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SYMPOSIUM SESSION

A chatbot-delivered multicomponent intervention to promote change in physical exercise and dietary habits: preliminary results from a randomized controlled trial

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Abstract

Introduction: Digital tools offer a user-friendly, cost-effective, and accessible solution to broadly disseminate mental health-related interventions. Such tools include chatbots, which are computer programs that simulate human conversations. This research project aimed to use a motivational chatbot to promote and monitor behavioral changes related to healthy lifestyles, specifically physical exercise, and dietary habits. *Materials and methods:* This randomized controlled trial (RCT) study tested the usability and the effectiveness of a 4-weeks, ACT-based, chatbot intervention. Based on the theoretical model of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), the chatbot aimed at increasing psychological flexibility (PF) among participants as a core mechanism of change towards more healthy lifestyles. A total of 156 (75,76% females; Mage = 22.24 ± 6.09 years) Italian adults were randomized to either the experimental or control group and completed a package of questionnaires at pre- and post-treatment, and at two-months follow-up. *Results:* Longitudinal data will be analyzed using mixed models. Comparisons will be made between the two groups over time, with the expectation that the group receiving the motivational Bot intervention (Group I – "treatment") will experience greater changes in targeted behaviors compared to the control group, providing valuable insights on the use of chatbots as a motivational tool and on the usability of such interventions. *Discussion and Conclusions:* The results will supposedly show that the usability and quality of the chatbot, as well as its actual frequency of use and psychological flexibility, play a key role in producing motivational changes. Results from this study will also provide additional insights on chatbot interventions and inform mental health practitioners on the role of patient-tailored artificial intelligence (AI)-led chatbot services to foster healthy lifestyles.