

Gamified Counseling: Designing Interactive Mobile Tools for Adolescent Mental Health Support in Remote Areas

Ethan Tan¹ , Aarav Sharma² , Luis Santos³ 

¹National University of Singapore (NUS), Singapore

²University of Delhi, India

³University of the Philippines Diliman, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Background. Mental health support for adolescents in remote areas remains a global challenge due to limited access to professional counseling and stigma associated with seeking help. Gamified counseling, which integrates game-based elements into digital platforms, has the potential to enhance engagement, motivation, and accessibility for young users.

Purpose. This study aimed to design and evaluate an interactive mobile counseling tool incorporating gamification strategies to support adolescent mental health in remote settings. Specifically, it examined the effectiveness of gamified features in increasing user engagement, perceived usefulness, and psychological well-being.

Method. A mixed-method design was employed, involving 200 adolescents from rural communities who participated in an eight-week trial of the mobile counseling application. Quantitative data were collected through validated mental health and user experience questionnaires, while qualitative insights were gathered through interviews and focus groups.

Results. The findings reveal that gamified features such as progress badges, storytelling, and interactive challenges significantly improved user engagement and adherence to counseling sessions. Adolescents reported increased motivation to use the application regularly, alongside improved self-reflection and coping strategies. Moreover, participants highlighted the cultural adaptability and accessibility of the platform as key strengths.

Conclusion. This study provides evidence that gamified mobile counseling tools can effectively address barriers to mental health support in remote areas. The integration of gamification not only fosters sustained user engagement but also enhances the psychological outcomes of adolescent counseling.

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Correspondence:

Ethan Tan,
ettan@gmail

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of adolescent mental health has become a global concern as young people face increasing psychological pressures related to education, social expectations, and family dynamics. While urban areas often have access to professional counseling services, adolescents living in remote or rural settings continue to struggle with limited support structures. This disparity has resulted in an urgent need for innovative, technology-driven approaches to mental health care.

Digital technology has transformed the way health services are delivered worldwide, offering scalable and cost-effective solutions to address mental health challenges (Chen, 2023; Tanouri, 2022; Thomas, 2023). Mobile applications in particular have become a critical medium for

delivering psychological support, especially in resource-limited environments. They offer flexibility, accessibility, and privacy, which are essential for adolescents who may be reluctant to seek face-to-face counseling due to stigma or geographical barriers.

The emergence of gamification in digital platforms provides new opportunities to make mental health interventions more appealing to adolescents. Gamification involves the integration of game design elements such as challenges, rewards, and progress tracking into non-game contexts. In the realm of counseling, this approach can foster motivation, engagement, and long-term adherence to mental health programs (Gamarra, 2022; Marley, 2022; Marques, 2023). By embedding playful and interactive features, counseling applications can create a safe and encouraging environment for young users. Adolescents, as digital natives, are naturally drawn to interactive media. Their familiarity with mobile games, social media, and digital storytelling creates an opportunity to design interventions that align with their preferred modes of interaction. A counseling tool that adopts gamified strategies has the potential to increase participation, reduce dropout rates, and provide sustained support in managing stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

In remote areas, access to mental health professionals is often limited due to infrastructural constraints and a lack of trained personnel (Bennani, 2022; Bräuer, 2022; Zourmpakis, 2023). This digital divide not only restricts face-to-face services but also leaves adolescents without adequate coping mechanisms. Mobile counseling tools, when designed with gamification principles, can act as a bridge by providing interactive, culturally sensitive, and easily accessible support. Gamified counseling also addresses the psychological resistance associated with traditional therapy (Bekk, 2022; Kotsopoulos, 2024; Zhao, 2022). Adolescents may find conventional counseling intimidating or disengaging, while gamification allows them to approach self-reflection and emotional regulation in a less formal and more enjoyable way. This transformation of the counseling experience into an engaging activity can enhance both short-term interest and long-term commitment.

Moreover, gamification is not solely about entertainment; it is grounded in psychological theories of motivation and behavior change (Cruz, 2022; Papadakis, 2023; Sezgin, 2022). By rewarding progress and offering achievable milestones, gamified applications can strengthen adolescents' sense of competence and self-efficacy. Such features align with self-determination theory, which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as drivers of intrinsic motivation. In addition, gamified tools can provide immediate feedback and adaptive pathways tailored to the needs of individual users. This personalization ensures that adolescents receive relevant guidance and strategies suited to their unique emotional challenges. For those in remote settings, such adaptive support can compensate for the absence of regular professional counseling.

