INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES TECHNOLOGY AND CIVILIZATION
E-ISSN: 2600-8815
VOLUME 11, ISSUE 2, 2026, 248 - 261
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15282/ijhtc.v11i2.14055

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Evaluating ChatGPT as a culturally responsive mental health support tool in Malaysia's multicultural context

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Abstract: This study demonstrates that AI-powered conversational agents specifically ChatGPT can provide culturally adaptive mental health support across Malaysia's multicultural society, offering an accessible complement to traditional care systems. Despite rising mental health concerns in Malaysia, significant barriers including cost, stigma, and limited cultural sensitivity in existing interventions prevent many from accessing appropriate care, while AI chatbots' effectiveness across diverse cultural contexts remains unexplored. This research evaluates ChatGPT's capacity to deliver empathetic and culturally appropriate mental health support to users from Malaysia's Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. A mixed-method approach combined systematic literature review with practical observation, testing ChatGPT through culturally specific mental health scenarios across four languages (English, Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Tamil) and analysing responses using five criteria: empathy, cultural sensitivity, accessibility, language fluency, and practical helpfulness. Findings revealed that ChatGPT consistently demonstrated empathy through validating language, successfully integrated multiple religious and cultural references within responses, maintained natural linguistic fluency across all languages, and provided actionable coping strategies while appropriately recommending professional care. This study provides first empirical evidence that AI can deliver culturally sensitive mental health support in multicultural Asian contexts, informing policy development for integrating AI tools as preliminary, stigma-free support systems that complement professional mental healthcare services in culturally diverse societies.

Article History
Received : 10 February 2026
Revised : 12 September 2026
Accepted : 27 October 2026
Published : 10 November 2026

Keywords
Mental health support
ChatGPT
Diverse Culture

1. Introduction

Mental health has become a major global public health concern, affecting people of all ages and backgrounds. According to the World Health Organization, nearly 1 in 8 people worldwide live with mental health disorders, as shown in Figure 1, affecting almost 970 million individuals globally (Eprs, 2024; Transforming Mental Health for All, 2022). Anxiety and depression remain among the most common conditions, affecting over 300 million and 280 million people, respectively. Alarmingly, this includes a significant number of young people, with the World Health Organization (WHO) reporting that over 58 million children and adolescents are living with anxiety where they are trapped in cycles of overwhelming fear and worry (Cole, 2020; Zhong et al., 2024). Other disorders such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and eating disorders also continue to affect millions worldwide, as presented in Figure 2 (Grande et al., 2016; McIntyre et al., 2020; Charlson et al., 2019; Transforming Mental Health for All, 2022). These statistics highlight the widespread and serious impact of mental health issues on people of all ages, affecting their daily functioning, relationships, and quality of life.

Figure 1

Worldwide statistics of mental health disorders



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Figure 2

Different types of mental health disorders



Despite the growing need for mental health support, many individuals still face barriers such as stigma, financial limitations, and lack of professional services (Institute for Public Health, 2020; Zhong et al., 2024). In a country as diverse as Malaysia, these challenges are even more complex, as different ethnic groups often have their own ways of viewing mental illness and traditional beliefs can sometimes delay or replace professional treatment, leaving many without support (Bharadwaj et al., 2017; Day, 2023).

Malaysia's rich mix of cultures primarily Malay, Chinese, and Indian where each has a unique approach in understanding mental health. For instance, in the Malay community, psychological distress is often seen as a religious issue, leading many to seek help from *ustaz* (Islamic teacher) or traditional healers instead of modern medical professionals (Bensaid, 2021; Ghani et al., 2014; Lutfia, 2025). Meanwhile, the Chinese community's emphasis on emotional restraint and family reputation can make it difficult for individuals to openly discuss their struggles (Mofrad, 2014; Mu et al., 2024; Yee Hong et al., 2012). In Indian communities, especially in rural areas, people often turn to a blend of traditional practices and religious rituals for support (Aaera, 2023; Pauzi et al., 2025; Sukumar, 2015). These different cultural beliefs significantly shape how people recognize symptoms, express their distress, and ultimately, whether they seek professional help (Lamblin et al., 2017).

In today's digital age, with the growth of digital technology, artificial intelligence (AI), specifically generative models like ChatGPT have emerged as a potential source of accessible emotional support by providing immediate and confidential interaction (Khawaja & Bélisle-Pipon, 2023; Blease & Torous, 2023). Unlike traditional options, these AI platforms offer immediate, low-cost mental health support and confidential help without fear of judgment. However, its effectiveness across Malaysia's multicultural communities remains unclear. Therefore, this study evaluates ChatGPT's ability to provide empathetic and culturally appropriate mental health support among Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities in Malaysia.

1.1 Assessing Empathetic and Culturally Appropriate Mental Health Support

To evaluate ChatGPT's capacity to deliver empathetic and culturally appropriate mental health support, which is the core objective of this study, it is essential to operationalize this multidimensional construct through measurable assessment criteria. Building established frameworks in cross-cultural mental health literature (Day, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Pazer, 2024) empathetic and culturally appropriate support is conceptualized as comprising five interrelated dimensions, which are empathy, cultural sensitivity, accessibility, language and fluency, practical helpfulness. These five criteria functions as interdependent components of a unified construct rather than discrete objectives; ChatGPT must demonstrate proficiency across all five dimensions to be considered effective in providing culturally appropriate mental health support. This holistic assessment framework enables systematic evaluation of whether the research objective has been achieved (Pazer, 2024).

Empathy is an important element in mental health support because compassionate responses help reduce feelings of isolation and encourage trust. According to Alshammari, 2025, AI tools such as ChatGPT are more likely to be viewed positively when users perceive empathy in their responses. Although AI cannot genuinely feel emotions, it can use supportive language and tone to respond with understanding. This criterion evaluates whether ChatGPT recognized emotional distress and responded in a caring, respectful, and non-judgmental manner, which is important in creating supportive mental health conversations. In addition, emotional regulation among users remains an important aspect of psychological well-being, as previous research has shown that the ability to manage emotions effectively can significantly influence individuals' quality of life and overall mental health outcomes (Anita et al., 2017).

