletska, 2024).

Furthermore, the integration of technology into counselling has evolved from telephone-based crisis support to sophisticated AI-driven tools. Early adopters used email and online forums for asynchronous communication (Barak et al., 2008; Mallen et al., 2005), while the rise of video platforms enabled synchronous sessions comparable in effectiveness to in-person therapy (Smith et al., 2020; Wind et al., 2020). Today, AI tools such as Woebot and Wysa deliver cognitive-behavioral interventions in real time (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017; Inkster et al., 2018), and predictive analytics support early identification of mental health risks (Kessler et al., 2017; Shatte et al., 2019). These advances enhance case conceptualization, reduce administrative burdens, and extend service accessibility, though concerns about confidentiality, algorithmic bias, and the digital divide remain significant challenges (Mishna et al., 2021; Naslund et al., 2017; Warrier et al., 2023).

Again, student counsellors in practicum settings are more likely to come across AI-driven tools like chatbots, virtual assessments, and online supervision platforms, for which their formal training frequently leaves them unprepared (Kiran, 2025). The challenges are exacerbated by the fact that technological advancement frequently surpasses the development of supervision models and digital literacy frameworks in counsellor education (Reamer, 2018), with many reporting

difficulties adjusting to new technologies, fears of diminished relational depth, ethical uncertainties, and inadequate institutional support (Glueckauf et al., 2018; Kiran, 2025). Exploring student counsellors' experiences and perceptions during this formative period is therefore essential for developing contextually relevant training, support systems, and policy frameworks that uphold ethical and effective digital mental health practice.

Although research on digital tools in clinical practice is expanding (Glueckauf et al., 2018; Luxton, 2016; Tudor Car et al., 2019), there is still much to learn about how technology and AI integration impact student counsellors' professional development during practicum training in Ghana. This is because most studies have concentrated on licensed practitioners rather than novice professionals still developing their therapeutic identities. A central concern is how digital tools challenge the foundational qualities of the counselling relationship; empathy, authenticity, and emotional presence—which may be diminished in virtual environments where physical cues are absent (Corey, 2016; Parakkal et al., 2025; Reamer, 2015), and while interventions such as video calls, chatbots, and AI-assisted assessments offer convenience and scalability, their influence on relational depth and therapeutic alliance remains underexplored from the perspective of novice practitioners (Amos, 2023; Wind et al., 2020).

Despite the promise of AI in counselling education, including virtual client simulations and automated feedback systems (Gray et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2022), actual adoption in practicum settings remains limited due to resource constraints, limited faculty expertise, and institutional inertia (Buck et al., 2022; Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2023). Student counsellors face unique challenges balancing relational skill development with digital tool integration, while ethical concerns around data governance, informed consent, and professional identity persist (Rahsepar Meadi et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2023).

These challenges are compounded by inadequate preparation, as many Ghanaian trainees enter practicum settings with minimal exposure to the ethical, emotional, and cultural complexities of technology-enhanced counselling, while limited digital literacy, insufficient virtual supervision, and the absence of standardized AI integration frameworks contribute to professional uncertainty and reduced competence (Mishna et al., 2021; Reamer, 2015).

Investigating the lived experiences of student counsellors is therefore critical to informing the development of training models, supervisory strategies, and policy interventions that can ensure ethical, culturally responsive, and emotionally intelligent digital counselling practice in Ghana. To theorize these dynamics, this study employs the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which integrates performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions as predictors of technology adoption (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Extensively validated in education and healthcare (Chao, 2019; Patil & Undale, 2023; Schretzlmaier et al., 2022), UTAUT addresses gaps left by narrower models such as Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and TPB (Ajzen, 2020; Taherdoost, 2018) by accommodating institutional, relational, and ethical dimensions particularly relevant to Ghanaian counsellor training contexts (Agormedah et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2023).

This qualitative exploratory study aimed to examine the experiences of student counsellors in incorporating technology and artificial intelligence (AI) into their counselling practicum. Having said this, the study aims to gain insight about how trainee counsellors perceive and engage with digital tools and AI-driven resources in their practice, what difficulties they face when maintaining therapeutic relationships in technology-mediated environments, and the strategies that address these challenges.

1.1. Current Study

This study explores how student counsellors use digital tools and AI-driven resources during their postgraduate practicum training at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). Specifically, it examines the types of technologies used by student counsellors, their perceived usefulness in supporting counselling practice, the challenges encountered during their integration into therapeutic settings, and the perceived influence of these technologies on the counsellor-client

relationship. The study also considers the forms of institutional, curricular, and supervisory support that student counsellors believe are necessary for the meaningful and responsible integration of digital technologies and AI into practicum training.

By focusing on technology use within the practical preparation of counsellors, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of technology adoption in counselling education. Digital and AI-based tools may support student counsellors in areas such as case conceptualization, administrative efficiency, access to information and resources, and client engagement. At the same time, their use may introduce challenges associated with digital literacy, usability, confidentiality, trust, ethical decision-making, and equitable access. Examining these opportunities and challenges is particularly important in counselling, where technological innovation must be balanced with the relational, ethical, and humanistic foundations of professional practice.

The findings are expected to have implications for counsellor education, supervision, institutional practice, and policy. At the educational level, the study may inform the development of curricula that more explicitly address digital competence, AI literacy, ethical technology use, and the critical evaluation of technology-assisted counselling practices. At the supervisory level, it may help identify areas in which student counsellors require additional guidance when selecting and using digital or AI-based resources during practicum. Institutionally, the findings may contribute to the development of clearer guidelines concerning confidentiality, data protection, responsible AI use, and appropriate boundaries for technology-supported counselling. More broadly, the study may inform discussions about how technology can contribute to expanding access to mental health services while ensuring that efficiency and innovation do not compromise trust, professional ethics, equity, or the humanistic core of counselling.

Accordingly, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1) What digital tools and AI-driven resources are student counsellors currently using in their practicum, and how effective do they perceive these tools to be in enhancing their counselling practice?

RQ 2) What challenges do student counsellors face in integrating technology and AI into their counselling practice, and how do they navigate or overcome these challenges?

RQ 3) How do student counsellors perceive the impact of technology and AI on the counsellor-client relationship?