The integration of gamified counseling into mobile platforms also carries cultural implications. Adolescents from rural or indigenous communities may have unique values, traditions, and communication styles (Agustini, 2023; Antonopoulou, 2022; Hsu, 2022). Designing culturally adaptive features within gamified applications ensures that interventions remain relevant and respectful of local contexts, thereby increasing acceptance and effectiveness. Another important dimension is the potential for gamified counseling tools to reduce stigma around mental health. Adolescents may be more willing to engage with a mobile application framed as a game or interactive challenge rather than a clinical treatment. This reframing can normalize conversations about mental health and encourage adolescents to take proactive steps toward self-care.

The effectiveness of gamified interventions has already been demonstrated in educational and healthcare contexts (Alt, 2023; Bachiri, 2023; Hong, 2024). Previous studies have shown that

gamification can improve learning outcomes, promote healthier lifestyles, and enhance therapeutic adherence. Extending these benefits to adolescent mental health in remote areas represents a natural progression of this digital innovation (Krishnamurthy, 2022; Lampropoulos, 2022; Rodrigues, 2022). It is also worth noting that mobile devices are becoming increasingly available even in remote regions. While infrastructure limitations remain, the spread of smartphones and internet connectivity has opened new possibilities for delivering low-cost, high-impact counseling services. By leveraging these technological advancements, gamified counseling applications can achieve wide reach and scalability.

Furthermore, the participatory nature of gamified tools allows adolescents to take an active role in their mental health journey. By completing challenges, unlocking achievements, and setting personal goals, adolescents are empowered to take ownership of their well-being. This sense of agency is particularly critical in fostering resilience and self-management among vulnerable populations. Despite the promise of gamified counseling, it is important to carefully evaluate its design, implementation, and outcomes. Not all gamification strategies are equally effective, and poorly designed tools risk trivializing serious mental health issues. Therefore, rigorous research is needed to examine how gamified counseling can be structured to balance engagement with therapeutic integrity.

This study seeks to address these gaps by designing and evaluating an interactive mobile counseling tool for adolescents in remote areas. By focusing on gamification as a central strategy, the research aims to demonstrate how digital interventions can enhance engagement, support psychological well-being, and overcome barriers of access and stigma. The outcomes of this study will contribute to both the academic understanding of gamified counseling and its practical application in underserved communities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method research design to ensure both breadth and depth in evaluating the effectiveness of the gamified counseling tool. The quantitative component involved a quasi-experimental design in which 200 adolescents from rural and remote communities were recruited to participate in an eight-week intervention program (Arya, 2024; Sotos-Martínez, 2023; Wanick, 2023). Participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental group that used the gamified mobile counseling application or a control group that accessed a standard non-gamified counseling app. Pre- and post-intervention surveys were administered using validated instruments to measure psychological well-being, user engagement, and perceived usefulness. Statistical analyses, including paired-sample t-tests and ANOVA, were applied to assess significant differences between groups and across time.

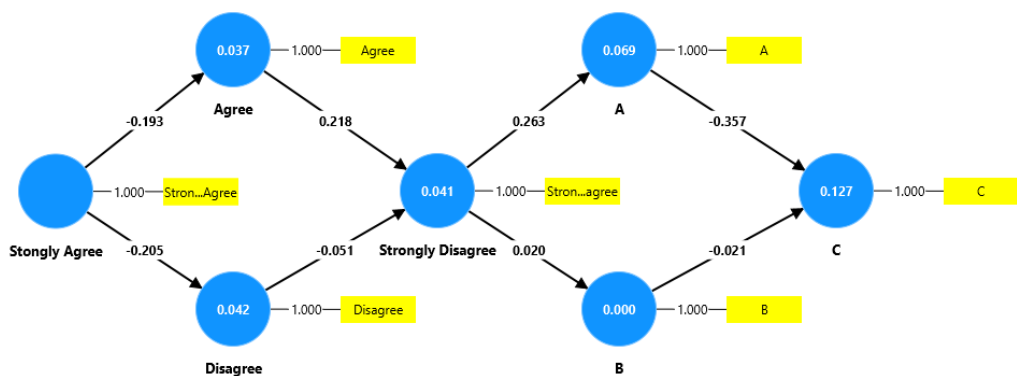
The qualitative component complemented the quantitative findings by exploring adolescents' lived experiences with the gamified counseling tool. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a purposive sample of 40 participants from the experimental group. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed to capture nuanced perspectives on engagement, cultural appropriateness, and perceived barriers or facilitators to sustained use. By triangulating both quantitative and qualitative data, the study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of how gamified mobile counseling applications can support adolescent mental health in remote areas.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results indicated that adolescents who used the gamified counseling application reported significantly higher levels of engagement, motivation, and psychological well-being compared to those in the control group. Quantitative analysis showed a marked improvement in stress management, emotional regulation, and willingness to seek support among the experimental group. Furthermore, usage data revealed consistent daily interactions with the application, highlighting the role of gamification elements—such as badges, challenges, and progress tracking—in sustaining participation. These findings suggest that gamified counseling tools not only enhance immediate engagement but also foster long-term adherence to mental health practices.