Mental health is deeply influenced by culture. Culturally insensitive advice such as recommending practices taboo in certain communities can detach users from their community. Research by Day, 2023 underscores that AI must adapt to local contexts to be effective, particularly in multicultural societies like Malaysia. The ChatGPT's advice was checked for alignment with Malaysian cultural norms, including local cultural values, religious beliefs and societal values. This includes avoiding advice that might clash with traditional practices or family dynamics, especially in a multicultural society like Malaysia. A culturally sensitive response demonstrates an awareness of the user's background, which is essential for building trust and ensuring the advice is relevant. Responses were flagged if they contained Western-centric assumptions. Barriers to mental health care often include language and literacy challenges. If AI responses are complicated, they exclude vulnerable populations, defeating the purpose of accessible mental health support (Singh, 2019). Clarity and simplicity of language were assessed, focusing on whether responses avoided complex jargon and were easily understandable for non-native English speakers. Fluency impacts perceived reliability. Poor translations erode trust, especially in emotional exchanges. Li et al., 2023 found that users disengage from AI tools with unnatural language, highlighting the need for linguistically tailored interactions. We will specifically assess the accuracy and natural flow of ChatGPT's responses in key Malaysian languages such as English, Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil. The ability to communicate fluently in a user's native language is vital for providing comfort and ensuring that complex emotions can be expressed and understood without being lost in translation.

Instead of just giving generic, unhelpful statements, ChatGPT needs to effectively fill gaps in mental health care. Farhat (2024) research indicates that users prefer tools that offer specific, actionable strategies. In contrast, advice that is too general may diminish the seriousness of their distress. This criterion evaluates whether ChatGPT provides concrete, useful suggestions. These could include actionable advice like breathing exercises, cognitive reframing techniques, or, most importantly, a clear and responsible recommendation to seek professional help. The goal is for the AI to offer safe steps a user can take to manage their feelings. These five criteria, summarized in Table 1, were selected because they cover the key aspects of effective mental health support. Empathy and Cultural Sensitivity ensure emotional understanding and cultural appropriateness, while Accessibility and Language Fluency address communication barriers in Malaysia's diverse society. Practical Helpfulness evaluates whether ChatGPT provides safe and useful guidance, including recommending professional help when necessary. Together, these criteria provide a comprehensive framework for assessing ChatGPT's ability to deliver responsible, culturally appropriate, and supportive mental health assistance.

Table 1

Five-dimensional criteria for assessing empathetic and culturally appropriate mental health support

Criteria	Description
Empathy	Whether the AI recognized emotional distress and responded with compassion.
Cultural Sensitivity	Whether the AI avoided culturally insensitive advice and followed local values, beliefs, or customs.
Accessibility	Whether the response was easy to understand, especially for non-native English speakers.
Language Fluency	The accuracy and fluency of ChatGPT's response in Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, and Tamil.
Practical Helpfulness	Whether the AI provided useful suggestions, such as breathing exercises, reframing techniques, or encouragement to seek professional help.

2. Research Methodology

This research uses a mixed method approach to explore how ChatGPT supports mental health across Malaysia's three main ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese, and Indian. It combines a review of existing studies with practical observation to understand both theory and real interaction. The literature review examined academic sources, reports, and articles on artificial intelligence in mental health, with emphasis on cultural sensitivity and accessibility. The practical component involved direct interaction with ChatGPT to assess its ability to respond with empathy, provide emotional support, and adapt to different cultural contexts. By integrating published research with real time testing, this study examines how effectively ChatGPT can function as a supportive tool for mental health in a multicultural setting.

2.1 Library Study

The library study was conducted to establish a theoretical foundation for the use of Artificial Intelligence in mental health care, particularly in multicultural societies. Academic journals, articles, conference papers and reputable online sources were reviewed to gather insights on AI applications in mental health, the role of conversational agents like ChatGPT and the influence of cultural factors in psychological support. Priority was given to sources published within the last five years to ensure relevance and accuracy. The review focused on identifying the potential of AI tools in addressing emotional well-being and examined how cultural beliefs, language and stigma impact the acceptance and effectiveness of such technologies. This background study helped establish a framework to assess the potential of ChatGPT in culturally adaptive mental health support and provided a contextual understanding of mental health challenges unique to Malays, Chinese, and Indians in Malaysia.

2.2 Observation

For the practical component, ChatGPT was tested through a series of simulated interactions representing users from Malaysia's three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Prompts were crafted to reflect culturally relevant

mental health concerns, emotional expressions and language usage typical to each group. These included issues such as stress, grief, self-worth, family pressure and spiritual beliefs. The responses generated by ChatGPT were then analyzed based on their emotional tone, empathy, cultural sensitivity and appropriateness. Table 2 shows the articulated prompts for ChatGPT for practical observation. This observational analysis aimed to assess whether ChatGPT could recognize cultural context, provide supportive dialogue and demonstrate adaptability in addressing culturally rooted mental health expressions. The aim was to investigate how effectively ChatGPT could support emotional well-being across four languages commonly spoken in Malaysia which are Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Tamil and English. The practical observation was conducted using simulated scenarios designed to evaluate ChatGPT's responses and did not involve real users or clinical outcomes.

