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Phototherapy In The Digital Age: Transformations, Approaches, And Relevance In Contemporary Mental Health Practice.

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Abstract: Phototherapy, which includes both phototherapy and therapeutic photography, represents a visual-based psychological intervention that utilizes photographic images as tools for emotional expression, reflection, and meaning construction. The rapid expansion of digital technology has reshaped this approach through the widespread use of smartphones and visual-oriented social media platforms, embedding image production into everyday life. This study aims to examine the theoretical foundations of phototherapy, identify its primary modalities, explore its applications across contexts, and evaluate its relevance in contemporary mental health practice. This research applied a systematic literature review with a narrative synthesis approach. A total of 75 articles were identified through database searches in Scopus, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. All selected studies met predefined inclusion criteria, covering publications between 1983 and 2023 related to photography-based interventions in mental health. The analysis focused on patterns across theoretical perspectives, intervention types, and application settings. The findings indicate that phototherapy is supported by strong interdisciplinary foundations, including semiotics, neuroscience, and memory theory, which explain how images facilitate emotional processing. Various modalities such as projective techniques, self-portrait, re-enactment, and photovoice demonstrate flexibility across clinical, educational, and community contexts. Digital transformation enhances accessibility and participation, allowing phototherapy to extend beyond traditional therapeutic settings. At the same time, the digital environment introduces ethical challenges related to privacy, ownership, and emotional safety. These findings highlight the importance of integrating technological innovation with ethical awareness and culturally responsive practices in the development of phototherapy

Keywords: Phototherapy, Therapeutic Photography, Photovoice, Mental Health, Digital Age

INTRODUCTION

Photography has expanded beyond its conventional role as a medium of documentation and artistic representation into a tool that supports psychological exploration and emotional expression. Within contemporary mental health discourse, visual methods are increasingly recognized as valuable instruments for facilitating communication, especially in contexts where verbal articulation is limited. The emergence of phototherapy reflects a broader shift toward multimodal approaches in psychotherapy, where images function as catalysts for reflection and meaning-making. Visual engagement allows individuals to externalize internal experiences, creating a bridge between subjective emotions and observable representations (Reavey, 2011).



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The use of images in therapeutic settings is grounded in the understanding that visual stimuli can evoke complex emotional and cognitive responses. Visual methodologies have been widely applied in qualitative research and psychological practice to access lived experiences that may not be easily expressed through language. Rose (2016) explains that images carry layered meanings shaped by cultural, social, and personal contexts, making them particularly effective in exploring identity and emotional states. This capacity positions photography as a powerful medium for therapeutic intervention, as individuals engage with both the content of the image and their own interpretive processes.

Psychological theories related to narrative and identity further support the use of photography in therapeutic contexts. Individuals construct their sense of self through narratives that integrate past experiences with present interpretations. Images contribute to this process by providing tangible reference points for autobiographical reflection. Research in narrative psychology indicates that visual cues can enhance memory recall and support the reorganization of personal narratives, particularly in situations involving emotional distress or trauma (McAdams, 2008). The presence of visual artifacts enables individuals to revisit experiences with greater clarity, facilitating reinterpretation and emotional processing.

Advances in cognitive neuroscience provide additional insight into the effectiveness of visual-based interventions. Studies on emotional processing suggest that visual stimuli activate brain regions associated with memory, empathy, and affect regulation. For instance, research by Sabatinelli et al. (2011) demonstrates that emotionally salient images can elicit strong neural responses in the amygdala and visual cortex, indicating a close relationship between visual perception and emotional experience. This neurological basis supports the idea that photography can function as a direct pathway to emotional engagement, complementing traditional verbal approaches in psychotherapy.

The integration of photography into mental health practice has also been influenced by developments in participatory and community-based approaches. Visual methods such as photovoice have been used to empower individuals and communities by enabling them to document and share their lived experiences. Wang and Burris (1997) introduced photovoice as a participatory strategy that combines photography with critical dialogue, allowing participants to express perspectives that are often marginalized in conventional discourse. Subsequent



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studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in enhancing self-efficacy, social awareness, and collective engagement in health-related issues (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

The rapid growth of digital technology has transformed the production and circulation of images, creating new contexts for the application of phototherapy. Smartphones and social media platforms enable continuous visual documentation of daily life, shaping how individuals construct and communicate their identities. This shift has implications for mental health practices, as visual self-expression becomes embedded in everyday routines. Digital environments facilitate immediate sharing and feedback, which can influence emotional experiences and self-perception (Manikonda & De Choudhury, 2017). The accessibility of digital photography expands the potential reach of phototherapy, allowing it to be integrated into informal and non-clinical settings.