RQ 4) In what ways do student counsellors believe that technology and AI could be better integrated into practicum training, and what forms of institutional or supervisory support do they require?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Participants

Qualitative exploratory study design was adopted to investigate student counsellors' experiences with technology and AI integration during practicum training at UEW. This design was selected because it is suitable for investigating new, understudied phenomena through rich, in-depth accounts of lived experiences that capture complexity, decipher meanings, and spot trends in how students use digital tools in supervisory and therapeutic settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These students who had direct experience with digital or AI-driven tools in any type of counselling practice, were purposefully chosen. Licensed professionals whose established perspectives might not reflect current training realities were excluded (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). Since qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth and also data saturation, which is the point at which no new themes emerge (can usually be reached after 12 interviews in homogeneous groups), the sample size of 15 was methodologically justifiable (Guest et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2018). The study's objective of contextualising the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) framework within counsellor education was also in line with the qualitative approach, which permits a deeper investigation of the relational, ethical, and institutional dynamics influencing technology adoption rather than applying the framework in a reductionist manner. This ensures that findings remain pertinent to both local Ghanaian practice and the larger

conversation on AI integration in counselling.

2.2. Instrumentation

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide for this study. It had open-ended questions meant to elicit the experiences of student counsellors using artificial intelligence and digital tools during their practicum. The semi-structured style allowed participants to discuss topics they thought were important while still providing a thematic framework. The guide was reviewed by two experts in counselling and one expert in qualitative methodology to ensure content validity. Their input guided changes to the guide's clarity and relevance, and it was further refined through pilot testing with five student counsellors who were not part of the main sample to improve question wording, sequencing, and pacing. While field note templates were utilised to record contextual information and researcher reflections during the data collection process, interviews were digitally recorded with participants' consent and then verbatim transcribed for theme analysis. It would be emphasised that the trustworthiness of the data was adhered to, to ensure that the study's ethical protocols were upheld.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

As already listed, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were adopted as the main method of data collection because they allow for flexibility, depth, and thorough analysis of participants' experiences within their specific situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Depending on participants' preference, interviews were conducted in-person or through secure online platforms in compliance with contemporary qualitative research methods in technology-related educational and therapeutic studies (Jowett, 2020). To maintain the authenticity of participants' narratives and reduce researcher bias in data collection, each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes, which was guided by a protocol that ensured consistency while permitting discussion and elaboration on emerging themes, and was audio-recorded with informed consent (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The data collection phase took approximately 15 days. Field notes made during and just after each interview substantially enhanced the data. Some questions asked include, "What digital tools and AI-driven resources are student counsellors currently using" "How effective are these tools", "Are there any challenges student counsellors face in integrating technology and AI?", "How do student counsellors perceive the impact on the counselor-client relationship?" and "How can technology and AI be better integrated into practicum training?"

2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was used in data analysis because it is adaptable and appropriate for exploratory qualitative research, allowing themes to develop inductively while maintaining theoretical knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After verbatim transcription, the researcher reviewed the transcripts several times to get a comprehensive understanding of the participants' stories (Nowell et al., 2017). Without using pre-established categories, the researcher used line-by-line coding to find significant textual passages (Saldaña, 2016). These codes were then sorted into possible themes in accordance with the research questions by the use of the Taguette software (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to guarantee coherence and internal consistency, the themes were then examined and improved through an iterative process of combining, modifying, or eliminating them (Nowell et al., 2017). The final themes and subthemes were incorporated into an interpretive narrative that was bolstered by participant statements and pertinent literature after being meticulously defined and labelled to capture their essential significance. Reflexive journaling was utilised to evaluate and manage potential researcher biases and assumptions throughout the process in order to increase trustworthiness.

3. Results

The 15 student counsellors engaged in this study had completed the first year of the postgraduate masters programme and are off-campus with various facilities and schools to be mentored by trained counselling professionals on how to counsel clients. They spent approximately one year on

the field for such exercise. These 15 students comprised 9 females and 6 males. Appendix 1 presents a summary of the themes, sub-themes, and supporting participant quotations identified in the analysis.

3.1 Use of Digital and AI Tools in Counselling Practice and frequency of use

During the practicum, every participant reported being familiar with and using digital technologies in their counselling practice. Some had started integrating AI-assisted resources into their daily routines, while others mostly depended on traditional digital tools. Participants described how technology was utilised in their counselling practice in a variety of ways, including the kinds of tools they used and how often they used them. They were also able to explain the precise uses of each type of tool. The results show a tiered approach to technology use that differentiates between preparatory chores, direct client involvement, and administrative functions. This reflects a careful and nuanced negotiation of technology's role within the counselling environment.

3.1.1. Non-AI digital tools

Everyday digital tools that counsellors used for communication, guidance lesson planning, and documentation constituted the most fundamental layer of technology use among participants. Counsellors were able to create guidance materials, keep accurate records, and communicate with clients and pupils on a daily basis because of the administrative and organisational functions of these traditional instruments. Their widespread usage among participants implies that fundamental digital literacy is already deeply ingrained in the counselling practicum, serving as the foundation for trainees' regular professional activities. P10 noted how important these tools are to day-to-day practice: "For me, I use my phone and laptop for typing reports, preparing guidance lessons, and communicating with students and clients that I meet each day ..." (P10).

This demonstrates a practical and functional engagement with technology, wherein gadgets like phones and laptops are used for the basic chores of communication and documentation that support successful counselling practice rather than for complex AI-driven objectives. Likewise, P8 emphasised how readily available productivity software helps them with their documentation work: "I use Word, Excel, and Google Forms for documentation. O yeah, it is really helpful" (P8).

Participants acknowledged these technologies' ease of use and accessibility as well as their potential to improve the administrative aspects of practicum by bringing efficiency and organization. When taken as a whole, these experiences indicate that non-AI digital technologies are essential to counselling trainees' management and organization of their professional obligations during practicum, rather than just being supplemental.