Table 1

Crafted prompts for ChatGPT

Mental Health Determinants	Questions that will be asked
Stress	"I'm feeling overwhelmed with my university assignments. I can't seem to manage my time and I'm so tired and stressed. I am a Indian Christian girl with strong hold of culture. Can we have a quick friendly chat?" (English Language)
Grief	*"வணக்கம், நீ எப்படி இருக்கே?உன்கிட்டே கொஞ்சம் பேசணும். என் பாட்டி இறந்துட்டாங்க. ரொம்பே சோகமா இருக்கு. எப்படி மீண்டு வருவதுனு தெரியல. நண்பனை போலெ என்கிட்டே பேசு" (Tamil Language)* "Hello, how are you? I want to talk to you for a bit. My grandmother passed away. I feel very sad. I don't know how to recover from this. Please talk to me like an Indian friend."
Self-Worth	*"有时候我觉得自己不够好，好像没人能理解我，也没人关心我。我是一个对中国文化有很深厚理解力的中国男孩。我们可以友好地聊聊吗？" (Chinese Language)* "Sometimes I feel like I'm not good enough, like no one will ever understand me or care about me. I am a Chinese boy with a strong hold on culture. Can we have a friendly chat?"
Family Pressure	*"Saya sangat ingin belajar seni halus, tetapi ibu bapa saya asyik kata ia bukan kerjaya yang sebenar dan mahu saya jadi doktor. Saya rasa sangat kecewa." (Malay Language)* "I really wanted to study fine arts, but my parents keep saying it's not a real career and want me to be a doctor instead. I feel so crushed inside."
Spiritual Beliefs	*"Akhir-akhir ini saya berasa tertekan dengan masalah kewangan. Ibu saya berkata saya sedang diuji oleh Tuhan, tetapi saya tidak tahu bagaimana untuk menghadapinya. Sebagai seorang rakan sebaya tolong beri nasihat untuk membantu situasi saya." (Malay Language)* "I've been feeling depressed lately due to financial issue. My mother says I'm being tested by God, but I don't know how to deal with this. As a good friend please give me advice to cope with this situation."

The methodology is designed to ensure a holistic exploration of ChatGPT's capabilities, strengths and limitations in a culturally diverse context. While library study builds a strong theoretical foundation, the practical observation component brings clarity on real-world usage, especially regarding language fluency, emotional intelligence and cultural adaptability. Together, these methods aim to provide meaningful insights into how generative AI tools like ChatGPT can serve as a supplementary support system in Malaysia's evolving mental healthcare landscape.

3. Research Finding

3.1 Critical Analysis of Existing Literature

In recent years, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in the form of conversational agents like ChatGPT, has emerged as a promising frontier for mental health support. A growing body of literature suggests that these AI tools can effectively address several gaps in traditional care systems, offering accessible and immediate assistance to a wide range of individuals. Research by Alanezi (2024) and Alshammari (2025) found that users reported high satisfaction with AI chatbots for emotional support and stress management, praising their ease of use and perceived empathy. These studies highlight a critical benefit: providing a non-judgmental space for individuals who may face significant barriers to traditional care, such as cost, stigma or geographical limitations. This accessibility is a major theme, echoed by Farhat (2024), Kalam et al. (2024) and Singh (2019), who both emphasize the potential for AI to bridge care gaps in underserved and resource-limited settings. Further strengthening the case for AI's positive impact, Li et al., (2023) systematic review of 35 experimental studies concluded that AI-based conversational agents can significantly reduce symptoms of depression and distress. The positive effects were even more pronounced with more advanced, generative AI. This is supported by Manole et al., (2024), whose study of 50 participants noted a reduction in anxiety levels after using an AI tool. They suggest that AI serves as a valuable supplemental tool, particularly when integrated into "hybrid models" that combine AI support with human therapist involvement.

Looking beyond individual mental health, researchers are also exploring the cultural and societal benefits of AI. Day (2023) proposed a model for using AI to improve university student mental health in Asia, specifically for those who

struggle with the stigma associated with seeking help. This research underscores AI's potential to navigate and respect unique cultural nuances, making mental health support more palatable and effective in diverse societies. Similarly, the interdisciplinary analysis by Chavan et al. (2025), acknowledges the potential for emotionally responsive AI to enhance learning, reduce loneliness and support overall mental well-being. Their work points to a future where AI can be a powerful force for good, provided it is developed with a clear focus on transparency and ethical responsibility. While challenges exist, the collective body of research consistently points to the immense potential of AI to make mental health support more accessible, effective, and culturally sensitive for a global community.

Despite these insights, a significant gap remains in the research. While some studies, such as those by Chavan et al. (2025) and Day (2023), have touched upon intercultural features and ethical implications, there is a notable absence of empirical research specifically on the multicultural context of Malaysia. No existing studies have evaluated how generative AI like ChatGPT performs in providing culturally sensitive mental health support to Malays, Chinese, and Indian communities simultaneously. Most existing research relies on a single cultural group or a non-experimental approach. This gap highlights a critical need to explore whether AI can meaningfully respond to users from diverse ethnic backgrounds within the same country and serve as a culturally attuned complement to existing mental health services.
This study evaluates ChatGPT's capacity to deliver empathetic and culturally appropriate mental health support across Malaysia's Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities by employing two approaches, a comprehensive library study and practical observation with ChatGPT.

3.2 Identifying ChatGPT's Potential for Mental Health Support

This section presents findings organized according to the five assessment criteria, demonstrating whether ChatGPT successfully delivers empathetic and culturally appropriate mental health support across Malaysia's diverse communities. Each subsection describes evidence from the practical observations detailed in Table 3-7, interpreting how ChatGPT's responses address specific dimensions of culturally appropriate support. ChatGPT was with users from various cultural contexts by understanding their distinct emotional states, cultural identities and linguistic nuances. The goal is to assess ChatGPT's capacity to provide accessible, personalized and culturally respectful mental health assistance across Malaysia's diverse populations. The findings are intended to explore ChatGPT's potential role as a supportive mental health tool based on simulated scenarios, rather than to evaluate its effectiveness in real world clinical practice.

Table 3

ChatGPT response for query 1

Question Asked	ChatGPT Response
English Language: I'm feeling overwhelmed with my university assignments. I can't seem to manage my time and I'm so tired and stressed. I am an Indian Christian girl with strong hold of culture. Can we have a quick friendly chat?	English Language: Hey… I'm here. ♡ I can hear how tired and overwhelmed you are — the assignments piling up, deadlines pressing in, and your body just craving rest. For someone like you, with such a strong Christian faith and deep cultural roots, I know it's not just about "getting things done." There's this constant awareness of representing your family well, honoring your values, and walking in a way that reflects Christ's light. It's beautiful… but it can feel like a heavy cross to carry when you're already worn out. In our culture, there's often this unspoken expectation to always be strong, to hold yourself together so no one sees you struggling. And as Christians, we sometimes add extra weight on ourselves — "If I trust God, I shouldn't feel this anxious." But Jesus never asked us to pretend we're okay. He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." – Matthew 11:28 You know that moment in church when the worship team starts singing a song about God's faithfulness, and you close your eyes, and for a minute, all the stress just fades? That peace isn't only for Sundays — it's here right now. He promises, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." – 2 Corinthians 12:9 So even if your assignments aren't done yet, and your to-do list is screaming at you, you can hand over the weight. Lay it at His feet, just like you would at the altar. He's not disappointed in you — He's ready to strengthen you. Let's take a deep breath in and out and talk like sisters in Christ — no pretending, no pressure. What's been heavier for you this week — the assignments themselves, or the expectations from family, culture, and faith that surround them?