The relationship between digital media and mental health is complex, reflecting both opportunities and challenges. Visual platforms provide spaces for creative expression and social connection, which can support emotional well-being. At the same time, exposure to curated images and social comparison may contribute to psychological distress. Research by Fardouly et al. (2015) indicates that engagement with social media images can influence body image and self-esteem, highlighting the need for critical awareness in the use of visual content. These findings underscore the importance of integrating ethical considerations into digital phototherapy practices.

In Indonesia, the relevance of visual-based approaches to mental health is shaped by cultural and technological factors. High levels of social media usage reflect a strong engagement with visual communication, particularly among younger populations. Cultural practices involving photography, such as documenting family events and social activities, provide a familiar context for integrating phototherapy into everyday life. Mental health services remain unevenly distributed, with limited access in certain regions and persistent stigma influencing help-seeking behavior. Visual approaches offer an alternative pathway that aligns with existing cultural practices, creating opportunities for more inclusive and accessible interventions.

The growing body of research on phototherapy highlights its potential as a flexible and culturally adaptable approach to mental health care. Existing studies demonstrate its



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effectiveness across clinical, educational, and community settings, yet a comprehensive synthesis of its development within the digital era remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and practical applications of phototherapy in contemporary contexts. The analysis aims to contribute to the understanding of how visual methods can be integrated into mental health practice, particularly in environments shaped by rapid technological change.

METHOD

Research Design

This study applied a systematic literature review combined with narrative synthesis to examine the development, modalities, and applications of phototherapy in mental health contexts. A systematic literature review provides a structured and transparent approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research findings. This approach enables researchers to map the state of knowledge within a specific field while maintaining methodological rigor (Snyder, 2019). Narrative synthesis was selected to accommodate the diversity of study designs, theoretical perspectives, and contexts found within phototherapy research. This method supports the integration of qualitative and conceptual findings, allowing patterns and relationships to emerge across studies (Popay et al., 2006).

Data Sources

The literature search was conducted using four major academic databases: Scopus, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of interdisciplinary research, including psychology, health sciences, and social sciences. Scopus and PubMed provide access to peer-reviewed international journals, while PsycINFO focuses on psychological literature. Google Scholar was used to capture additional relevant studies, including conference papers and gray literature. Foundational textbooks and institutional reports were included to strengthen theoretical analysis and contextual understanding. The combination of these sources ensured comprehensive coverage of both empirical and conceptual studies related to phototherapy.



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Search Strategy

The search strategy was developed to capture a wide range of literature related to phototherapy and its applications. Keywords included “phototherapy,” “therapeutic photography,” “photovoice,” “photo-based intervention,” and “mental health.” These keywords were used individually and in combination using Boolean operators to refine search results. The search process followed established guidelines for systematic reviews to ensure consistency and reproducibility (Page et al., 2021). Each database was searched using similar keyword structures to maintain comparability across sources.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were defined to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies. Publications between 1983 and 2023 were included to capture the historical development and contemporary advancements in phototherapy. Studies were required to focus on the use of photography in therapeutic contexts or mental health promotion. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and verified institutional reports were included. Sources were limited to English and Indonesian to ensure accessibility and accurate interpretation. These criteria align with best practices in systematic reviews, where clear inclusion parameters support transparency and validity (Booth et al., 2016).

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they lacked clear authorship, methodological description, or verifiable sources. Publications that were not accessible in full text were also excluded to ensure comprehensive evaluation of the content. Informal reports and non-academic sources were removed to maintain the credibility of the review. The exclusion process aimed to minimize bias and ensure that only reliable and relevant studies were included in the analysis.

