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Letter to Editor

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Remote Mental Health Services in Iran: Psychologists' Lens on Opportunities and Challenges

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Dear Editor

In recent decades, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, telepsychology has emerged as a significant and innovative approach to delivering mental health services worldwide, including Iran. Given the crucial role that these services facilitate in supporting the community's mental well-being; hence, this letter highlights key opportunities and challenges associated with them from the view of practicing psychologists in Iran. It would be beneficial to guide policymakers and researchers in developing targeted interventions to improve Iran's mental health care system.

Telepsychology presents valuable opportunities alongside notable challenges, which are discussed below and illustrated in Figure 1.

Opportunities

Telepsychology in Iran presents a unique opportunity to bridge the gap in mental health care, particularly in underprivileged regions. Platforms such as "Hamareh" and "Online Psychological Counseling" are instrumental in promoting equity, providing services to low-income communities where traditional face-to-face options might be

scarce. Such initiatives are vital for addressing the urban-rural divide that underpins mental health disparities in Iran. Furthermore, remote services are essential for individuals with physical disabilities, facilitating their access to mental health support in a manner previously unimaginable (1). The role of telepsychology in reducing stigma cannot be overlooked. Many clients, particularly those battling addictions or navigating the complexities of gender identity, face cultural and social taboos that discourage them from seeking help(2). Online services create a sense of privacy, enabling clients to participate in therapy, while reducing the fear of judgment and increasing the adherence to treatment. Additionally, these services provide Iranian immigrants in other countries with the opportunity to receive mental care in their native language, thereby overcoming linguistic barriers and enhancing the therapeutic experience(3). Moreover, given Iran's susceptibility to natural disasters, the ability to deliver rapid psychological support remotely can mitigate acute trauma and provide critical care during emergencies when in-person services are often disrupted. This aspect cannot be ignored; as disasters strike, the capacity to mobilize mental health support via telepsychology could be a game-changer.

From a financial perspective, the cost-effectiveness of telepsychology is persuasive. By eliminating transportation expenses and offering more affordable care options, remote services broaden access to mental health support for a wider demographic, including economically disadvantaged groups(4).

Additionally, the flexibility of remote therapy sessions allows psychologists to expand their offerings to include group counseling and training workshops; thus, maximizing resources and improving convenience for all parties involved.

Moreover, by overcoming geographical barriers, telepsychology can enhance the visibility and recognition of psychologists and broaden the reach of their professional activities at both national and international levels; thereby, contributing to the alleviation of the substantial mental health burden above and beyond.

Challenges

However, as promising as these opportunities sound, several challenges undermine the integrity and efficacy of telepsychology in Iran. Two areas requiring urgent attention are systematic infrastructure deficit and regulatory concerns.

The infrastructure deficit extends beyond frequent power outages and disrupted internet access. It represents a fundamental digital divide where unreliable connectivity and unequal access to technology exclude vulnerable populations, thereby paradoxically creating new barriers to care. This is compounded by a critical training gap. Without formal training in telepsychology, from remote rapport-building to crisis management at a distance, a substantial proportion of psychologists delivers online interventions with limited proficiency, potentially impacting treatment quality and client trust. This lack of proficiency risks eroding the therapeutic alliance and can lead to misdiagnosis, as critical visual cues essential for an accurate diagnosis might be lost in online sessions, and certain mental health disorders may not respond well to this medium (5). Therefore, the efficacy of virtual meetings remains an open question and warrants rigorous investigation.

Concurrently, a regulatory vacuum creates an environment of professional and legal uncertainty. The absence of clear guidelines surrounding the licensing and insurance of telepsychology has led to uncertainties not only for psychologists but also for clients, obstructing broader acceptance of online services. This ambiguity is acutely felt in the realm of data security and privacy. The digital nature of telepsychology raises key questions regarding the confidentiality of client information. For clients with sensitive issues, the fear of a privacy breach is a profound deterrent to seeking care, directly undermining the core goal of expanding access to mental health services(6). It necessitates the establishment of enforceable protocols for securing digital platforms and managing client data. Such measures are critical to build trust among both psychologists and clients and to prevent exposure to significant risks.