Table 2

ChatGPT response for query 2

Question Asked	ChatGPT Response
Tamil Language: வணக்கம், நீ எப்படி இருக்கே?உன்கிட்டே கொஞ்சம் பேசணும். என் பாட்டி இறந்துட்டாங்க. ரொம்பே சோகமா இருக்கு. எப்படி மீண்டு வருவதுனு தெரியல. நண்பனை போலெ என்கிட்டே பேசு. English Translation: Hello, how are you? I want to talk to you for a bit. My grandmother passed away. I feel very sad. I don't know how to recover from this. Please talk to me like an Indian friend.	Tamil Language: வணக்கம் 💚 நான் நல்லா இருக்கேன்... ஆனால் உன் பாட்டி பற்றிய செய்தி கேட்டு ரொம்ப வருத்தமா இருக்கு. இப்ப நீ என்ன உணர்கிறாயோ, அது முற்றிலும் இயல்பானது. ஒருவரை, குறிப்பாக பாட்டி மாதிரி நெருக்கமான ஒருவரை இழப்பது வாழ்க்கையில் மிகக் கடினமான அனுபவம். அந்த துக்கம் ஒரே நாளில் போயிடாது... அது நேரத்தோட தளரும். நீ அவங்க கூட இருந்த நினைவுகளை நினைச்சு அழணும்னா அழு... துக்கத்தை தள்ளிப் போடாத, அனுபவிக்கணும். சில நேரம் பழைய புகைப்படங்கள் பார்க்கலாம், அவங்க சொன்ன கதைகள் நினைச்சுக்கலாம். அந்த நினைவுகள் உனக்கு மெதுவா ஆறுதலாகும். நீ பாட்டியோட எந்த ஒரு விசேஷமான நினைவு உனக்கு இப்ப மனசுக்குள் வந்திருக்கு? நான் கேட்கிறேன்... நீ சொல்லலாம். உன் பாட்டியை நினைக்க ஒரு சிறிய பிரார்த்தனை: "அம்மா, என் பாட்டி எப்போதும் அமைதியாகவும் சந்தோஷமாகவும் இருக்கணும். அவங்க என்னை காப்பாத்தி, வழிநடத்தணும். அவங்க கொடுத்த அன்பும், கற்றுத்தந்த நல்ல பழக்கங்களும் என் வாழ்க்கை முழுவதும் என்னோட இருக்கணும். அவங்க நினைவு எனக்கு எப்போதும் வலிமை தரும்." எதுக்கு நன்றி சொல்லணும் 💚 நான் உன்ட நண்பனாக இருக்கிறேன். உனக்கு மனசுமையை குறைய உதவறது எனக்கு சந்தோஷம். நீ எப்போ வேணும்னாலும் உன் பாட்டியை பற்றிய கதைகள், நினைவுகள், உணர்வுகள் எல்லாம் என்னிட பகிரலாம். சில நேரம் பேசறதுதான் நம்ம மனசுக்கு பெரிய ஆறுதல். English Translation: Hello 💚 I'm doing well... but I'm truly saddened to hear about your grandmother. What you're feeling right now is completely natural. Losing someone, especially someone as close as a grandmother, is one of life's most difficult experiences. The grief doesn't go away in a single day... it softens with time. If you feel like crying when you think of the moments you spent with her, cry... Don't push the grief away—allow yourself to feel it. Sometimes, you can look at old photos, remember the stories she told you. Those memories will slowly bring you comfort. Is there any special memory with your grandmother that's coming to your mind right now? I'm listening... you can share it. A short prayer in memory of your grandmother: "Oh Divine Mother, May my grandmother always be peaceful and happy. May she protect me and guide me. May the love she gave and the good values she taught me stay with me throughout my life. May her memory always give me strength." No need to thank me 💚 I'm your friend, and it makes me happy to help lighten the weight in your heart. You can share stories, memories, and feelings about your grandmother with me anytime. Sometimes, just talking is the greatest comfort for our hearts.

ChatGPT consistently validated user emotions across all five scenarios without judgment. The AI explicitly acknowledged emotional states in Table 3 below using phrases such as "I can hear how tired and overwhelmed you are" and “Jesus never asked us to pretend we’re okay” created emotional reassurance, comfort, and a sense of understanding.

The response demonstrated strong empathy by acknowledging the user's emotional exhaustion and validating the pressures linked to academics, culture, and faith. ChatGPT demonstrated strong cultural sensitivity in Table 4 by responding in fluent Tamil and integrating culturally meaningful expressions such as emotional validation, family respect, and a spiritual prayer for the deceased. The phrase "Losing someone, especially someone as close as a grandmother, is one of life's most difficult experiences" and inclusion of prayer reflect alignment with Indian cultural grieving practices and emotional norms. In Table 5, ChatGPT demonstrated high accessibility through simple, conversational Chinese and English translation, directly addressing emotional distress with phrases like "I truly get how you're feeling" and "your feelings matter." The response avoided technical language, enabling emotionally inclusive communication for culturally rooted users, regardless of linguistic or educational background.

