

## Issues and Challenges of Online Counseling Services During Covid-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted the quality of counseling services. During the pandemic, e-counseling emerged as a vital and transformative approach to mental health support. With social distancing measures and lockdowns restricting in-person interactions, traditional counseling services faced significant challenges in maintaining accessibility and continuity of care. A significant effect can be seen in counselors' online counseling services through technology. The study aims to investigate the issues and challenges that arise in online counseling services and identify the advantages and disadvantages of these services. A quantitative approach was carried out when a questionnaire was sent to 100 registered counselors across the country, asking two (2) main questions, namely the experience of issues and challenges they experienced in conducting online counseling sessions and their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of online counseling. These answers are collected and then analyzed with the support of previous studies. The study findings found that confidentiality issues and managing disabled clients are among the main challenges.

**Keywords:** *Efficiency, disabled people, technology, advantages, disadvantages, Madani, Penang Vision 2030*

### 1. Introduction and Background

Yusof, et al (2022) believes that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacts the quality of counseling services in Malaysia and worldwide. Even though the Malaysian Counseling Board has set guidelines to ensure the quality of counseling services is implemented perfectly for all registered counselors, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a change in counseling sessions due to the Movement Restriction Order imposed on all Malaysian citizens (Ab Latif et al., 2021). The relevant way includes the use of technology by counselors, and the challenge can be seen as to whether the use of technology, such as online counseling, can meet counseling ethics, therapeutic atmosphere, and service medium.

The British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy has defined online counseling services as an alternative counseling process in the text-based virtual world on the Internet, either through email or chat rooms (Richards & Viganò, 2012). Zainudin et al (2022) on the other hand, thinks that online counseling services are a process of interaction between counselors and clients who are in different locations and use internet facilities to communicate. American Psychiatric Association (2022) highlighted the current definition of online counseling as providing psychological support and mental health services through digital platforms, utilizing various communication tools like video calls, phone calls, emails, and text messaging.

This method allows clients to engage in therapy sessions from remote or convenient locations, offering greater accessibility and flexibility compared to traditional in-person counseling. Novella & Samuolis (2022) also detailed that online counseling services are a new method of helping relationships because they use the Internet's advantages to connect counselors and clients synchronously and asynchronously. The mediums used to run this virtual counseling session are written (text), voice (audio), audiovisual, and website.

Although the Counsellors Act 1998 defines counseling as a systematic helping relationship process that must involve the counselor and the client in the same physical space, this concept began to change when counselors began to see the therapeutic potential in the internet space as an opportunity to expand their services (Geller, 2023). In other words, the counseling process is no longer limited to a face-to-face meeting between the counselor and the client in a room; instead, it is enough to be in front of the screen.

Among the benefits that can be offered in this online counseling service is access to counseling for clients who live in remote and remote areas, disabled clients who have difficulty moving (Chester & Glass, 2006), clients who have responsibilities at home such as taking care of small children or parents (Suranata et al, 2020), clients who are always on the move due to tasks and work factors, clients who care about anonymity or do not want to know their identity, and clients who want to choose a counselor according to specific expertise.

However, previous research has shown that this service has caused some issues and challenges. These include a lack of face-to-face interaction, technical issues, privacy invasion concerns, customer comfort, digital fatigue, and a limited scope of practice. In Malaysia, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a shift from in-person to online counseling services. For example, the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development launched the Talian Kasih 15999 online counseling service. This service, which addresses issues such as abuse, protection, and welfare, received positive feedback, with over 1,000 counseling cases reported from March to August 2020, highlighting the demand and effectiveness of online counseling in ensuring continued mental health support during the pandemic (Ab Latif, et al, 2021)

The national and state governments are very concerned about the mental health of Malaysians, especially during and post-pandemic period. Economic and social problems are proven to worsen existing mental issues at all levels of society. If not taken care of, the number of those who have this mental illness will increase from time to time, affecting the productivity of the individual, family, and society. Therefore, the researcher lists two (2) significant efforts by the national and state governments of Penang to ensure the mental health of Malaysians is stable. The two (2) efforts are the celebration of National Counseling Month 2023 and the Penang Vision 2023.

### **National Counseling Month 2023**

In October 2023, the national government, through the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community, inaugurated the celebration of National Counseling Month 2023 with the theme "Civilised Mind of Harmonious Society." The main objective of the implementation of National Counseling Month is to give recognition to registered counselors for their efforts to provide professional counseling services, in addition to focusing on the role of counselors in dealing with current issues, gutturalizing counseling services for the community, increasing the accessibility of counseling services for the community, and promoting counseling services and the counselor profession as pillars of community well-being.

This aligns with the government's desire to increase public awareness of the benefits of professional counseling services that lead to a harmonious life. Another objective is to provide the community with an understanding of counseling services and hope that Malaysians' well-being and mental health will always be stable.