3.1.2. AI-assisted tools

Some participants reported using AI platforms in their preparation routines in ways that were deliberate, targeted, and task-specific, going beyond traditional digital tools. Participants used AI to synthesise research literature, develop topic ideas, build session outlines, and organise programmes instead of employing it during live counselling sessions. This deliberate and limited use of AI is indicative of a growing professional sensibility in which trainees acknowledge the benefits of AI as a cognitive and organisational tool while being acutely aware of the boundaries of its proper use in therapeutic settings. P6 discussed the use of AI tools and mentioned that they preferred a particular platform. "I use AI to summarize articles and prepare structured counselling outlines. ... and yes, I have noticed a lot more are on the internet, but I use more of ChatGPT" (P6).

According to this perspective, counselling trainees are becoming more knowledgeable about the AI ecosystem and are starting to make well-informed decisions about which technologies best meet their needs. Crucially, the same person also discussed how they learned to utilise AI, emphasising the importance of peer learning in their adoption of technology. "At first, I didn't know how to explore AI. A friend taught me and now AI helps me generate ideas for guidance topics which I use to organize programmes for the students and organize session plans." (P6).

This story is especially illuminating because it highlights how informal social networks, rather

than official training, are frequently used to manage access to AI tools and the knowledge needed to use them effectively. It also emphasises how AI may assist trainees arrange and structure their work, even in the absence of official institutional support for AI learning.

3.1.3. Frequency and context of use

Participants made a clear and intentional distinction between the frequency with which they used traditional digital tools and AI tools, as well as, most importantly, the particular situations in which each kind of tool was deemed suitable. AI use was more deliberate and selective, usually limited to preliminary activities rather than direct customer work, even if digital tools were used almost everyday. The boundaries of technology use are deliberately determined in connection to the relational demands of counselling, and this pattern indicates a purposeful and developing professional identity. P11 provided a very clear description of how frequently they use technology: "hmmm, as for AI, it has come to stay, It is very helpful to us. For me, I use these digital tools almost every day, but for AI maybe two or three times a week." (P11).

This narrative not only shows a methodical and deliberate approach to the use of AI, but it also indicates a wider understanding among trainees that AI has become an indispensable part of contemporary professional life, one that will only become more significant in the future. P15 emphasised the significance of contextual boundaries when using technology, clearly defining the difference between preparation and direct client interaction.

AI is mainly for preparation; I mean to prepare my sessions; especially certain things I should prepare for clients who are coming for the second time and subsequent sessions. But during the session, I focus on the client. They are my priority. So, I use technology and especially the AI almost everyday but ensure during sessions, my focus is only on client. (P15)

This intentional disengagement from technology during in-person counselling sessions demonstrates a strong dedication to the human and relational aspects of counselling practice. Participants showed a deep awareness of the limitations of technology and the indispensable value of interpersonal presence, attentiveness, and empathic connection in therapeutic work by deliberately putting AI tools aside while working directly with clients. Setting boundaries is a sign of growing professional maturity and shows that counselling students are actively creating a professional identity where technology enhances rather than replaces the human element of counselling.

3.2. Perceived Benefits of Digital and AI Tools

Participants shared their opinions on the value of AI and digital technologies for counselling. Some emphasised how technology made their administrative tasks easier, while others discussed how it strengthened clinical preparation and case conceptualisation. Participants' varied, in-depth, and occasionally ecstatic reports of the particular advantages they encountered establish a picture of technology as a useful and practically significant support for their practicum work. The advantages noted included client engagement, clinical thinking, administrative efficiency, and session preparation, indicating that the benefits of technology are felt in many aspects of counselling practice.

3.2.1. Administrative efficiency

One of the most obvious and immediate advantages of using technology during practicum, according to participants, is administrative efficiency. In an already taxing training programme, the time and effort saved on paperwork, report writing, and communication were often cited as major practical improvements. Several participants contextualised this advantage by contrasting it with the more labour-intensive administrative procedures of previous generations of counsellors, providing insight into the revolutionary change that digital tools have brought about. P9 talked clearly about this generational divide:

I do reflect on some of the things our lecturers talked about concerning how they have to spend days in preparing their documents for client sessions. But for now, we have all these digital tools to assist. Technology makes documentation and communication much easier and faster. (P9)

This report is noteworthy for the viewpoint and sense of appreciation it offers, in addition to the practical value it details. P9 illustrates how much digital technologies have actually changed the administrative environment of counselling training by contrasting the usage of technology now with more laborious earlier methods. In a similar vein, P11 highlighted the time-saving possibilities of AI in report writing and material organization while also expressing a desire to increase their use of these tools. "AI saves time when writing reports and organizing materials and for me, I just have to learn more about it so I can do more with it." (P11).

This forward-thinking attitude is indicative of a larger trend among participants who see AI as a resource with unrealised potential that merits ongoing research and development rather than just as a present convenience. The ability of technology to reduce the administrative load of practicum, freeing up time and mental resources for the relational and therapeutic aspects of their job, is for many student counsellors the most obvious advantage.

3.2.2 *Enhanced preparation*

Participants emphasised the important role AI plays in improving the calibre and depth of their counselling session preparation, going beyond administrative efficiency. Efficiency and professional confidence were shown to be derived from the ability to swiftly create structured lesson plans, session outlines, and conceptual frameworks. Due in large part to the clarity and organization that AI-assisted preparation offered, participants reported feeling more prepared and purposeful when they entered sessions. P10 considered how AI has changed the way they prepared lessons. "AI helps me prepare structured guidance lessons quickly. I use to spend days making sure my guidance lessons are well organised. But now, AI takes much of the responsibility." (P10).

This clearly demonstrates how AI has changed participants' preparation methods, making what was once a laborious and time-consuming procedure much more effective and manageable. The statement "AI takes much of the responsibility" is very telling, as it implies that participants view AI as a collaborative partner in the counselling preparation process rather than merely a tool. P7 expanded on this advantage by highlighting how better conceptual clarity during sessions is as a result of AI-assisted preparation: "Using AI helps me walk into sessions with clearer frameworks. Because it gives me what I want and what I may encounter though it may not be the same, it puts me in perspective, hahahahaaaa..." (P7).

The above highlights the real sense of assurance and trust that more precise frames offer. A mature and realistic understanding of AI's capabilities, one that appreciates its preparatory utility without exaggerating its predictive potential, is also demonstrated by the recognition that AI-generated frameworks might not be able to accurately predict what will happen in a session.