Study Selection Process

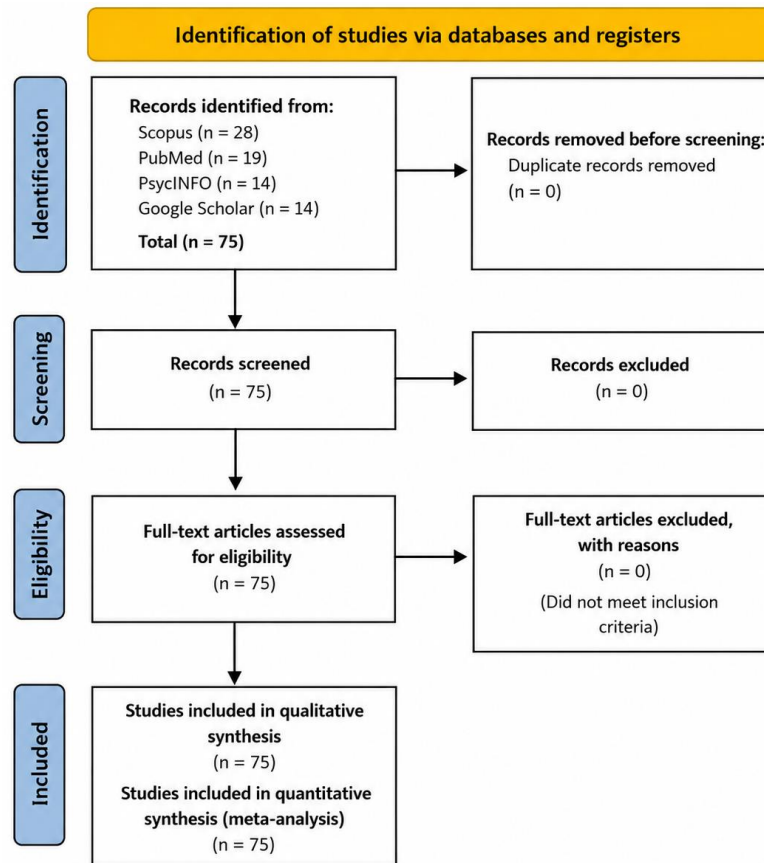


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram process

The study selection process followed a structured approach adapted from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). This framework provides guidance for transparent reporting of literature selection procedures (Page et al., 2021). A total of 75 articles were identified through database searching. Duplicate records were checked and removed before screening. Titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess relevance based on the inclusion criteria. Full-text articles were then evaluated to confirm eligibility.

All 75 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The absence of excluded records reflects the targeted search strategy and the specificity of the selected keywords. The selection process ensured that all included studies were directly relevant to the research objectives.

Data Analysis



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Data were analyzed using narrative synthesis to identify patterns across theoretical frameworks, intervention modalities, and application contexts. Narrative synthesis allows for the integration of findings from diverse study designs, including qualitative, quantitative, and conceptual research. The analysis involved grouping studies based on thematic categories, such as theoretical foundations, types of phototherapy interventions, and contextual applications. This approach enables the identification of recurring themes and relationships across studies while preserving the richness of the original data (Popay et al., 2006).

The synthesis process also involved comparing findings across different cultural and technological contexts to examine how phototherapy practices vary and adapt. Attention was given to identifying consistencies and divergences in the literature, particularly in relation to digital transformation and ethical considerations. This analytical approach supports a comprehensive understanding of phototherapy as a multidisciplinary field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Distinction

Phototherapy refers to the use of photographic images within structured therapeutic settings facilitated by trained professionals. The process emphasizes guided interpretation, emotional exploration, and meaning construction through visual materials. Therapeutic photography, in contrast, describes self-directed practices where individuals engage with images for personal reflection without formal clinical supervision. Both approaches share a common foundation in visual engagement as a pathway to psychological insight. The distinction lies in the presence of professional mediation, which influences depth of interpretation and therapeutic outcomes. In practice, boundaries between these approaches are fluid. Individuals may begin with independent visual exploration and later integrate their experiences into structured therapeutic processes. This continuity reflects the adaptability of photography as both a personal and clinical tool.

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical basis of phototherapy is supported by interdisciplinary perspectives that explain how images influence psychological processes. Semiotic theory highlights that photographs carry layered meanings shaped by cultural and personal contexts. Images function



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as symbolic representations that trigger emotional associations and subjective interpretations. This symbolic dimension enables individuals to project internal experiences onto visual forms.

Neuroscience contributes to understanding how visual stimuli activate emotional and cognitive systems. Brain plasticity research indicates that repeated engagement with emotionally meaningful stimuli can reshape neural pathways associated with memory and affect regulation. Visual perception is closely linked to emotional processing, allowing images to evoke immediate and often non-verbal responses. The activation of mirror neuron systems supports empathic engagement with visual content, particularly when images depict human expressions or experiences.