### **Penang Vision 2030**

Penang Vision 2030 is a state structure plan that aims to prosper the state of Penang as an intelligent, harmonious, and international state. To achieve this goal, the state government is working to improve human capital development through psychological services by empowering individuals, groups, tele-counselors, and e-counselors. Based on this vision, it is clear that the state government is now turning to technology to provide counseling services.

### **Problem Statement**

The rapid adoption of online counseling, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has brought both opportunities and challenges to the field of mental health services. While online counseling offers increased accessibility to clients in remote areas and those with mobility issues, it also presents significant problems that impact the effectiveness and quality of these services. Among the primary challenges are concerns about confidentiality, as the digital environment may not fully guarantee the privacy of client information, leading to potential breaches of trust between clients and counselors.

Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face interaction can hinder the development of a therapeutic relationship, which is crucial for successful counseling outcomes. Counselors also face difficulties in managing clients with disabilities, as traditional online platforms may not be adequately equipped to meet their unique communication needs. Additionally, the digital divide, technical issues, and the varying levels of counselors'

competence in using online platforms further complicate the delivery of effective online counseling. These challenges necessitate a reevaluation of counseling practices and the development of robust guidelines to ensure that online counseling can meet the ethical and professional standards required in the field.

### **Research Objectives**

The study aims to comprehensively investigate the issues and challenges that arise in the provision of online counseling services while also identifying the advantages and disadvantages of these services. Firstly, it seeks to identify key issues related to confidentiality, data security, and privacy, which are critical concerns in an online setting. Additionally, the study will explore the technological barriers that may hinder effective counseling, such as limited access to devices and unreliable internet connections. The challenges faced by counselors in building rapport and maintaining therapeutic relationships through digital platforms will also be examined.

Furthermore, the study aims to evaluate the competence of counselors in utilizing online platforms, assessing their level of preparedness and the need for additional training or guidelines. On the other hand, the study will identify the advantages of online counseling, such as increased accessibility for clients in remote areas and the flexibility it offers in scheduling sessions. It will also consider the potential for online counseling to reach a broader demographic, including those who may be reluctant to seek in-person counseling.

However, the study will not overlook the disadvantages, such as the absence of non-verbal cues, which are essential for understanding client emotions, and the risks posed by the digital divide, which may disadvantage clients with limited technological resources. Finally, the study will develop recommendations to address these challenges, proposing strategies to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of online counseling services and suggesting improvements to ensure that ethical and professional standards are upheld in the online environment.

## **2. Research Methodology**

In this research, the methodology is centered on understanding the issues and challenges associated with online counseling services through a quantitative approach. The study involved the distribution of a structured questionnaire to 100 registered counselors from various regions across the country. The selection of participants aimed to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives on the subject matter.

The questionnaire comprised two main sections. The first section focused on identifying the specific issues and challenges the counselors faced during online counseling sessions. This could include concerns such as maintaining confidentiality, navigating technical difficulties, or challenges in building rapport with clients in a virtual environment. The second section sought to gather the counselors' opinions on the overall advantages and disadvantages of online counseling. This part of the questionnaire aimed to understand the benefits, such as increased accessibility for clients, and the drawbacks, like the potential loss of non-verbal communication cues.

After collecting the responses, the data was systematically analyzed using statistical tools to identify common trends and themes. The analysis was not conducted in isolation; rather, it was supported by a review of previous studies on online counseling, which provided a contextual background and helped validate the findings. This combination of quantitative data and literature review enabled a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of online counseling services, the issues faced by practitioners, and the perceived benefits and challenges.

## **3. Research Findings**

Based on the 100 questionnaires that were sent, the researcher received a variety of responses. However, for this study, these responses have been categorized into five (5) main issues and challenges of online counseling services, including:

**a) Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is a critical concern in e-counseling, as it forms the foundation for trust between counselors and clients. As Chester and Glass (2006) emphasize, maintaining confidentiality is a fundamental ethical practice in e-counseling, and without it, the counseling process cannot proceed effectively. Corey (2013) further highlights that confidentiality is essential for building the necessary trust for successful counseling outcomes. However, the nature of online counseling, where face-to-face meetings are absent and the counselor and client may not even know each other, raises significant ethical concerns. This lack of direct interaction can create uncertainty about the ability to guarantee confidentiality, leading to intense debate within the field (Zainudin & Rong, 2020).

To address these concerns, it is imperative that counselors clearly state their privacy and confidentiality practices on their websites. Clients should be informed about the confidentiality of their discussions by completing a notification form, ensuring that they understand the terms under which their information is protected. Moreover, the code of ethics concerning critical issues must be transparently explained to the client. In cases where the counselor perceives that the client might pose a risk to themselves or others, it is crucial to encourage the client to seek face-to-face sessions to better manage such risks. By doing so, counselors can uphold ethical standards and protect the well-being of their clients in the online counseling environment.

**b) Counselor and client introduction**

The introduction phase in e-counseling, where the client and counselor first meet and establish rapport, presents several unique challenges and weaknesses compared to traditional in-person counseling. One of the primary issues is the difficulty in creating an immediate and strong connection due to the lack of physical presence. Non-verbal cues, such as body language, eye contact, and even the subtleties of tone and pace, are often diminished or lost in virtual settings, which can hinder the initial bond between the client and counselor.