3.2.3 *Case conceptualization support*

Additionally, participants reported that AI tools helped them think about client concerns, allowing for a more thorough, multifaceted, and structured approach to comprehending presenting difficulties both before and after meetings. Participants who had previously struggled with case conceptualisation found this improvement particularly noteworthy, suggesting that AI may serve as a scaffold for trainees who are still honing their clinical reasoning skills. P6 discussed this change in an open and passionate manner:

...eish !!! this case conceptualization thing, I have really gotten hold of it. I used to struggle with it so much. But now, I understand things better because AI helps me think broadly about client issues and organize my case ideas better before I put them into writing.

This participant's confidence and clinical progress have been greatly impacted by AI support for case conceptualisation, as evidenced by the emotional narrative, which is characterised by relief, pride, and a sense of mastery. AI seems to be significantly contributing to the development of clinical reasoning skills among counselling trainees by assisting them in organising their thoughts more methodically and considering clients' presenting difficulties from several perspectives. Crucially, though, this advantage is felt during the planning phase rather than the

actual session, maintaining the counsellor's control over clinical judgment and decision-making while working directly with clients.

3.2.4 Client engagement

Clients' engagement during counselling sessions was positively impacted by the quality of their AI-assisted preparation, according to some participants. Increased client responsiveness and participation were shown to be facilitated by well-organised materials and visual aids, indicating that the indirect advantages of careful planning extend significantly into the therapeutic encounter. P6 noted: "... Clients respond better when I use well-organized materials and visuals." (P6).

There are important ramifications to this account. It implies that the investment in AI-assisted preparation has real advantages for the client experience in addition to being self-serving for the counsellor. Clients are more likely to feel that their counsellor is professional, well-prepared, and attentive to their needs when counsellors arrive at sessions with organised, visually appealing materials. These factors all help to establish and sustain a fruitful therapeutic relationship. This result emphasises how practice and preparation are intertwined, implying that the quality of a session can be significantly influenced by what occurs prior to it.

3.3. Challenges and Limitations

Participants admitted that using digital and AI tools into their practicum work presented considerable hurdles. Some identified personal skill gaps and cultural fit concerns, while others noted structural and infrastructural hurdles. Participants were open, thorough, and occasionally amusing in their descriptions of the nature of these difficulties, outlining the different ways in which these restrictions influenced and limited their practicum experience with technology. Infrastructure limitations, the learning curve for AI tools, and the cultural and contextual incongruence of AI-generated material were the three main categories of problems that were found.

3.3.1. Infrastructure constraints

The most basic and widespread obstacle to technology integration during practicum, according to participants, is inadequate physical and digital infrastructure, especially in placement locations with limited resources. For many trainees, the lack of basic digital facilities like computers, dependable internet connectivity, and institutional support significantly limited what was actually possible, resulting in a large gap between the potential of digital and AI tools and the reality of their working settings. P10 provided a remarkably clear description of the scope of this infrastructure shortfall: "Infrastructure has been a big issue for us. There are no computers or internet facilities at the school. I use my phone for hotspot. Sometimes I get home before I can get a wifi to work with." (P10).

This account demonstrates the ingenuity and tenacity of counselling students who, in spite of working in extremely underfunded settings, come up with inventive ways to keep using digital tools. The picture of a trainee having to wait till they come home in order to have a dependable internet connection effectively illustrates the systemic injustices that influence many students' practicum experiences. P6 discussed a similar but different issue: inconsistent connectivity during online therapy sessions. "Internet connectivity is unreliable, especially during virtual sessions. That makes the counselling session a bit boring and tiring because I have to be going back and forth." (P6).

This account's displeasure demonstrates the actual and disruptive effects of connectivity problems on the therapeutic process. In addition to being a technical annoyance, intermittent connectivity during a counselling session disturbs the relational flow of the exchange and may jeopardise the rapport and trust that are critical to successful counselling. Together, these testimonies show that many student counsellors face structural deprivation that restricts their access to the very tools they are expected to use, rather than a lack of willingness or expertise.

3.3.2. Learning curve

Participants also discussed the challenges of effectively learning to use AI tools, especially when formal training or institutionally supervised instruction is lacking. With many trainees navigating new platforms and capabilities mostly by trial and error, peer support, and self-directed online learning, the load of self-teaching added to the demands of an already demanding practical experience. P9 described their first encounters with AI technologies with a mix of humour and candour: "... I had to teach myself how to use AI tools, hahahahaaaa, it was funny what I used to do when I first heard of it." (P9).

The underlying difficulty this account conveys is softened but not eliminated by the laughter that permeates it. There is a big gap in the way counselling education programmes now prepare students for technology-integrated practice, as seen by the experience of having to autonomously traverse a new and complex technical terrain without institutional guidance or structured assistance. P7 recognised a more focused and enduring aspect of this difficulty: the ability to successfully prompt AI: "Learning how to prompt AI properly is a challenge. A friend told me to learn it using youtube" (P7).

This report is especially insightful because it highlights prompt engineering, a type of technology ability that is rarely covered in conventional education curriculum but is widely seen as crucial to effective AI application. The degree to which self-directed and peer-mediated learning has filled the void created by the lack of official AI training in counsellor education is demonstrated by the fact that P7 was referred to YouTube by a peer rather than any institutionally supplied resource.

3.3.3. Cultural and contextual incongruence

Participants expressed significant concerns over the cultural and contextual relevance of AI-generated information, especially when applied to localised counselling situations in Ghana, in addition to structural and skill-related issues. Because most AI systems are internationally produced, the content they create frequently reflects Western presumptions, examples, and frameworks that are difficult to adapt to African cultural contexts or rural community settings. Participants explained the adaptive techniques they used to overcome this restriction and showed a critical awareness of it. P6 expressed this difficulty with a great deal of consideration.

For me, our culture is a bit different. Looking at some of the things I see AI generates, some AI-generated content feels foreign and has to be modified. What I do is to ensure that I use it to get my English formatting right but not to alter the cultural context. It is very important to me. So it is not always that AI can do it all. (P6)

This report demonstrates a sophisticated and culturally grounded approach to the usage of AI, wherein its culturally incongruent information is critically filtered and adapted while the tool is chosen appropriately for its structural and linguistic value. The assertion that "it is not always that AI can do it all" demonstrates a healthy scepticism that protects the counsellor's function as a culturally aware practitioner and prevents an excessive reliance on AI-generated content. P13 discussed a similar issue with regard to school placements in rural areas: "Some examples do not fit the rural school environment where I serve as a practicum student. It is really challenging but I do manage. All I ensure is that the context is not lost." (P13).

