Counsellors' Experiences on Providing Online Counselling in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract
This study explores counselling techniques that are important for the advancement of online counseling, addressing a significant research gap in counselors' experiences with this medium. Using a qualitative approach in Klang Valley, Malaysia, the researchers engaged five LKM-certified counselors through convenience sampling. Interpretative phenomenological analysis identified three main themes: (a) positive experiences, (b) encountered challenges, and (c)preferred methods. The findings revealed online counseling's flexibility compared to traditional methods but highlighted limited resources as a drawback. Therapists must adapt their skills for effective online sessions, differing from face-to-face interactions. *The study's findings suggested that therapists must alter their skills and approaches in online counselling that differ from those employed in the usual face-to-face counselling process to strengthen their therapeutic sessions.* The study suggests further research to focus on counselors' experiences in online therapy, including language use and ethical considerations. Future studies could also include client perspectives to enrich understanding in online counselling.
Keywords: COVID-19, Counsellors' Experience, Online Counselling

Introduction
        As we progress deeper into the Fourth Industrial Revolution, one driven by the technological advancements of the 21st Century, we can expect massive societal changes in the world. With around 64.4% of the global population having access to the internet in 2023, it has become an essential resource for information and commerce (Ritchie et al., 2023). The Internet and digital communication tools, such as smartphones and computers, allow people to have access to information and a multitude of online services at their fingertips, regardless of time and logistics. Educational services and other businesses have begun to shift operations to online platforms and counselling practices have begun to rapidly follow in stride. The once

rigid and conventional in person counselling practices have begun progressing towards including and accepting the new modality of online counselling (Zainudin et al., 2021).

This rapid growth of online counselling can be credited to the evolving technological advancements and technology becoming an integral aspect of people's lives (García et al., 2021). However, it must be noted that the shift towards online mediums has been heavily expedited by the COVID-19 pandemic that spanned the better parts of 2020 and 2021. Movement being restricted by the lockdowns all over the world during COVID-19, many people turned to online platforms for most aspects of their lives, work, school, shopping, social interactions, and counselling services. Therefore, out of necessity, counsellors and clients alike were able to experience the new upcoming modality of online counselling services due to the pandemic and the technological advancements made regarding communication applications (Paterson et al., 2017).

Online counselling uses computer technology and electronic communication to provide counselling online. It is the delivery of therapeutic interventions online synchronously or asynchronously between qualified counsellors and clients via telephone, computer, email, and online chat (American Psychological Association, 1997). Synchronous therapy involves real-time client-counsellor connection via Skype, Zoom, or the phone. Asynchronous counselling (correspondence) lets clients and counsellors take their time responding. This delay replies in email counselling and WhatsApp instant messaging. This method lets both parties assess their approach and responses for the greatest results (Glasheen et al., 2017). In both circumstances, the Internet connects the therapist and client. This novel strategy uses the Internet and phone to provide counselling services swiftly and efficiently. Online counselling has moved from computer-generated responses to digital counsellor-client connections (Zainudin et al., 2022). Over time, internet therapy has expanded to offer a variety of mental health treatments at client and therapist convenience.

Although there are clear ethical guidelines set for online counselling in Malaysia, there are still no national-approved charges for online counselling. There are no regulations nor an established body to recommend the pricing of the current form of counselling, making it difficult for some counsellors to get on board. Many have voiced that due to this current issue of the lack of regulation, the online platform for counselling is benign, making it uncertain for many counsellors. Some studies have viewed online counselling as a supplement to conventional treatments. It can be used for extended support by providing follow-up to the in-person clinical process. This method can be used to attract the client for the potential counselling session to be held in person (Mejah et al., 2019).

Some report that being able to build rapport with clients via online counselling, specifically those with depression or anxiety, yielded positive results. This may be due to the instantaneous assistance that is possible through the online medium when necessary. Many of these reviews on the perceptions of online counselling highlight the importance of online counselling being geared towards a face-to-face style of counselling by using video counselling (Sucala et al., 2012). Furthermore, the integration of online and in-person methods of counselling may be used for the convenience of the counsellor and client alike, this is known as hybrid therapy. Chat and instant messaging have shown to be a more direct and immediate form of communication, in comparison to the asynchronous forms of online counselling such

as Email counselling. Synchronous online counselling approaches offer constant and instant feedback, in two ways (Mejah et al., 2019). This form of counselling is effective and favoured.