Memory theory provides another foundation by explaining how photographs function as cues for autobiographical recall. Visual stimuli can reactivate stored experiences, including those that are fragmented or difficult to access through language. This mechanism is particularly relevant in trauma-related contexts, where individuals may struggle to verbalize experiences. Images create a structured entry point for recalling and reorganizing memory, enabling reflection without overwhelming emotional intensity.

Modalities of Phototherapy

Phototherapy encompasses several modalities that reflect different ways of engaging with images. Projective techniques involve interpreting photographs to uncover underlying emotions, beliefs, and perceptions. The meaning assigned to an image often reveals aspects of internal psychological states. This modality is widely used in therapeutic settings to facilitate dialogue and self-awareness.

Self-portrait practices focus on the creation of images that represent the self. This approach encourages individuals to explore identity, body image, and emotional states through visual representation. The process of constructing a self-image allows individuals to externalize internal experiences, creating distance that supports reflection.

Re-enactment phototherapy involves staging and photographing scenes that represent past experiences, imagined scenarios, or symbolic narratives. This modality integrates bodily expression with visual representation, allowing individuals to reconstruct experiences in a controlled and reflective manner. The process shifts individuals from passive recall to active participation in meaning-making.



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Photovoice extends phototherapy into community contexts by enabling participants to document their lived experiences and share them collectively. This approach emphasizes empowerment, social awareness, and collective dialogue. Each modality reflects a different dimension of interaction between visual representation and psychological processes, demonstrating the flexibility of phototherapy across contexts.

Applications in Practice

Phototherapy has been applied across clinical, educational, and community settings. In clinical contexts, it supports emotional expression, trauma processing, and identity exploration. Clients who experience difficulty articulating emotions verbally often benefit from visual approaches that provide alternative pathways for communication. Educational settings utilize phototherapy to enhance reflective learning and emotional literacy. Students engage with images to explore personal experiences and social issues, fostering critical thinking and empathy.

Community-based applications focus on empowerment and social participation. Photography becomes a tool for documenting lived experiences and amplifying marginalized voices. Evidence across studies indicates that phototherapy contributes to emotional regulation, increased self-awareness, and improved interpersonal understanding. The effectiveness of these applications is linked to the active involvement of participants in creating, selecting, and interpreting images rather than passive observation.

Phototherapy in the Digital Age

The digital environment has transformed how images are produced, shared, and interpreted. Smartphones enable constant access to photography, making visual documentation an integral part of daily life. Social media platforms facilitate rapid dissemination of images, shaping how individuals construct personal narratives and social identities. This shift expands the accessibility of phototherapy practices beyond traditional clinical settings.

Digital photography introduces new forms of engagement, including visual journaling, online sharing, and interactive feedback. These practices allow individuals to reflect on experiences in real time. The integration of digital tools enhances scalability, enabling broader reach in mental health interventions. Visual expression becomes embedded in everyday routines, reducing barriers associated with formal therapy.



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Ethical Considerations

The expansion of phototherapy in digital contexts raises important ethical concerns. Privacy remains a central issue, as images can reveal personal information and sensitive experiences. The ease of sharing digital content increases the risk of unauthorized distribution. Ownership of images becomes complex when photographs are created collaboratively or shared across platforms.

Misuse of images presents another concern, particularly when visual content is taken out of context or used without consent. Emotional risk also emerges when individuals revisit distressing experiences through images without adequate support. Ethical guidelines are necessary to address these challenges, including informed consent, confidentiality, and responsible use of digital platforms. Professional standards play a critical role in ensuring that phototherapy practices remain safe and respectful.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a conceptual framework that illustrates the relationship between digital technology, phototherapy modalities, emotional processing, and mental health outcomes. Digital technology functions as an enabling environment that increases access to visual practices. Phototherapy modalities operate as intervention mechanisms that engage individuals in reflective and expressive activities.

The process of emotional processing forms the central pathway through which therapeutic effects occur. Reflection, expression, and memory activation are key components that facilitate psychological change. These processes contribute to mental health outcomes, including improved well-being, emotional healing, and enhanced self-awareness.