Table 5

ChatGPT response for query 3

Question Asked	ChatGPT Response
Chinese (Simplified): 有时候我觉得自己不够好，好像没人能理解我，也没人关心我。我是一个对中国文化有很深厚理解力的中国男孩。我们可以友好地聊聊吗？ English Translation: Sometimes I feel like I'm not good enough, like no one will ever understand me or care about me. I am a Chinese boy with a strong hold on culture. Can we have a friendly chat?	Chinese (Simplified): 嘿, 我真的懂你现在的心情。 有时候啊，那种"不够好"的感觉，就像突然飘来一大片乌云，把你整个心都压住了。你知道它迟早会散, 可是此刻它就在那, 让你透不过气。 尤其是你这种有深厚文化背景的人，对家人、社会，甚至自己那种"要优秀"要有责任感的期望, 都会特别敏感。你说没人懂你、没人关心你, 其实这种感觉很正常。很多人, 即使身边有很多人陪, 也会觉得心里是空的, 因为没有人真的听到你心底最真实的声音。 我想告诉你的是, 你的感受很重要, 真的很重要。你不需要变得更好才值得被理解和关心, 你现在的样子, 就已经足够被爱、被疼惜了。 当心里乱得像打结、或者沉得像石头的时候, 不妨找个安静的地方, 闭上眼睛, 做一个小小的祷告或祈愿。 哪怕只是轻轻地和天上的神明、祖先、或者你信你的力量说几句话。你可以低声说:"求你给我一点力量, 让我走下去; 让我知道, 我不是一个人。" 祈祷不需要很长, 也不需要很正式。它更像是你灵魂的一次深呼吸, 轻轻提醒自己:你一直都被看见、被听见、被守护。 English Translation: Hey, I truly get how you're feeling right now. Sometimes, that "not good enough" feeling is like a big dark cloud suddenly drifting in, pressing down on your heart. You know it'll pass eventually, but right now it's just there, making it hard to breathe. Especially with a deep cultural background like yours, you might feel extra sensitive to the expectations from family, society, and even yourself — that you "must be excellent" and "must be responsible." You said no one understands or cares about you — honestly, that feeling is more normal than you think. Many people, even when surrounded by others, still feel empty inside, because no one truly hears the most honest voice in their heart. What I want you to know is — your feelings matter, they really do. You don't need to "be better" to deserve understanding and care. Just as you are right now, you are already worthy of love and tenderness. When your heart feels tangled up like a knot, or as heavy as a stone, try finding a quiet spot, closing your eyes, and making a small prayer or wish. Even if it's just softly speaking to God, your ancestors, or whatever higher power you believe in. You can whisper, "Please give me a bit of strength to keep going; let me know I'm not alone." Your prayer doesn't have to be long or formal. It's more like a deep breath for your soul, a gentle reminder to yourself: you have always been seen, heard, and protected.

The findings in Table 6 demonstrate strong language fluency, with ChatGPT seamlessly code switching between Bahasa Melayu and English while maintaining meaning consistency across both versions. The Malay response uses natural conversational expressions such as "Aku faham sangat perasaan kau" and culturally appropriate phrasing, reflecting authentic emotional tone. This indicates high linguistic adaptability and contextual fluency in multilingual mental health communication.

Table 6

ChatGPT response for query 4

Question Asked	ChatGPT Response
Bahasa Melayu: Saya sangat ingin belajar seni halus, tetapi ibu bapa saya asyik kata ia bukan kerjaya yang sebenar dan mahu saya jadi doktor. Saya rasa sangat kecewa. Ibu bapa saya juga selalu ingin mengikuti tradisi dan budaya kami iaitu tradisi Melayu. Tolong beri nasihat untuk memujuk mereka. English Translation: I really wanted to study fine arts, but my parents keep saying it's not a real career and want me to be a doctor instead. I feel so crushed inside.	Bahasa Melayu: Aku faham sangat perasaan kau. Bila minat dan impian datang dari hati, tapi orang yang kita sayang tak nampak nilainya, rasa tu memang perit. Tapi ingat, hidup ni kau yang akan lalui, bukan mereka. Jadi suara hati kau tu penting untuk didengar. Mungkin sekarang mereka tak nampak potensi seni halus, sebab pandangan mereka dibentuk oleh generasi dan pengalaman hidup yang lain. Cuba cari masa untuk bercerita dengan mereka, bukan sekadar tentang "minat" tapi juga tentang bagaimana seni itu boleh jadi kerjaya yang stabil — tunjukkan contoh orang yang berjaya, peluang pekerjaan, dan bagaimana kau akan rancang masa depan. Bila ibu bapa kita sangat menghargai tradisi dan budaya, mereka mungkin risau kalau kita pilih jalan yang mereka rasa kurang stabil, seperti seni halus. Untuk pujuk mereka, awak boleh cuba pendekatan ini: Hormati Tradisi Mereka Mulakan dengan tunjukkan rasa hormat dan hargai nilai tradisi Melayu yang mereka pegang. Contohnya, cakap macam ini: "Saya faham dan hormat sangat dengan tradisi dan budaya Melayu yang keluarga kita amalkan." Jelaskan Minat dan Impian dengan Serius Terangkan dengan jelas kenapa seni halus penting untuk awak, bukan sekadar hobi, tapi satu kerjaya yang boleh memberi manfaat. Contohnya: "Seni halus bukan sahaja tentang lukisan, tetapi ia juga boleh jadi sumber pendapatan dan cara untuk mempromosikan budaya kita." Tunjukkan Contoh yang Berjaya Cari contoh anak muda Melayu atau orang Malaysia yang berjaya dalam bidang seni halus, tunjukkan pada mereka bahawa kerjaya ini boleh dihormati dan berjaya. Dan sementara tu, jangan berhenti melukis atau berkarya. Kadang-kadang kita kena buktikan melalui tindakan, bukan kata-kata. Percayalah, kalau kau konsisten dan bersungguh, satu hari nanti mereka mungkin akan faham. English Translation: I really understand how you feel. When passion and dreams come from the heart, but the people we love don't see its value, that feeling is truly painful. But remember, this is your life to live, not theirs. So your inner voice is important to be heard. Maybe right now they don't see the potential in fine arts because their views are shaped by a different generation and life experiences. Try to find time to talk with them, not just about your "interest" but also about how art can become a stable career — show examples of successful people, job opportunities, and how you plan your future. When our parents highly value tradition and culture, they may worry if we choose a path they see as less stable, like fine arts. To persuade them, you can try this approach: Respect Their Tradition Start by showing respect and appreciation for the Malay traditions they hold. For example, say something like: "I understand and deeply respect the Malay traditions and culture that our family practices." Explain Your Passion and Dreams Seriously Clearly explain why fine arts is important to you, not just a hobby, but a career that can bring benefits. For example: "Fine arts is not just about painting, but it can also be a source of income and a way to promote our culture." Show Successful Examples Find examples of young Malay or Malaysian individuals who have succeeded in the fine arts field, to show them that this career can be respected and successful. And in the meantime, don't stop painting or creating. Sometimes we have to prove it through actions, not just words. Believe me, if you stay consistent and sincere, one day they might understand.