Tele counselling, also known as teletherapy, is a form of counselling or therapy that is conducted remotely using electronic communication technologies such as phone calls, video conferencing, messaging or email. It has shown effectiveness in crisis management as a first-aid intervention, for clients in need of immediate assistance (Mejah et al., 2019). Internet-based treatments with support from professionals have shown high levels of patient engagement and noteworthy reductions in symptoms related to mental health. These treatments offer accessible and cost-effective alternatives to traditional in-person therapy (García et al., 2021).

Research reviews consistently show that incorporating guided support in internet-based treatments improves participant adherence and overall effectiveness. Guided support enables personal connections as necessary and is a valuable component of online interventions (Bright et al., 2022). In Malaysia, e-mail and chat-based counselling has seen a rise in popularity. The time delay in synchronous online therapy allows the counsellor and client to formulate their thoughts and questions to explain the problem or issue (Stoll et al., 2020). Chat-based therapy allows clients to put down their troubles to speak with them, which can help them self-disclose and resolve their issues. This can increase self-awareness, reduce emotional weight, and encourage more honesty and expression than a counselling session (Maurya et al., 2020).

As the counsellors are not directly seen by the clients or have face-to-face interactions during this form of online counselling, clients feel less defensive and vulnerable. This can make people more honest and comfortable sharing unpleasant and stigmatising ideas and behaviours. Clients can express themselves without the counsellor interrupting (Maurya et al., 2020). In this format, counsellors can take time to evaluate what has been written and consider all options to help clients before writing a reply, unlike in the traditional method of conversation, which is usually on the spot. The counsellors' responses are more thoughtful, which can benefit clients who have felt unappreciated in the past (Stoll et al., 2020).

With the ever developing technology, AI Chatbots have been created to offer asynchronous online counselling services. It is designed to provide personalized counselling services and is responsive to the client's emotional needs. AI algorithms focus on emotional communication and user interface (Oh et al., 2017). Computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (cCBT) helps clients with AI replies to their concerns. Zainudin et al (2022) note that Malaysians prefer synchronous online therapy due of anonymity. Due to the lack of session pricing constraints, internet counselling can be cheaper than in-person therapy. Online counselling is cheaper than traditional counselling, which allows the general public, especially those in need, to access counselling services (Othman et al., 2020).

Study Purpose and Objectives

This current study aims to fill the research gap on the experience and perception of online counsellors, currently practicing online counselling in Malaysia. This study replicated the study done by Smith and Gillion (2021) in finding out the therapists' experiences in providing online counselling: A counsellor (who is also referred to as a therapist) will use psychotherapy to assist clients dealing with mental health issues (Gifford, n.d.)

This study focused on the synchronous form of online counselling, as this is the most trending method of online counselling now. According to a survey conducted by the Malaysian Mental Health Association (2020), 63% of the participants preferred video conferencing and video calls for their online counselling, making it the most sought-after method of online counselling. Many studies claim counsellors overseas have a positive outlook towards this new medium for delivering therapy (Patterson et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, studies have shown a generally positive outlook towards online therapy, however, many seemed to have rather strong opinions towards the conventional method of counselling being the most authentic way of delivering counselling, some even discrediting online counselling to be a legitimate approach for therapy work (Mejah et al., 2019). The purpose of this research is to explore and understand the psychotherapeutic techniques that are important for the progress and advancement of online counselling, as there is a gap in the research concerning the counsellors' experiences towards the online medium for therapy. In doing so, the study can gain in-depth insight into the therapeutic experience, processes and efficacy of providing counselling services on the online medium. The study aimed to investigate the detailed procedures involved in online therapy, to provide insights that could be useful for training, raising awareness, and developing skills for psychotherapists who are already providing or planning to provide therapy through online interventions.