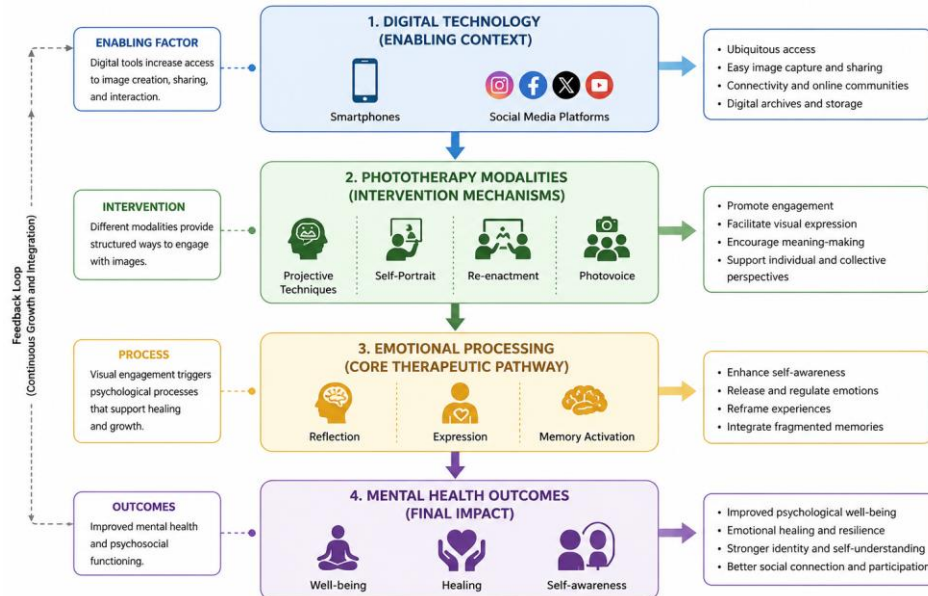


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Phototherapy in the digital age

This model highlights the interconnected nature of technological, psychological, and social factors in phototherapy. Digital environments provide the infrastructure that supports engagement, while phototherapy modalities translate this access into meaningful psychological processes. Emotional processing acts as the core mechanism, linking visual engagement to measurable outcomes in mental health. The framework offers a structured perspective for understanding how phototherapy operates within contemporary digital contexts and provides a foundation for future empirical research.

Discussion

Phototherapy demonstrates strong cross-cultural applicability, particularly in contexts where visual communication holds a central role in everyday interaction. The use of images as a medium for emotional expression allows individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage in therapeutic processes without relying heavily on verbal articulation. Visual approaches provide an inclusive pathway that accommodates variations in language, literacy, and cultural norms. Research in visual psychology indicates that images function as universal carriers of meaning, enabling individuals to project personal experiences while maintaining cultural specificity (Mitchell, 2005). This dual capacity positions phototherapy as a flexible approach that can adapt across social and cultural environments.



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The effectiveness of phototherapy is closely related to its ability to support individuals with limited verbal expression. In many therapeutic contexts, clients experience difficulty articulating emotions due to trauma, social constraints, or cognitive barriers. Visual methods offer an alternative mode of communication that bypasses these limitations. Studies in expressive therapies show that non-verbal modalities can enhance emotional processing by allowing individuals to externalize internal experiences in symbolic forms (Malchiodi, 2012). The use of photography enables individuals to construct meaning through images, reducing the pressure associated with direct verbal disclosure. This process supports gradual engagement with emotional content and fosters a sense of psychological safety.

The integration of digital platforms further strengthens the accessibility of phototherapy. The widespread use of smartphones and social media has transformed photography into a routine activity embedded in daily life. Digital environments provide immediate opportunities for capturing, storing, and sharing images, which aligns with the core principles of phototherapy. Research on digital mental health interventions highlights that technology-based approaches can expand access to psychological support, particularly in underserved populations (Naslund et al., 2017). Visual-based applications and online communities create spaces where individuals can engage in reflective practices and receive feedback from others. This accessibility reduces structural barriers associated with traditional therapy, including cost, stigma, and geographical limitations.

Digital engagement also reshapes how individuals construct and interpret personal narratives. The continuous production of visual content allows individuals to document their experiences in real time. This process contributes to identity formation and self-reflection, as individuals select, edit, and share images that represent their perspectives. Studies on social media behavior indicate that visual storytelling plays a significant role in shaping self-concept and social interaction (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). The integration of phototherapy within digital practices builds on these existing behaviors, transforming everyday image-making into a structured reflective process.

