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Perceptions towards online counseling among counselors in Malaysia

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Abstract

Technology is changing the nature of problems people are having as well as how they are treated. Technology assistance such as electronic counseling, or e-counseling has been available and widely used as more users are going online, hence the delivery of such services continues to grow well. This research is a preliminary research to explore perceptions of counselors towards the needs of online or e-counseling. A total of 20 respondents were selected as subjects and data were collected using questionnaires to examine the use of e-counseling among counselors. Results showed that although respondents viewed positively towards e-counseling, but they prefer face-to-face counseling to deliver their services to clients. However, it is important to note that more and more people will continue to look to the internet as a resource for dealing with their mental health issues. Hence, continued research in the use and applicability of online counseling will help shape the future of professional counseling.

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1. Introduction

Technology is changing the nature of problems people are having as well as how they are treated. Trends over these years have shown that online or e-counseling has grown in terms of popularity among clients and mental health counselors. Technology assistance such as computer-assisted assessment and information systems have been available and widely used, thus e-counseling continues to grow as well.

Grohol (1995) defined e-therapy, also known as e-counseling as a new modality of helping people resolve life and relationship issues. As online counseling services were used as an adjunct to traditional practice, or in-person treatment, Putnam (1998) suggested that individuals with stigmatizing or embarrassing problems were more easily able to acknowledge their problems due to the degree of anonymity offered by online counseling. In terms of advantages, online counseling offers easy access for people who refrain from using conventional psychological services due to difficulties in transportation, personal handicap, need for anonymity, shyness or the fear of face-to-face disclosure or interaction, sickness, having no free time for counseling during regular working hours, and living in a remote place (Young, 2005).

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Evans & Hawkin (2002) and Rochland, Zach & Speyer (2004) believed that with the advent of online counseling services as an innovative therapeutic medium, mental health counselors should consider how such therapeutic conditions can be fostered in an online environment. Numerous researches have been done to explore the availability of online interventions (Heinlen, Reynolds-Welfel, Richmond & Rak, 2003; Maheu & Gordon, 2000; Sampson, Kolodinsky & Greeno, 1997).

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions towards online counseling among counselors in Malaysia. It also explores their awareness of online counseling.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Table 1 presents the number of participants based on gender, ethnic, age and level of education

Table 1: Demographic information (N=20)

Demographic factors	Frequency	%
Gender	9	45
Male	11	55
Female		
Ethnic		
Malay	18	90
Others	2	10
Age in years		
21-30	2	10
31-40	15	75
41 and above	3	15
Level of education		
Secondary	1	5
Diploma	9	45
Undergraduate	2	10
Master	8	40

20 participants were selected based on their experience as counselors in mental health counseling. Participants were informed that the primary purpose of the study was to determine their perceptions toward online counseling. Majority of the participants falls in the 31-40 years of age (75%) with Malay (90%) as the major ethnic group. About 95% of the respondents had a diploma, an undergraduate degree or higher. 45% of the respondents are male while 55% are female.

2.2 Assessment measures

The 'Perceptions towards Online Counseling Questionnaire' was constructed for the purpose of this study. Participants were administered the 'Perceptions towards Online Counseling Questionnaire' which contains 38 items rated on a five-point Likert scale.

2.3 Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the demographic information and perceptions towards online counseling by respondents.

3. Results

Table 2: Awareness and advertising of online counseling

Variable	Frequency		Percent (%)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Awareness of online counseling	18	2	90	10
Visited an online counseling site	6	14	30	70

Table 2 above presents the respondent awareness of online counseling and visiting the online counseling site. From the analysis, 90% of the respondents are aware of online counseling, however only 30% visited the online counseling site.

Table 3 : Perceptions towards online counseling versus face-to- face counseling

Statement	Percentage				
	Did not answer	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
In my opinion, online counseling has more advantages than face-to-face counseling	0	5	10	75	10
In my opinion, online counseling has more disadvantages than face-to-face counseling	0	0	10	65	25
Online counselors need adequate knowledge and skills similar to face-face counselors	0	55	40	5	0
Online counselors should possess personal characteristics similar to face-to-face counselors	0	50	45	5	0
The quality of online counseling cannot be compared to face-to-face counseling	5	40	55	0	0
Online counseling can maintain confidentiality	5	0	40	45	10
I am interested in online counseling	5	50	35	10	0
I would accept and be involved in online counseling	5	45	40	10	0

Majority of the respondents (75%) did not agree with the statement ‘online counseling has more advantages as compared to face-to-face counseling’. Also, 65% of the respondents disagree with online counseling having more disadvantages than face-to-face counseling. 55% of the respondents strongly agree with the statement that online counselors need to possess skills and knowledge like the traditional practice counselors. 50% of the respondents also agree that online counselors should possess personal characteristics similar to that of the face-to-face counselors. 55% of the respondents disagree with the statement ‘the quality of online counseling can maintain confidentiality’. 50% of the respondents favors online counseling, while 85% would accept and be involved in online counseling.

4. Discussion

Despite the acceptance of online counseling in this study, results also showed that respondents agree that online counseling have some disadvantages. In previous studies (Cook and Doyle, 2002; Rochlen et.al 2004) the disadvantages levied against online counseling concerns the difficulties with establishing strong therapeutic alliances in the absence of non verbal information and messages available in traditional face-to-face counseling. Altman and Taylor (1973) believed that non verbal cues and messages are critical to the development of relationship and intimacy while Alleman (2002) believed that it is a necessity in counseling relationship. Lambert and Ogles (2004) noted that therapy relationship is one of the largest and most consistent factors predicting the successful outcome of counseling.

Previous finding by Cook and Doyle (2002) found that respondents reported experiencing strong alliance with their online therapist despite the loss of non verbal cues; the therapeutic alliance was nevertheless effectively established. Although the findings of this study reveal that respondents accepted and were aware of online counseling (90%), they do not report a higher level of usage of online counseling (70%) as is reported in studies (Busseri & Tyler, 2003; McMurty & Hudson, 2000) where clients have received face-to-face counseling. The reasons for this might be the inadequacy in communicating effectively through distance technologies. As pointed out by Mallen, et. al (2005), online counselors should receive training in communication and experience with new technologies, such as interpreting text messages written through synchronous chat and assessing clients without the aid of non verbal cues.

The findings of this study also suggest that both online and face-to-face counselling have the advantages and disadvantages respectively and that counsellors should regard both medium of therapeutic alliance as complementarily to one another.

As computer technologies evolve, the counseling profession must continue to reflexively evaluate the role and scope of online counseling. In addition, because of the small nature of sample, being a preliminary study, the results reported in this study may not represent what others might experience in online counseling.

5. Conclusion

In summary, online counseling should be considered to supplement traditional mental health counseling services. If online counseling can be effectively developed, it can help reach underserved individuals with mental illness that are isolated. However, online counseling will not replace the conventional face-to-face counseling but rather will complement the latter services to improve access to counseling.

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