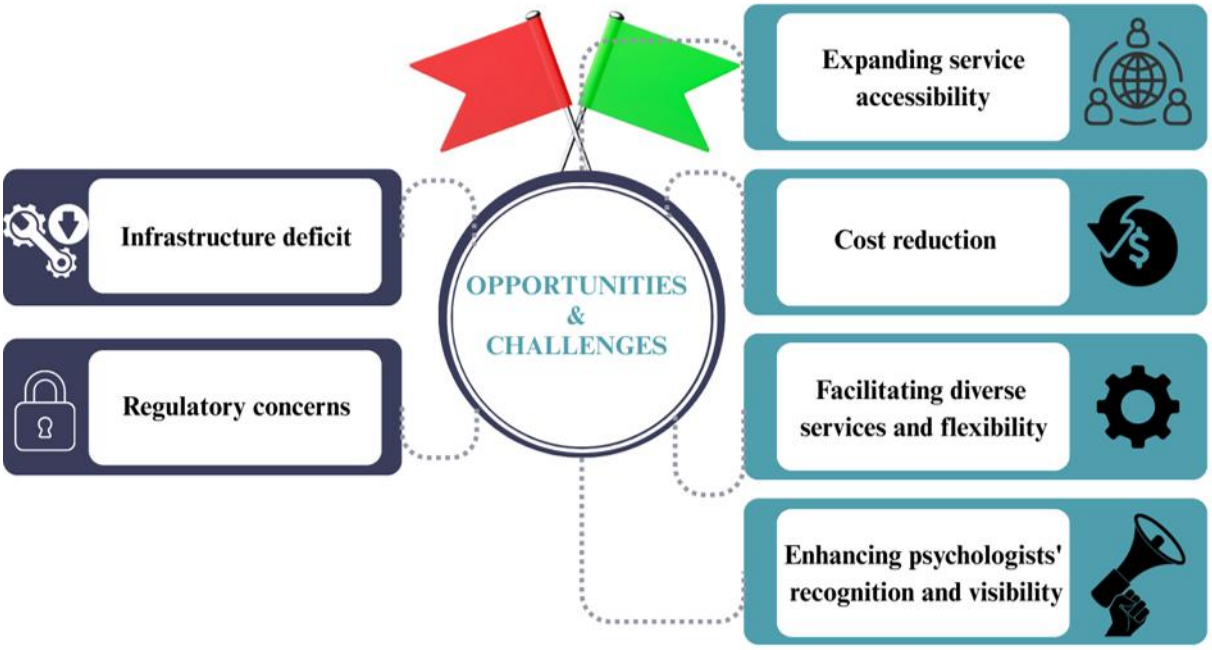

Figure 1. Opportunities and challenges of remote mental health services in Iran from psychologists' view

Conclusion and recommendations

While telepsychology is offering some potential for Iran's mental health framework, some challenges need serious consideration. Additionally, to harness the benefits of telepsychology and address the challenges, Iran must transition to a structured, national framework. We propose the following policy-oriented actions:

Establishing a National Tele-mental Health Taskforce: A government-mandated body, consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Health, medical councils, and IT security, should be established with the authority to draft and ratify definitive regulations for professional licensure, insurance reimbursement, and the parameters of remote service delivery.

Launching a Digital Mental Health Competency Initiative: Mandatory certification programs in digital ethics and tele-practice skills must be developed and integrated into the continuing education requirements for all certified psychologists to ensure a standardized level of proficiency.

Promotion of Secure Technology Development: The government should allocate public funding and provide tax incentives to spur the development and adoption of low-cost, HIPAA-compliant, Persian-language digital platforms that guarantee end-to-end encryption and secure data storage.

These targeted interventions are critical for transitioning toward a telepsychology ecosystem that is accessible, ethically sound, clinically effective, and sustainable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no **conflicts** of interest to declare.

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