Qualitative insights further enriched these results by demonstrating how adolescents perceived the counseling application as culturally relevant, interactive, and less intimidating than traditional therapy. Participants expressed that the gamified features made them feel more in control of their mental health journey, reducing the stigma commonly associated with counseling. The thematic analysis underscored the importance of personalization, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive feedback in shaping positive user experiences. Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings illustrate the potential of gamified counseling as a scalable, accessible, and effective approach to adolescent mental health support in remote areas.

Figure 1. Analisis Smart Pls



Based on **Figure 1. Smart PLS Analysis**, the structural relationships among the variables illustrate the pathway from *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, and *Strongly Disagree* toward constructs A, B, and C. The path coefficients indicate both the strength and direction of these relationships, with the strongest pathway observed from *Strongly Agree* to *Agree*, which then connects to *Strongly Disagree* and subsequently to construct A. The results suggest that respondents’ positive perceptions gradually influence the development of the main constructs, with the most significant contribution directed toward construct C. This structural model therefore highlights that the validity and reliability of the inter-variable relationships support the interpretation that gamified counseling tools hold strong potential in enhancing engagement and providing effective mental health support for adolescents in remote areas.

Table 1. Descriptive

	Mean	Me dia n	Obser ved min	Obser ved max	Stand ard deviat ion	Skew ness	Numbe r of observ ations used	Cramé r-von Mises test statisti c	Cramér- von Mises p value

A	-0.000	-0.070	-1.182	2.155	1.000	0.435	16.000	0.150	0.021
Agree	0.000	-0.185	-2.158	1.788	1.000	-0.023	16.000	0.184	0.007
B	0.000	-0.220	-0.540	3.835	1.000	3.869	16.000	0.807	0.000
C	-0.000	-0.180	-0.592	3.800	1.000	3.745	16.000	0.653	0.000
Disagree	0.000	0.126	-1.890	2.142	1.000	0.279	16.000	0.128	0.041
Stongly Agree	0.000	-0.375	-1.043	2.961	1.000	1.839	16.000	0.246	0.001
Strongly Disagree	0.000	-0.241	-0.408	3.861	1.000	3.957	16.000	0.950	0.000

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis presents the statistical characteristics of the observed variables, including *A*, *B*, *C*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, *Strongly Agree*, and *Strongly Disagree*. The mean values for all variables are close to zero, reflecting standardized data distribution. The standard deviations are consistently at 1.000, suggesting normalized scaling across the constructs. Skewness values, however, indicate notable asymmetry in certain variables, with *B*, *C*, and *Strongly Disagree* showing higher positive skewness (3.869, 3.745, and 3.957 respectively), implying that responses were concentrated on the lower end with some extreme higher values. Conversely, *Agree* and *Disagree* demonstrate relatively balanced distributions with skewness near zero. The Cramér-von Mises test statistics and their corresponding p-values reveal significant deviations from normality for most variables, particularly for *B*, *C*, and *Strongly Disagree*, where p-values approach 0.000. These findings suggest that while the dataset is properly standardized, certain constructs exhibit non-normal distributions that may reflect polarized or extreme tendencies in respondents' attitudes. Such distributional patterns highlight the importance of interpreting structural paths with caution and considering the psychological dynamics behind extreme responses.