The resolve shown in this story, "I do manage" and "the context is not lost", speaks to the adaptability and contextual awareness of counselling students managing the constraints of globally taught AI systems in culturally and locally unique settings. Together, these stories highlight how crucial it is to use contextual awareness, cultural adaptation, and professional judgement when utilising AI tools in counselling, especially in African and other non-Western contexts where there may be a substantial disconnect between AI-generated content and local reality.

3.4. How AI shapes the Counsellor-Client Relationship

Participants considered how the quality of their counselling relationships was affected by digital

and AI tools. Some highlighted the benefits of better planning and more seamless sessions, while others expressed worries about the dangers of relying too much on technology when interacting directly with clients. Participants provided nuanced, context-sensitive, and occasionally cautionary views regarding the relational impact of technology, acknowledging both the potential and the limitations of digital tools in the counselling arena. The results point to a twofold effect: when technology is utilised carefully in advance, it improves the settings for therapeutic connections, but when it is employed too prominently during the session, it runs the danger of upsetting relational attunement.

3.4.1. Relationship enhancement

Participants noted that thorough digital and AI-assisted preparation contributed positively to the flow, organisation, and overall quality of their counselling sessions, thereby indirectly strengthening the counsellor–client relationship. When counsellors arrived at sessions well-prepared and equipped with structured materials, they were better able to focus their attention fully on the client, respond more effectively to presenting concerns, and maintain a sense of purposefulness and direction throughout the interaction. P15 captured this dynamic succinctly: “When I prepare well using digital tools, sessions flow better. But bear in mind that I don’t use it for everything in my work. It is just to guide me” (P15).

The qualification embedded in this account, “it is just to guide me”, is significant in that it reflects a conscious effort to maintain professional ownership of the counselling process while acknowledging the supportive role of technology. This framing positions digital tools as facilitators of good practice rather than determinants of it, preserving the counsellor’s agency and clinical judgment as the primary drivers of the therapeutic interaction. P6 added a further dimension to this benefit, noting the impact of prepared materials on client engagement: “Prepared materials help me engage students better.” (P6).

Despite being brief, this discovery has significant ramifications for comprehending the relationship between practice and preparedness. Clients see sessions as being more focused, professional, and responsive to their needs when counsellors are well-prepared; these attributes directly support the growth of a solid therapeutic partnership. Together, these testimonies imply that the relational advantages of technology are most strongly felt in the quality of preparation that comes before a session, allowing counsellors to work with clients with more clarity, organization, and attention.

3.4.2. Relationship risks

Additionally, participants noted that using screens or other devices during counselling sessions posed serious hazards, especially when it interfered with the therapeutic alliance’s delicate dynamics or diverted attention from the relational work of counselling. Participants who work in delicate or high-stakes therapy settings, where trust and emotional safety are particularly important, voiced these concerns with a sense of urgency. P7 discussed how using screens during sessions might be distracting: “Using screens too much during sessions can be distracting. Ha, sometimes the network goes off, especially when you are at the peak of the relationship.” (P7).

This response clearly depicts a situation where a technical malfunction, a network dropout, occurs at the most sensitive and intimate point of a counselling session, upsetting the therapeutic momentum and possibly jeopardising the relationship that has been meticulously developed between the counsellor and the client. Clients may perceive these interruptions as a break in the session’s relational fabric that needs to be carefully repaired; they are not only inconvenient. P14 brought up a similar but different issue, highlighting how using technology could undermine client trust in more delicate counselling situations: “sometimes I feel the use of the device can weaken trust. Having issues and not getting a hold of it.” (P14).

This shows a profound understanding of the therapeutic alliance’s relational fragility, especially in settings like addiction counselling where trust is both fundamental and difficult to earn. The idea that fumbling with a gadget during a session can erode trust highlights the larger danger of

technology bringing a feeling of disarray, distraction, or divided attention into what ought to be an area of concentrated, compassionate, and complete human presence. Together, these issues highlight the significance of using technology in counselling in a deliberate, limited, and context-sensitive manner as well as the indispensable relevance of the therapeutic alliance as the foundation of successful counselling practice.

3.5. Training, Policy, and Future Directions

In order to effectively and more ethically incorporate digital and AI tools into counselling training and professional practice, participants provided detailed and comprehensive proposals. While some underlined the critical necessity for formal AI training in counselling education programmes, others stressed the significance of developing infrastructure and establishing unambiguous ethical standards at the institutional and national levels. Participants offered forward-thinking, useful, and occasionally passionate recommendations for better technology integration that were based on their actual practicum experiences and the difficulties they had faced.

3.5.1. Training needs

Formal AI training was recognised by participants as a critical, fundamental, and long-overdue requirement in counsellor education. A major shortcoming that left trainees navigating challenging technological and professional terrain without sufficient preparation or institutional support was the lack of systematic, programme-level guidance on AI use and ethics. Given the speed at which AI tools are developing and the increasing expectation that counsellors will be able to interact with them in a competent and moral manner, this divide was felt more keenly. P15 expressed this necessity clearly and firmly: "There should be formal training on AI use and ethics for counselling students." (P15).

This response reflects a wider and increasing awareness among counselling students that integrating AI into professional practice is a crucial and urgent issue that counsellor education programmes need to proactively address, rather than a secondary or optional concern. Particularly noteworthy is the emphasis on ethics in addition to practical AI literacy, indicating that participants view technology training as a component of professional formation that must be guided by the values and ethical commitments that underpin the counselling profession rather than just as a matter of skill development.

3.5.2. Resource needs

Additionally, participants emphasised how crucial it is to improve practicum settings' access to basic technology infrastructure, especially in underfunded schools and community-based placements where the lack of essential digital resources continues to restrict what trainees can actually accomplish. The demand for infrastructure development was presented as a requirement for equitable and meaningful participation in a professional environment that is becoming more and more technologically integrated, rather than just as a convenience issue. P10 presented this argument with urgency and clarity: "Basic schools need computers and reliable internet. Where technology and AI has reached, we need to up our game. We need to meet the demands of the time." (P10).