Research Questions
How do counsellors experience the online therapeutic relationship with clients?

Literature Review
Increased Demand for Online Counselling
According to Hazlegreaves (2020), searches for 'online counselling' increased by 124% in Malaysia, during the first COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia. It is worth noting the rise of online counselling occurring as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019 not only in Malaysia, but the rest of the world. The increased levels of psychological distress and the growing demand for mental health services in the post pandemic world led to the widespread adoption of online counselling. The United States was the first country to implement this modality during the pandemic. This granted access to psychological practitioners, including intern therapists and school counsellors, ensuring that clients could receive mental health care with minimal barriers.

Following this example, the United Kingdom and Australia also embraced the online medium on guidelines provided by the American Psychological Association (APA) and American Counselling Association (ACA). As a result of government support for online counselling, various countries like Malaysia witnessed improved accessibility to counselling resources, indicating a necessary and well-received shift in the field (Wan Chen et al., 2023). Not only were clients able to receive psychological assistance during this time of peril, but the mental health service providers were able to gain more experience in this medium than ever before. Another interesting point to note was that the working population enjoyed greater benefits from online counselling due to the time flexibility of online counselling during the COVID-19 period and after (Kotera et al., 2021).

Ethics

Online counselling, similar to traditional counselling, adheres to established rules and regulations to ensure ethical practices. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy provides guidelines for transparent pricing and fair fees. The APA published Telepsychology guidelines in 2013, and the BACP has further developed regulations for online counselling, leading to global expansion (Ostrowski & Collins, 2016). Online counsellors must possess the necessary training, knowledge, and skills to provide effective and safe services.

In Malaysia, online counselling guidelines have not been established, but ethical guidelines must be followed. The Board of Counsellors has set a Code of Ethics outlining the principles and standards for counsellors. Clients must be informed about the benefits and limitations of online counselling. Counsellors must ensure clients are able to use the technology and provide assistance if needed. If online counselling is not suitable, conventional counselling should be recommended. Obtaining informed consent is crucial, involving explaining the nature and limitations of online counselling. Confidentiality and data management are important considerations. Clear ethical guidelines help counsellors address the unique challenges of transitioning to online counselling (Mat Rani et al., 2017).

Experiences

The landscape of counselling has been significantly transformed by the advent of online platforms, which offer new pathways for therapeutic engagement. Counsellors' experiences with online counselling have revealed a mixture of opportunities and challenges. The convenience and accessibility provided by digital platforms have allowed counsellors to extend their services to a wider client base, breaking down geographical barriers (Wagner et al., 2020). Additionally, the anonymity offered by online sessions can encourage individuals who might otherwise be hesitant to seek in-person counselling (Sucala et al., 2012). However, counsellors have also navigated various hurdles such as technical glitches, ensuring privacy and confidentiality in the digital realm, and adjusting therapeutic techniques to suit the virtual setting (Andersson & Cuijpers, 2019). The adaptation process has often been influenced by the counsellor's technological competence and familiarity with the modality (Haberstroh et al., 2018). Collectively, these experiences underscore the dynamic interplay between technological innovation and therapeutic efficacy in a global context.

Online therapists in Malaysia face a unique blend of culture and technology. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysian therapists immediately adopted online platforms to meet demand (Yusoff et al., 2020). Malaysian counsellors have learned the importance of cultural sensitivity in online sessions to respect traditional values and cultural nuances (Abdul Kadir et al., 2020). Technology allows remote and rural residents to receive counselling services, however the digital divide and unequal access to online resources have prompted concerns (Yusoff et al., 2020). Malaysian counsellors have hurdles in maintaining therapeutic alliances and ethical standards online. Their experiences demonstrate the necessity for culturally and technologically competent online therapy in Malaysia.