Another weakness is the potential for technical difficulties, such as poor internet connection, audio or video lags, or unfamiliarity with the digital platform, which can disrupt the flow of the conversation and create an uncomfortable or frustrating start to the session. These disruptions can make it harder for the client to feel comfortable and for the counselor to accurately gauge the client's emotional state.

Additionally, the absence of a physical space dedicated to counseling, like an office designed to be welcoming and private, can impact the client's sense of safety and confidentiality, making it harder for them to open up during the introduction phase. This can delay the process of building trust, which is crucial for effective counseling.

Lastly, clients may feel more detached or less committed to the counseling process when it begins online, as the virtual environment can feel less formal or serious than a traditional face-to-face meeting. This perception might reduce their willingness to engage fully, which can be a significant obstacle to establishing a productive therapeutic relationship from the outset.

**c) Handling clients with disabilities**

Some counseling services may not be suitable for an online environment, particularly when working with individuals with disabilities. Unlike the general population, people with disabilities such as blindness, deafness, or speech impairments face unique communication challenges that require specialized approaches. Counselors must be adept in the alternative communication methods used by these individuals, such as sign language or braille, to effectively provide support. This necessity for specialized communication can make online counseling less effective or appropriate for these clients.

In an online setting, the impersonal nature of digital communication can exacerbate the challenges these individuals already face. Counselors must approach these sessions with sensitivity, ensuring they listen carefully to the client's expressions and avoid actions that might unintentionally cause harm. Refusing to accommodate their specific needs or failing to provide the necessary support can lead to feelings of rejection or further marginalization.

Counselors must be prepared to accept and address the unique constraints and possibilities that arise when working with disabled clients. This includes choosing appropriate therapeutic theories, such as humanistic or

reality therapy, which are well-suited to addressing the personal experiences and realities of individuals with disabilities. Given the need for such tailored approaches, traditional in-person counseling may often be more suitable for these clients than online alternatives, where the nuances of their needs might not be fully met.

**d) Efficiency**

Some counselors have expertise in various fields, while others are more inclined to solve specific problems. From the perspective of cultural bias, many counselors do not master cross-cultural counseling techniques. E-counseling challenges the abilities of counselors. This happens when clients of different nationalities from all over the world with a variety of specific problems meet with counselors online. This is where a counselor's ability will be tested (Sue et al., 2022).

This problem can be overcome by setting the conditions and scope of counseling. However, it seems to show a counselor's incompetence. Because of that, some counselors only carry out their professional work within the boundaries of their competence. These boundaries are based on education, training, supervised experience, professional accreditation, and appropriate professional experience. Counselors should acquire knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills related to their services when dealing with different types of clients.

Katsopoulou (2015) emphasizes that e-counseling is not confined to websites alone; it encompasses all forms of communication tools, including telephone and social media applications, under the broader definition of e-counseling. This perspective broadens the scope of online counseling, highlighting the importance of various digital platforms in delivering mental health services. Meanwhile, Shaw & Shaw (2006) conducted a review of 166 websites that advertised online counseling services. Their findings revealed that only 88 of these sites met the criteria for genuine online counseling, with the remaining sites being either inactive or merely using online counseling as an advertising tactic. This discrepancy underscores the variability in the quality and authenticity of online counseling platforms, further emphasizing the need for clear definitions and ethical guidelines in this rapidly evolving field.

The development of technology leads to the existence of various types of knowledge in the counseling field. In other cases, uncertified counselors abuse technology by learning counseling without a proper foundation, and hackers may impersonate counselors and obtain confidential information about their clients for profit. Therefore, to ensure that online counseling services are genuinely transparent, a counselor must demonstrate his understanding of this code of ethics by introducing himself by stating their qualifications, licenses, and specializations on the website.

**4. Conclusion**

The Malaysian Ministry of Health reported in 2019 that 29.2% of Malaysians experienced depression in 2017, highlighting a significant mental health crisis in the country. Among those most affected were teenagers aged 13 to 17, with 10% of this age group expressing suicidal thoughts within the same year. This alarming statistic underscores the urgent need for accessible and effective mental health services, particularly for vulnerable populations such as adolescents.

In response to this pressing need, the Board of Counselors in Malaysia holds a critical responsibility in leveraging available opportunities to provide high-quality counseling services. The integration of online counseling has become increasingly important as it offers a flexible and accessible means to reach individuals in need, particularly in times when in-person services may be limited or inaccessible. This initiative is in line with the broader goals of Malaysia Madani and the Penang Vision 2030, both of which prioritize the physical and mental well-being of all Malaysians. By ensuring that quality counseling services are available and accessible through online platforms, the Board of Counselors can contribute significantly to the mental health and overall well-being of the population, aligning with the nation's vision for a healthier, more resilient society.



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