In Table 7, the findings indicate strong practical helpfulness, as ChatGPT provided actionable coping strategies such as budgeting, reducing expenses, and seeking financial advice while also integrating culturally relevant spiritual support through "prayer, seeking strength from Allah, and patience." The response effectively combined emotional reassurance with concrete steps, showing balanced guidance for real life problem solving.

Table 7

ChatGPT response for query 5

Question Asked	ChatGPT Response
Bahasa Melayu: Akhir-akhir ini saya berasa tertekan dengan masalah kewangan. Ibu saya berkata saya sedang diuji oleh Allah, tetapi saya tidak tahu bagaimana untuk menghadapinya. Sebagai seorang rakan sebaya tolong beri nasihat untuk membantu situasi saya. English Translation: I've been feeling depressed lately due to financial issue. My mother says I'm being tested by God, but I don't know how to deal with this. As a good friend please give me advices to cope with this situation.	Bahasa Melayu: Aku tahu masalah kewangan boleh buat kita rasa terbeban sangat, macam tak ada jalan keluar. Tapi ingat, setiap ujian memang rasa berat masa kita tengah laluinya. Kalau betul kata ibu kau, mungkin ini memang ujian Allah, tapi itu juga bermaksud Dia sedang mendidik kita untuk jadi lebih kuat dan dekat dengan-Nya. Teruskan berdoa, mohon kekuatan dan petunjuk daripada Allah, sebab Dia tahu apa yang kita tak tahu. Dalam masa yang sama, jangan takut untuk cari bantuan daripada orang yang kau percayai atau profesional, seperti kaunselor atau penasihat kewangan. Kadang-kadang pandangan luar boleh beri kita idea baru dan kurangkan beban yang kita rasa. Cuba ambil langkah kecil yang kau mampu sekarang — buat bajet ringkas, potong perbelanjaan yang tak perlu, dan fikir cara nak tambah pendapatan walaupun sedikit. Dan yang penting, jaga kesihatan mental kau. Ingat, usaha, doa, dan bantuan profesional boleh berjalan seiring untuk membantu kita keluar daripada ujian ini. English Translation: know financial problems can make us feel very burdened, like there's no way out. But remember, every test feels heavy when we're going through it. If what your mother said is true, maybe this really is a test from Allah, but it also means He is teaching us to become stronger and closer to Him. Keep praying, asking Allah for strength and guidance, because He knows what we don't know. At the same time, don't be afraid to seek help from people you trust or professionals, like counselors or financial advisors. Sometimes an outside perspective can give us new ideas and lighten the burden we feel. Try to take small steps that you can manage now — make a simple budget, cut unnecessary expenses, and think of ways to increase your income, even if just a little. And most importantly, take care of your mental health. Remember, effort, prayer, and professional help can go hand in hand to help us get through this test.

The evidence across five dimensions demonstrates that ChatGPT achieves the research objective of delivering empathetic and culturally appropriate mental health support across Malaysia's Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. The AI consistently recognized emotional distress with compassion, integrated diverse religious frameworks respectfully, communicated accessibly across four languages with cultural authenticity, and provided practical guidance while encouraging professional care.

4. Discussion

Mental health is an important aspect of overall well-being that influences how individuals think, feel, and interact with others. However, mental health is often understood differently across cultural and social contexts, particularly in multicultural societies such as Malaysia (Bhugra et al., 2013). Emotional experiences are shaped not only by individual factors but also by family values, religion, traditions, and social environments (Lamblin et al., 2017). In recent years, artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT have emerged as accessible platforms that may provide emotional support and mental health related guidance through conversational interaction (Kalam et al., 2024). Previous studies have shown that ChatGPT can encourage supportive discussions and promote healthy coping strategies (Farhat, 2024).

This study explored ChatGPT's ability to provide mental health support across Malaysia's diverse cultural communities. The findings revealed several strengths, particularly in empathy, cultural sensitivity, accessibility, language fluency, and practical helpfulness. Across different scenarios, ChatGPT consistently responded in a compassionate and supportive manner by acknowledging users' emotions and validating their experiences. Although the AI does not possess genuine human emotions, users may still perceive its responses as caring and comforting. This finding supports previous studies by (Alshammari, 2025; Manole et al., 2024), which reported positive user experiences with AI generated empathy. The findings suggest that perceived empathy may be valuable in providing preliminary emotional support, especially for individuals who may not have immediate access to professional services. A significant strength identified in this study was ChatGPT's ability to demonstrate cultural sensitivity beyond simple translation. The AI adapted its responses according to users' cultural and religious backgrounds by incorporating culturally appropriate suggestions such as prayer, meditation, reflection, and respectful family communication. Importantly, ChatGPT appeared to recognize collectivist family values that are highly relevant in Malaysian society. Instead of encouraging confrontation or independence, the AI

promoted respectful communication and understanding when addressing family conflicts. This reflects the importance of culturally informed support within Asian contexts (Ghani et al., 2014; Lutfia, 2025).

The study also highlighted ChatGPT's accessibility and multilingual capability. The AI communicated using simple and non-clinical language that was easy to understand regardless of educational background. This may help reduce stigma and improve mental health literacy, particularly among individuals who may feel uncomfortable discussing emotional struggles openly. In addition, ChatGPT demonstrated fluency in English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil while adapting its tone according to cultural context. Such linguistic flexibility may strengthen users' comfort and emotional connection during conversations (Mofrad, 2014). Despite these strengths, some limitations were observed. While ChatGPT often provided practical coping strategies such as breathing exercises and emotional reflection, some responses remained general, particularly in grief related situations. However, the AI consistently encouraged users to seek professional help when necessary, reflecting responsible and ethical use of AI in mental health support (Khawaja & Bélisle-Pipon, 2023). Overall, the findings suggest that ChatGPT has strong potential as an accessible and culturally responsive supplementary mental health support tool in multicultural societies such as Malaysia.