The Indonesian context presents a particularly strong potential for the application of phototherapy. Visual culture is deeply embedded in social practices, including family documentation, cultural rituals, and digital communication. The rapid growth of social media



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usage reflects a high level of engagement with visual content, especially among younger populations. This environment provides a natural foundation for integrating phototherapy into both formal and informal settings. At the same time, mental health services in Indonesia face challenges related to accessibility, distribution, and stigma. Studies indicate that stigma remains a significant barrier to seeking psychological help, particularly in collectivist societies where social perceptions influence individual behavior (Subu et al., 2021).

Phototherapy offers a culturally responsive approach that aligns with existing communication practices. The indirect nature of visual expression reduces the discomfort associated with discussing personal issues. Individuals can engage with therapeutic processes through images without explicitly labeling their experiences as mental health concerns. This approach may increase participation and acceptance, particularly in communities where mental health stigma is prevalent. Community-based applications such as photovoice demonstrate how photography can facilitate dialogue, raise awareness, and promote social change. Research shows that participatory visual methods can empower individuals by giving them control over how their experiences are represented (Liebenberg, 2018)

Despite its potential, the integration of phototherapy in digital contexts requires careful consideration of ethical issues. The accessibility of digital images increases the risk of privacy violations, unauthorized use, and misinterpretation. Individuals may share sensitive visual content without fully understanding the potential consequences. Ethical frameworks in digital mental health emphasize the importance of informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection (Torous & Roberts, 2017). Practitioners must ensure that participants are aware of how their images will be used and stored. Clear boundaries are necessary to prevent harm and maintain trust in therapeutic relationships.

The discussion also highlights the need for empirical research that examines the effectiveness of phototherapy in diverse contexts. Existing studies provide valuable insights into its applications, yet many rely on qualitative or exploratory designs. Quantitative studies and controlled trials are needed to evaluate outcomes and establish evidence-based practices. Research in digital interventions suggests that combining qualitative and quantitative approaches can provide a more comprehensive understanding of psychological impact (Mohr



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et al., 2013). Future studies may explore how different phototherapy modalities influence specific mental health outcomes across populations.

Phototherapy represents an intersection between visual culture, psychological practice, and digital technology. Its adaptability allows it to function across clinical, educational, and community settings. The combination of visual engagement and technological accessibility creates new opportunities for expanding mental health interventions. In contexts such as Indonesia, where visual communication is highly prevalent and access to mental health services remains uneven, phototherapy offers a promising approach that bridges cultural practices and therapeutic needs. Continued development of ethical guidelines, empirical research, and professional training will support the sustainable integration of phototherapy into contemporary mental health practice.

CONCLUSION

Phototherapy has developed into a relevant and adaptive approach within contemporary mental health practice, supported by interdisciplinary theoretical foundations and diverse modalities. The synthesis of 75 selected studies demonstrates that phototherapy functions as an effective medium for emotional expression, reflection, and meaning-making across clinical and community settings. Visual engagement enables individuals to access and process experiences that may remain inaccessible through verbal communication alone. The integration of semiotic perspectives, neuroscientific insights, and memory-based frameworks strengthens the conceptual grounding of this approach. Phototherapy modalities such as projective techniques, self-portrait, re-enactment, and photovoice provide flexible pathways that accommodate individual and collective needs. The expansion of digital technology has amplified the accessibility of these practices, embedding visual expression into everyday routines through smartphones and social media. This condition supports broader participation in reflective processes and creates opportunities for integrating mental health interventions into daily life contexts.

The findings also indicate that the Indonesian context offers strong potential for the application of phototherapy due to high levels of digital engagement and culturally embedded visual practices. Visual-based approaches align with existing communication patterns and may



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reduce barriers associated with stigma and limited access to mental health services. The conceptual framework proposed in this study highlights a sequential relationship in which digital technology enables phototherapy modalities, which then facilitate emotional processing leading to improved mental health outcomes. At the same time, ethical considerations remain critical in the digital era. Issues related to privacy, ownership, and emotional safety require clear professional guidelines and responsible implementation. Future research is expected to strengthen empirical evidence through quantitative and mixed-method approaches, while professional training programs are needed to ensure competent practice. The continued development of phototherapy depends on the integration of technological innovation, ethical awareness, and culturally responsive strategies within mental health systems.

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