The forward-looking framing of this account, "we need to meet the demands of the time", reflects a recognition that the pace of technological change in the counselling profession requires a corresponding investment in the infrastructural foundations that make technology use possible. Without reliable devices and connectivity in placement settings, training in AI literacy and digital tool use remains largely theoretical, disconnected from the practical realities of the counselling environments in which trainees are expected to work.

3.5.3. Policy and guidelines

Finally, participants called for the development of clear, institutionally sanctioned, and professionally endorsed guidelines to govern the ethical use of AI in counselling contexts. The absence of such frameworks was experienced as a gap that left individual trainees to navigate

complex ethical terrain largely on the basis of their own judgment and the foundational ethics training they had received, without the guidance of profession-specific standards or institutional policies. P9 articulated this need with precision: "There should be clear guidelines on how AI can be used ethically." (P9).

This recommendation points to the need for coordinated and collaborative action across multiple levels of the counselling ecosystem, training institutions, professional bodies, and policymakers. to develop frameworks that are both ethically robust and contextually appropriate. The call for clear guidelines also reflects a broader understanding among participants that individual ethical awareness, while necessary, is not sufficient to ensure responsible AI use at a systemic level. Professional-wide standards and institutional policies are needed to create the conditions in which AI can be integrated into counselling practice in ways that are consistent, accountable, and aligned with the core values of the profession.

4. Discussion

The study explored counselling trainees' experiences with the use of digital and artificial intelligence (AI) tools during practicum, focusing on patterns of use, perceived benefits, challenges, ethical considerations, relational implications, and future needs. The findings provide contextually grounded insights into how emerging technologies are being negotiated within counsellor training, particularly in resource-constrained settings. This discussion interprets the findings in relation to existing literature and highlights their implications for counsellor education and professional practice.

The findings indicate that counselling trainees routinely used basic digital tools and adopted AI tools cautiously, primarily for preparation, planning, and administrative tasks. This restrained engagement reflects an emerging understanding of AI as an augmentative resource rather than a substitute for professional counselling judgment. Similar positions have been articulated in the literature, which emphasizes that AI should support, rather than replace, the counsellor's clinical reasoning and relational role (Ping, 2024).

This pattern also aligns with literature showing that digital and AI technologies are increasingly used to enhance case conceptualization, reduce administrative burdens and improve service delivery without displacing the human dimensions of counselling (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017; Inkster et al., 2018; Naslund et al., 2017). Participants' careful use of technology further supports concerns raised by Corey (2016) and Reamer (2015) regarding the need to preserve empathy, authenticity and therapeutic alliance in digitally mediated counselling environments.

Participants' avoidance of AI use during live counselling sessions further underscores their sensitivity to ethical boundaries and professional responsibility. Olawade et al. (2024) similarly caution that unregulated or intrusive AI use in mental health care may compromise ethical standards and therapeutic integrity. Collectively, these findings suggest that trainees' patterns of AI use align with emerging professional norms that prioritize human-centered practice. These concerns are also consistent with scholarship highlighting confidentiality, data governance, informed consent and professional identity challenges surrounding AI integration in counselling education and practice (Mishna et al., 2021; Rahsepar Meadi et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2023).

Participants identified several benefits of digital and AI tools, including improved administrative efficiency, enhanced session preparation, clearer conceptual organization, and increased confidence during counselling encounters. These findings align with Ping's (2024) assertion that AI can reduce cognitive and administrative burdens, thereby allowing counsellors to focus more fully on therapeutic engagement. Similar findings have been documented in studies demonstrating how AI tools support structured preparation, cognitive-behavioural interventions, case formulation and efficient information processing (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017; Inkster et al., 2018; Kessler et al., 2017). The findings also resonate with broader work on digital mental health interventions that emphasize scalability, responsiveness and improved access to mental health support (Naslund et al., 2017).

Consistent with Olawade et al. (2024), participants described AI as particularly useful for

preparatory tasks such as organizing session outlines, summarizing information, and developing psychoeducational materials. Importantly, participants did not attribute clinical authority to AI, instead positioning it as a supportive aid that enhanced readiness rather than decision-making. This distinction reinforces ethical best practices and reflects a sophisticated understanding of AI's appropriate role in counselling.

Despite these benefits, participants reported notable challenges related to infrastructural limitations, skill acquisition, and contextual relevance. Limited access to computers, unreliable internet connectivity, and lack of institutional digital resources were particularly evident in public schools and community-based settings. These constraints mirror broader concerns regarding inequitable access to digital health technologies, especially in low-resource contexts (Olawade et al., 2024). They also support evidence suggesting that technological advancement frequently outpaces the development of supervision models, institutional preparedness and digital literacy frameworks within counsellor education (Buck et al., 2022; Glueckauf et al., 2018; Reamer, 2018).

Participants also described difficulties in learning how to use AI tools effectively, largely due to the absence of formal training. This finding supports Ping (2024) observation that professional training has not kept pace with the rapid development of AI technologies. The finding further aligns with studies showing that counsellor education programmes often struggle with limited faculty expertise, institutional inertia and insufficient structured AI training (Buck et al., 2022; Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2023; Gray et al., 2024). The reliance on peer learning and self-directed exploration observed among participants reflects broader concerns about gaps in digital preparedness among trainee professionals (Glueckauf et al., 2018; Kiran, 2025).

Additionally, concerns about culturally incongruent AI-generated content highlight the limitations of globally trained AI systems when applied to localized counselling contexts. Such concerns underscore the importance of contextual sensitivity and adaptation, as emphasized in broader discussions of ethical AI integration in counselling (Sheperis et al., 2025). These findings also support arguments that digital mental health tools may reproduce inequities and algorithmic bias when insufficiently adapted to local socio-cultural realities (Agormedah et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2023; Naslund et al., 2017; Warrier et al., 2023).

Ethical awareness emerged as a central feature of participants' engagement with AI. Across practicum settings, participants demonstrated strong commitment to confidentiality, data protection, and professional boundaries, particularly by avoiding the entry of identifiable client information into AI platforms. This ethical caution aligns closely with scholarly warnings regarding data privacy and the risks of misuse in AI-assisted counselling (Olawade et al., 2024; Ping, 2024). Similar concerns regarding confidentiality, digital ethics and responsible technology use have been emphasized in studies of technology-mediated counselling and social work practice (Mishna et al., 2021; Reamer, 2015, 2018).