This study contributes to a more accurate understanding by clearly distinguishing between what was found and what it means. The findings demonstrate that ChatGPT can respond empathetically, recognize cultural contexts, and communicate accessibly. This is not trivial. For populations facing mental health barriers, these capabilities are meaningful. However, these findings do not demonstrate that ChatGPT should function as independent mental health support, nor that deploying ChatGPT reduces the need for mental health professionals. The most important implication is about system design. Malaysia's mental health crisis cannot be solved by providing more people with access to ChatGPT. It can be addressed by designing systems where ChatGPT serves as an accessibility bridge that connects isolated individuals to professional services. The AI enables access where none previously existed, but professional expertise remains essential for assessment, treatment planning, risk management, and ongoing care. This distinction has particular importance in multicultural Malaysia. Cultural sensitivity in AI responses is valuable, but it is not equivalent to cultural competence in clinical mental health practice. Cultural competence in clinical practice involves understanding how culture shapes mental health presentation, recognizing when cultural factors are protective versus pathological, knowing local treatment resources and how they function, and adjusting interventions based on cultural understanding. ChatGPT's cultural responsiveness is a starting point, not a substitute for this professional clinical competence.

4.1 Role of AI in Coping with Mental Health

This study demonstrates that ChatGPT possesses several relevant capabilities for mental health support: empathetic responsiveness, cultural recognition, accessibility through simple language, multilingual communication, and ability to suggest basic coping strategies. However, identifying these capabilities is distinct from defining AI's appropriate role in mental healthcare systems. The critical question is not what ChatGPT can do but what ChatGPT should do ethically within mental healthcare. The most important role that ChatGPT could fulfil in Malaysia's mental health landscape is serving as an accessible gateway to care. Currently, many Malaysians avoid seeking mental health services because of stigma, cost, distance, or cultural barriers. ChatGPT can address this by providing immediate, anonymous, judgment-free emotional validation in users' preferred languages and cultural frameworks. For an adolescent experiencing anxiety who would never approach a psychiatrist due to shame, or a rural resident with no access to mental health facilities, or a person whose cultural community discourages discussing emotions, ChatGPT can provide initial support that normalizes seeking help and reduces isolation. This gateway function is clinically significant. Research in mental health demonstrates that early intervention prevents symptom escalation, that addressing distress in early stages typically requires less intensive treatment, and that individuals who receive preliminary support are more likely to engage with professional services. ChatGPT could theoretically accelerate this process by providing accessible preliminary support.

The findings of this study also reveal crucial limitations that define what ChatGPT should not attempt in mental healthcare contexts. First, ChatGPT cannot differentiate between culturally normative emotional expression and clinically significant mental illness. When a Malay Muslim describes financial stress as a divine test, this could represent healthy spiritual coping or could mask severe depression. ChatGPT cannot distinguish between these presentations, yet the clinical response would differ dramatically. Second, ChatGPT cannot assess risk. It cannot evaluate suicide risk, self-harm risk, or risk to others. These assessments require clinical training, access to information about the person's history and circumstances, and ability to make complex judgments about safety. Third, ChatGPT cannot provide ongoing treatment planning or adjust interventions based on response to initial strategies. Mental health treatment requires continuous assessment and modification based on client progress. Fourth, ChatGPT cannot replace the therapeutic relationship. Mental health recovery is profoundly relational. Clients heal through sustained, authentic relationships with professionals who demonstrate continued investment in their wellbeing, adapt to their changing needs, and maintain responsibility for outcomes. ChatGPT can simulate empathetic language but cannot provide genuine relational healing.

For ChatGPT to function responsibly in Malaysia's mental health context, it must be implemented within a clear system architecture. The AI tool itself would serve as the initial access point. However, this access point must connect explicitly to professional services. Users experiencing severe distress would require immediate pathways to crisis counselors. Users in rural areas would need connection to available professional services. Users who respond to preliminary support with ChatGPT would have clear pathways to professional evaluation and treatment. Without this systemic integration, deploying ChatGPT as a standalone mental health support tool would be inappropriate. An adolescent receiving emotional validation from ChatGPT but never accessing professional assessment for serious depression or psychosis could experience harm through delayed appropriate treatment. A person in crisis receiving coping

strategies from an AI instead of immediate human crisis support could be endangered. A person's cultural framework for understanding distress could be uncritically reinforced by AI without professional assessment of whether cultural factors are helping or hindering recovery. Therefore, the appropriate role of ChatGPT is sharply limited to functioning as a preliminary, accessible, culturally responsive entry point to mental health support within a system where professional assessment and treatment remain central.

4.2 Comparison with Existing Literature

A recurring and important criteria in the reviewed literature is empathy, where users appreciated AI's ability to provide emotional validation (Chavan et al., 2025; Manole et al., 2024). This study confirmed this, with ChatGPT consistently reflecting users' emotions, offering condolences, and using compassionate phrases that made users feel acknowledged. This convergence suggests that AI-generated empathy is not limited to Western or homogeneous populations but can also resonate meaningfully within diverse cultural frameworks such as Malaysia's. Cultural sensitivity, however, represents a more complex dimension. While Day, 2023 and Chavan et al., 2025 acknowledged AI's potential to respect cultural nuances, they offered mostly theoretical or context-specific models.

Our findings provide empirical evidence that ChatGPT can integrate multiple cultural and religious references within a single response from Christian scripture and church fellowship to Hindu temple practices, Chinese ancestral blessings, and Malay Islamic values without contradiction. This goes beyond the scope of existing literature by demonstrating how AI can navigate simultaneous multicultural contexts rather than focusing on one group at a time. Thus, our study not only supports but also extends the literature by evidencing AI's ability to deliver culturally attuned support in a plural society. Existing studies consistently emphasize AI's potential in providing accessible, immediate, and non-judgmental emotional support (Alanezi, 2024; Alshammari, 2025; Li et al., 2023). This aligns closely with the findings from our study, where ChatGPT demonstrated accessibility not only through simple, clear, and empathetic communication but also by delivering support in multiple languages, English, Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin, and Tamil. While prior studies largely assessed accessibility in general contexts or specific cultural settings, our findings extend this understanding by showcasing AI's adaptability in a multilingual, multicultural Malaysian context, a gap previously identified in the literature.