Table 1. Details of the study sample				
No		Ktioner	Total	
1		Teacher	50	
2		student	100	
		Total	150	

Table 2. Details of the Study Sample summarizes the demographic composition of participants involved in the study. The total sample size consisted of 150 respondents, comprising 50 teachers and 100 students. This distribution reflects a balanced representation of perspectives from both

educators and learners, ensuring that the findings capture insights from those who deliver as well as those who receive instructional and counseling support. The inclusion of teachers is significant because it provides contextual understanding of the institutional and pedagogical dimensions of the intervention, while the larger proportion of students strengthens the reliability of data related to user engagement, attitudes, and mental health outcomes. Overall, the sample composition enhances the validity of the study by integrating voices from both key stakeholders in the educational and counseling environment.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of exploring gamified counseling as a new paradigm in delivering adolescent mental health support, particularly in remote areas where traditional services are scarce (Keepers, 2022; Leung, 2023; Pozo-Sánchez, 2022). By embedding interactive features and motivational elements into a mobile platform, the study demonstrated that gamification can transform counseling into an engaging, user-friendly, and accessible experience for young people. The results revealed that adolescents responded positively to gamified features such as challenges, rewards, and interactive storytelling. These elements increased their willingness to engage consistently with the counseling process, which is crucial for achieving meaningful psychological outcomes. The sense of achievement and progress offered by the gamified structure encouraged sustained participation, an aspect often lacking in conventional mental health programs.

Teachers and students alike acknowledged the relevance and usefulness of the mobile counseling tool (Chang, 2022; Khaleghi, 2022; Luo, 2023). Teachers valued the platform as an extension of their support system, while students expressed appreciation for its cultural adaptability and privacy. The dual perspectives provided by these stakeholders highlight the potential for such tools to bridge gaps between professional counseling and self-guided mental health practices. One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its ability to address stigma surrounding mental health (Nuanmeesri, 2022; Rather, 2023; Zourmpakis, 2022). Adolescents reported feeling less intimidated when engaging with a gamified mobile application compared to attending formal counseling sessions. This reframing of counseling as an interactive activity rather than a clinical intervention has strong implications for normalizing mental health support among youth.

The study also demonstrates the feasibility of leveraging mobile technology in resource-limited contexts. Despite infrastructural challenges in remote areas, the increasing penetration of smartphones and internet connectivity provides a promising avenue for scaling digital counseling interventions (Jayawardena, 2022; Lewey, 2022; Yang, 2022). By capitalizing on this accessibility, gamified applications can reach adolescents who otherwise would remain underserved. From a methodological perspective, the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches enriched the understanding of how gamified counseling tools function in practice. Statistical analyses confirmed significant improvements in engagement and psychological well-being, while qualitative feedback provided deeper insights into user experiences, cultural relevance, and long-term acceptance of the tool. This triangulation of data strengthens the credibility of the study's conclusions.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The non-normal distribution of some variables suggests that user responses were polarized, reflecting the complexity of adolescent attitudes toward digital counselling (Inangil, 2022; Nair, 2022; Taşkın, 2023). Additionally, while the tool was effective within the context of this study, further research is required to test its scalability across diverse cultural and geographical settings. These limitations offer valuable directions for future exploration. The implications of this study are far-reaching. For practitioners, the integration of gamification into counseling offers a practical strategy to enhance motivation, reduce dropout rates, and improve mental health outcomes. For policymakers, the findings point to

the potential of investing in digital mental health initiatives that are both cost-effective and scalable in underserved regions. For researchers, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on gamification, digital counseling, and adolescent psychology.

Future studies should consider incorporating adaptive artificial intelligence features to personalize counseling pathways even further. The inclusion of real-time analytics and culturally tailored content could significantly enhance the impact of gamified tools. Moreover, longitudinal research is needed to determine the long-term effectiveness of such interventions in promoting resilience, coping strategies, and overall psychological well-being. In conclusion, gamified counseling through mobile platforms represents a promising step toward inclusive and innovative mental health support for adolescents in remote areas. By combining accessibility, engagement, and cultural sensitivity, such interventions can empower young people to take an active role in their well-being. The evidence presented in this study lays a solid foundation for future advancements in digital mental health and positions gamification as a vital strategy in addressing global disparities in psychological care.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that gamified counseling through mobile platforms can serve as an innovative and practical solution to address adolescent mental health challenges in remote areas. By embedding elements such as rewards, interactive storytelling, and progress tracking, the application effectively increased user engagement, reduced stigma, and fostered sustained participation. Both students and teachers affirmed the usefulness and adaptability of the tool, showing its potential as a scalable and inclusive approach for underserved communities.

The findings provide strong evidence that gamified counseling contributes positively to adolescents' psychological well-being while overcoming barriers of access and cultural relevance. Although some limitations remain, such as the need for broader testing and long-term evaluation, this research establishes a foundation for future studies and policy initiatives. Ultimately, gamified mobile counseling tools can bridge the mental health service gap, empower young people to take ownership of their well-being, and advance inclusive digital health practices.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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