The emphasis on maintaining human oversight reflects core counselling values and supports arguments that ethical AI use must remain counsellor-led (Sheperis et al., 2025). Notably, participants' ethical sensitivity was evident despite the absence of formal AI ethics training, suggesting that foundational counselling ethics may serve as an important safeguard against inappropriate technological use.

The findings indicate that AI indirectly enhanced counsellor-client relationships by improving preparation and session flow, while direct use during counselling sessions was perceived as potentially disruptive to rapport. This dual effect aligns with Ping's (2024) emphasis on the irreplaceability of empathy, presence, and relational attunement in counselling practice.

Participants' concerns about technology weakening emotional connection echo broader conceptual discussions that caution against the depersonalization of counselling in increasingly digital environments (Olawade et al., 2024; Sheperis et al., 2025). These concerns strongly mirror scholarship on relational depth, empathy and therapeutic presence in technology-enhanced counselling settings (Amos, 2023; Corey, 2016; Parakkal et al., 2025; Wind et al., 2020). These findings reinforce the importance of preserving the therapeutic relationship as the core of counselling practice, with AI functioning as a background support rather than a focal element of

the counselling process.

Participants strongly recommended the integration of AI literacy, ethical training, and digital competencies into counsellor education curricula, alongside improvements in infrastructure and the development of clear institutional and national guidelines. These recommendations are consistent with calls in the literature for reimagining counsellor preparation to address the realities of digital and AI-integrated practice (Ping, 2024; Sheperis et al., 2025). Similar recommendations have emerged from studies advocating structured digital education, strengthened supervision systems and clearer ethical frameworks for technology-enabled counselling practice (Buck et al., 2022; Chao, 2019; Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2023; Glueckauf et al., 2018). Olawade et al. (2024) similarly emphasize the need for regulatory frameworks and professional standards to guide ethical AI implementation in mental health care. The convergence between participants' recommendations and scholarly discourse suggests that counselling trainees are critically aware of both the opportunities and risks associated with AI. This positions counsellor education institutions as key stakeholders in shaping responsible, ethical, and contextually appropriate AI integration.

5. Contribution of the Study and Recommendations

This study contributes theoretically by extending the application of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) within counselling education and practicum training in a Ghanaian context. The findings illustrate how perceived usefulness, ease of use, social influence and facilitating conditions shape student counsellors' engagement with digital and AI tools. Beyond technology adoption, the study demonstrates that counselling trainees negotiate technology use through ethical judgement, relational sensitivity and contextual awareness, thereby expanding these theories into the humanistic and culturally responsive domain of counselling practice. Practically, the study contributes to counsellor education by highlighting the need for structured AI literacy, ethical guidance and institutional support for sustainable digital counselling practice.

First, it is therefore important that counsellor training institutions incorporate structured digital training courses into the programme to enable students to acquire the needed skills in the appropriate use of AI tools. Second, professional bodies and training institutions should develop or establish clear, specific ethical frameworks for use within institutions, especially in areas of confidentiality, professional boundaries and data protection. These trainees should also be trained to use and assess the AI tools to suit culturally specific, socio-economic and educational contexts. Third, professional bodies and training institutions should organise hands-on training and continuous professional development by organising workshops, seminars and training sessions to enable trainees to develop competence in the use of the AI tools. Fourth, drawing from TAM and UTAUT, counselling training institutions should strengthen perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, social support and facilitating conditions for AI adoption by embedding structured digital literacy, supervised AI practice and ethical technology training into counsellor education programmes. Such interventions may improve trainee confidence, responsible technology acceptance and culturally responsive counselling practice. Finally, educational institutions and practicum sites for trainee counsellors should have digital infrastructure on their sites to enable ease of use.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital and AI tools are increasingly incorporated into counselling training, primarily as preparatory and supportive resources. Although these tools offer meaningful benefits in efficiency and readiness. Their use is constrained by infrastructural limitations, cultural considerations, and ethical concerns. Consistent with existing scholars (Olawade et al., 2024; Ping, 2024; Sheperis et al., 2025), the study underscores the necessity of human-centered, ethically regulated, and contextually responsive integration of AI in counselling practice.

7. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for further Research

This study is subject to several limitations, including its confinement to postgraduate students at a public university in Ghana which restricts the generalizability of findings to other counselling training programs in Ghana and beyond, as the results reflect the unique institutional culture and resources of UEW alone. The exclusive focus on student counsellors also means that the perspectives of supervisors, clients, and institutional administrators were not captured, limiting the comprehensiveness of the findings, while the study's reliance on self-reported perceptions rather than objective clinical outcome data means that conclusions about the actual effectiveness of digital and AI tools remain subjective and potentially subject to recall bias and social desirability.

In light of these limitations, future research should broaden its scope to include multiple institutions across Ghana and other African and non-Western contexts, and adopt multi-stakeholder designs that incorporate the views of supervisors, clients, and administrators to provide a more holistic understanding of technology integration in counselling training. Quantitative and mixed-methods studies measuring clinical outcomes such as client satisfaction and trainee competency development would complement the experiential insights of qualitative approaches, while longitudinal research tracking trainees into qualified practice would illuminate how technology habits formed during training evolve over time. Finally, the development and evaluation of AI literacy curricula specifically designed for counsellor education would directly address a gap identified by participants and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of practicum training programmes.