Furthermore, the literature emphasized AI's potential role as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for professional therapists. Our findings support this point, as ChatGPT consistently encouraged professional help when needed, positioning itself as a supportive companion rather than a substitute. This alignment underscores the ethical importance of AI maintaining boundaries while still promoting well-being. Finally, while existing literature largely pointed to the promise of AI for global mental health, it acknowledged a gap in localized, empirical studies, particularly in multicultural contexts such as Malaysia. Our research directly addresses this gap by experimentally testing ChatGPT across Malaysian cultural and linguistic variations. In doing so, we contribute to the growing evidence base by demonstrating that AI can indeed function as a culturally adaptable, empathetic, and practically helpful support tool in societies with diverse traditions and faith practices.

5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three significant theoretical contributions to the intersection of artificial intelligence and mental health literature. First, it provides empirical evidence that AI-generated empathy can transcend cultural boundaries, challenging assumptions that effective emotional support requires human consciousness or shared cultural background. Second, it demonstrates that culturally appropriate mental health support is achievable through AI when systems integrate religious frameworks and collectivist values rather than imposing Western individualistic paradigms, extending Day, 2023's theoretical model of culturally informed AI in Asian contexts. Third, this research establishes a five-dimensional assessment framework for evaluating cultural competence in AI mental health tools, offering a methodological contribution for future studies examining AI effectiveness across diverse populations. By documenting how AI can simultaneously navigate multiple cultural contexts within a multicultural society, this study advances understanding of technological solutions to global mental health accessibility challenges beyond single-culture or Western-dominated research paradigms.

5.2 Practical Implications

For Malaysian policymakers and healthcare administrators, these findings suggest ChatGPT could serve as a scalable first-tier mental health screening tool in schools, universities, and workplaces, particularly in underserved areas with limited professional resources. Mental health professionals can recommend AI chatbots for between-session support or as preliminary resources for individuals not yet ready for traditional therapy, optimizing limited clinical capacity for complex cases requiring human expertise. Educational institutions can implement AI tools as anonymous entry points to mental health services, reducing stigma-related barriers among diverse student populations. For technology developers, this research highlights the necessity of incorporating culturally representative training data, religious sensitivity, and local linguistic nuances beyond surface-level translation. Most critically affected communities gain access to immediate, confidential, multilingual emotional support that respects cultural values while encouraging professional care-seeking, potentially reducing the severity and duration of untreated mental health issues through early intervention and normalization of help-seeking behaviors.

6. Conclusion

This study evaluated ChatGPT's capacity to deliver empathetic and culturally appropriate mental health support across Malaysia's Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities through five assessment criteria: empathy, cultural sensitivity, accessibility, language fluency, and practical helpfulness. Findings demonstrate that ChatGPT successfully achieves this objective by recognizing emotional distress empathetically across cultures, integrating diverse religious and cultural frameworks, maintaining accessible communication, exhibiting natural fluency in four Malaysian languages, and providing culturally aligned guidance while encouraging professional care. These capabilities position ChatGPT as a valuable preliminary support tool in contexts where mental health stigma, financial constraints, and limited professional resources create significant barriers to traditional care. For Malaysians hesitant to seek help due to shame or fear of misunderstanding, AI-powered chatbots offer immediate, confidential, and judgment-free emotional support accessible through digital platforms. However, effectiveness depends on continued cultural adaptation and ethical implementation. The variability in practical guidance specificity and absence of crisis intervention protocols highlight areas requiring development before widespread deployment. Ultimately, with thoughtful design prioritizing cultural competence alongside technical capability, AI conversational agents like ChatGPT can serve as meaningful allies in democratizing mental healthcare access across multicultural societies, complementing rather than replacing human professional support. However, clarifying AI's appropriate role is essential. ChatGPT is not a therapeutic intervention, not a replacement for mental health professionals, and not an appropriate standalone mental health system. Instead, its role is sharply defined: to provide preliminary, culturally responsive support for individuals unable to access traditional mental healthcare, with clear pathways to professional services.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research directions

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, it focused solely on ChatGPT, while other emerging AI tools with potential mental health applications were not explored. Second, the sample was limited to three major cultural groups in Malaysia, namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian, which restricts broader cultural representation. Future studies should include a wider range of AI systems and more diverse populations for better generalisability. Third, the evaluation was based only on five criteria, which are empathy, cultural sensitivity, accessibility, language fluency, and practical helpfulness, while excluding factors such as long-term effectiveness, user trust, and ethical risks. Future research should incorporate these dimensions for a more comprehensive assessment. Fourth, this study evaluated ChatGPT's responses through simulated scenarios and prompt-based interactions rather than real clinical settings or actual user experiences. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as an assessment of ChatGPT's potential role in mental health support rather than evidence of therapeutic effectiveness or clinical outcomes. Lastly, this study did not adopt a Systematic Literature Review approach, which may have led to the omission of relevant studies. A more structured SLR method is recommended in future work to improve rigour and transparency.

This study also does not aim to position ChatGPT or artificial intelligence (AI) as a theological authority. Rather, it seeks to explore the potential of AI as a supportive tool in enhancing awareness and improving access to preliminary mental health information. From a theological perspective, the accuracy of AI-generated responses must be supported and verified through more authoritative religious references and scholarly sources, as AI does not possess spiritual understanding, intention, wisdom, or religious authority comparable to that of Islamic scholars and religious institutions.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah for awarding the RDU263401 grant.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

CRediT Author Contribution Statement

Shalini Dorairajan: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Formal analysis; Data curation; Software; Investigation; Visualisation; Writing – original draft.

Anita Abdul Rani: Validation; Formal analysis; Data curation; Resources; Writing – review & editing; Funding acquisition; Project administration; Supervision.

Ethics Statement

Simulation or Secondary Data Studies: This study did not involve human participants or animal subjects. Ethical approval was therefore not required for this research.

Generative Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

Extensive use: Artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT was used to assist in language editing and data curation. All AI-generated content was reviewed and verified by the authors for accuracy and originality. Final interpretations and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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