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Appendix 1. Summary of Themes, Sub-Themes, and Supporting Participant Quotations

<i>Meaning Unit</i>	<i>Condensed meaning unit. Description close to the text</i>	<i>Condensed meaning unit. Interpretation of the underlying meaning</i>	<i>Sub-theme</i>	<i>Theme</i>
"I'm completing my practicum at a public Junior High School where I work with early adolescents." (P10) "My practicum is at a municipal hospital and an addiction recovery centre." (P14) "I'm doing my practicum at a College of Education, working with teacher trainees." (P6) "I provide one-on-one counselling sessions for students dealing with academic and personal challenges." (P3) "I conduct group guidance sessions on career development and study skills." (P5) "I assist with mental health workshops and community outreach programs." (P11)	The participants are completing their practicums across diverse settings - including a public junior high school, a municipal hospital, an addiction recovery centre, and a College of Education – engaging populations ranging from early adolescents and students to teacher trainees and individuals in rehabilitation	The varied placement contexts and counselling activities, spanning individual sessions, group guidance, mental health workshops, and community outreach, reflect the broad and multifaceted nature of counselling practice that trainees are being exposed to during their field training	Practicum Setting Counselling Roles and Responsibilities	Theme 1: Practicum Context and Counselling Roles
"I use my phone and laptop for typing reports, preparing guidance lessons, and communicating with students." (P10) "We use Word, Excel, and Google Forms for documentation." (P8) "I use AI to summarize articles and prepare structured counseling outlines." (P6) "AI helps me generate ideas for guidance topics and organize session plans." (P9) "I use digital tools almost every day, but AI maybe two or three times a week." (P11) "AI is mainly for preparation; during sessions, I focus on the client." (P15)	The participants use a range of digital tools – from personal devices and productivity software like Word, Excel, and Google Forms, to AI – for tasks including report writing, documentation, lesson preparation, idea generation, and session planning, with AI used selectively rather than constantly.	While digital technology is deeply embedded in the trainees' daily counseling practice, AI is purposefully positioned as a preparatory aid that supports the cognitive and organizational demands of counseling work without replacing the human-centered focus required during actual client interactions.	Non-AI Digital Tools AI-Assisted Tools Frequency and Context of Use	Theme 2: Use of Digital and AI Tools

Appendix 1 continued

<i>Meaning Unit</i>	<i>Condensed meaning unit. Description close to the text</i>	<i>Condensed meaning unit. Interpretation of the underlying meaning</i>	<i>Sub-theme</i>	<i>Theme</i>
"Technology makes documentation and communication much easier and faster." (P9) "AI saves time when writing reports and organizing materials." (P11) "AI helps me prepare structured guidance lessons quickly." (P10) "Using AI helps me walk into sessions with clearer frameworks." (P7) "AI helps me think broadly about client issues and organize my case ideas." (P6) "Students respond better when I use well-organized materials and visuals." (P6)	Participants report that technology and AI streamline documentation, report writing, lesson preparation, and case organization, while also enhancing the quality and clarity of materials presented to students and clients.	The perceived benefits of AI extend beyond mere efficiency, suggesting that its use strengthens the trainees' clinical readiness and professional confidence while positively influencing student engagement and session outcomes.	Administrative Efficiency Enhanced Preparation Case Conceptualization Support Client Engagement	Theme 3: Perceived Benefits of Digital and AI Tools
"There are no computers or internet facilities at the school." (P10) "Internet connectivity is unreliable, especially during virtual sessions." (P6) "I had to teach myself how to use AI tools." (P9) "Learning how to prompt AI properly is a challenge." (P7) "Some AI-generated content feels foreign and has to be modified." (P6) "Some examples do not fit the rural school environment." (P13)	Participants report significant barriers to technology use, including inadequate infrastructure, unreliable internet, limited formal training on AI tools, and the need to adapt AI-generated content that often feels contextually misaligned with their local settings.	These challenges reveal a gap between the idealized utility of AI and the practical realities of trainees' environments, underscoring that effective AI integration requires not only access and technical literacy but also cultural and contextual relevance.	Infrastructure Constraints Learning Curve Cultural/Contextual Incongruence	Theme 4: Challenges and Limitations
"I never input personal or identifying client information into AI tools." (P6) "I avoid entering students' or patients' details into AI." (P15) "AI should guide preparation, but not replace professional judgment." (P7) "Counseling is about human connection; AI can assist but not replace empathy." (P11)	Participants consistently avoid entering identifiable client information into AI systems and firmly regard AI as a preparatory support tool that cannot substitute for the professional judgment and human connection central to counseling.	The trainees demonstrate an emerging ethical consciousness around AI use, recognizing the boundaries between technological assistance and the irreplaceable relational and moral dimensions of counseling practice.	Confidentiality and Data Protection Ethical Boundaries of AI Use	Theme 5: Ethical and Privacy Considerations

Appendix 1 continued

Meaning Unit	Condensed meaning unit. Description close to the text	Condensed meaning unit. Interpretation of the underlying meaning	Sub-theme	Theme
"We had ICT training, but nothing specific on AI." (P12) "Supervisors encourage innovation but emphasize ethics." (P11) "Classmates share AI tools and prompts through WhatsApp." (P13)	Participants received general ICT training without specific AI instruction, while supervisors promoted ethical innovation and peers informally shared AI tools and prompts through social messaging platforms.	The absence of formal AI-focused training has pushed trainees toward informal, peer-driven learning networks, suggesting that institutional preparation has not yet kept pace with the technological realities of contemporary counseling practice	Institutional Training Supervisor Influence Peer Influence	Theme 6: Training, Supervision, and Social Influence
"When I prepare well using digital tools, sessions flow better." (P15) "Prepared materials help me engage students better." (P6) "Using screens too much during sessions can be distracting." (P7) "In addition counseling, device use can weaken trust." (P14)	Participants acknowledge that digital preparation enhances session flow and student engagement, yet caution that excessive screen use during sessions can be distracting and potentially erode the trust essential in sensitive counseling contexts.	This tension between preparation-based benefits and in-session drawbacks highlights the trainees' growing awareness that effective technology use requires deliberate boundaries that privilege therapeutic relationship over digital convenience.	Relationship Enhancement Relationship Risks	Theme 7: Impact on Counselor-Client Relationship
"There should be formal training on AI use and ethics for counseling students." (P15) "Basic schools need computers and reliable internet." (P10) "There should be clear guidelines on how AI can be used ethically." (P9)	Participants call for structured AI training integrated with ethics education, improved technological infrastructure in underserved schools, and clear institutional guidelines governing the ethical use of AI in counseling.	These recommendations reflect the trainees' recognition that responsible AI integration in counseling cannot rely on individual initiative alone, but requires deliberate institutional investment in both resources and ethical frameworks.	Training Needs Resource Needs Policy and Guidelines	Theme 8: Recommendations and Future Needs