Advantages of Online Counselling
1. Accessibility and Comfort

One of the key benefits of online counselling is that it can be conducted free of geographical constraints and timetabling differences. Previously clients would be bound to the counsellors' space or time (office hours), rather the client can gain the counselling service

at their convenience. The convenience of being able to have a counselling session in the comfort of your own home seems to be a positive for some clients, especially for clients with depression and anxiety. Mobility and scheduling issues are easily worked around with the online counselling approach. The flexibility of online counselling regarding its scheduling has also shown to be favourable, as it can be arranged outside of the traditional office hours and rescheduling is easy (King & Richardson, 2006).

In Spain, Gonzalez-Ortega et al (2021) found that clients were happy with the convenience of being able to arrange sessions after working hours for online counselling. This was a significant factor in their willingness to continue using this modality of counselling. This means that counselling services are available to clients anytime, anywhere which greatly improves the accessibility of counselling services for everyone (Rummell & Joyce, 2010). This is especially beneficial for underprovided individuals such as young adults, the elderly and physically impaired people Zapolsky (2020); clients who reside in remote or rural areas where counselling services are inaccessible Sussman (2004); clients who are homebound due to health issues, physical constraints or have transportation issues (Maples & Han, 2008).

2. *Crossing Borders*

The advancements in technology have brought about significant changes in the field of counselling, particularly with the rise of online counselling services. This means that individuals seeking help and support can now access professional counselling expertise regardless of their physical location. Whether they are across borders, oceans, or continents, distance is no longer a barrier when it comes to obtaining the assistance they need.

Online counselling can help people without a support structure. People sometimes find themselves in foreign places due to studying or working overseas. Being away from family, friends, and familiar faces can isolate and make it hard to express oneself or share difficulties. Online counselling gives these people a chance to share their feelings, seek advice, and receive support from a professional. Much research shows that rural or underserved people benefit from online counselling (Sucala et al., 2012). Remote residents and those with mobility or health challenges who can't leave home benefit immensely. This is especially true for rural Malaysians who need counselling services and the convenience of access during the MCO era (Smith & Gillon, 2021).

Online counselling has helped people live better, more harmonious, and more affluent lives wherever they are. Counselling services that are handy and accessible help people overcome their issues. This alternative counselling allows people to plan a more fulfilled life despite being far from their normal support. Overall, online counselling has transformed how people obtain and benefit from counselling. It has removed barriers and made support and guidance available to everybody by using technology.

3. *Privacy and Security*

Online therapy is accepted among Malaysians for privacy. Many choose anonymous internet counselling due to cultural stigmas against traditional mental health care (Cheung et al., 2020). Some people struggle to discuss gender, adultery, suicide, etc. Through online space, people who would never have sought professional aid can now do so. This "invisibility" helps clients overcome mental health stigmas and feel more comfortable seeking online counselling (Titov et al., 2010). Clients can freely interact and initiate contact, which may

increase therapeutic autonomy. This can significantly reduce counsellor-client power disparity (Simpson et al., 2018).

Online counselling may also be an option for those who are apprehensive to attend traditional counselling. As online counselling is less aggressive and anonymous, it may be seen as less required than traditional counselling (Wong et al., 2018). Online counselling's anonymity can decrease pressure and anxiety for some (Manhal-Baugus, 2001). Online counselling makes counselling more accessible by allowing people to get help without external pressure.

4. Focus on the issue's discussion

Online clients focus on specific difficulties, unlike face-to-face clients. Clients who have been holding onto difficulties for a long time often unload many issues at once during in-person sessions, which may indicate a lack of therapeutic focus (Sucala et al., 2012). Online therapy customers are usually informed of space, cost, and time limits via chat, email, or phone.

Thus, clients are more likely to prioritise and discuss their most pressing concerns. Online sessions indirectly nurture and educate clients to focus on their most pressing difficulties while allowing for follow-up sessions and therapies to address additional issues. Online counsellors help clients resolve their issues by providing structure and advice (Sucala et al., 2012; Berryhill et al., 2019). They may help clients identify and prioritise their major concerns to maximise session productivity. This counsel keeps clients on target and helps them handle their main issues.

This condition helps the counselling session succeed. Online counselling streamlines and improves therapy by helping clients focus and prioritise their concerns. Online counselling's limited space and communication medium let clients reveal their most important issues, resulting in targeted interventions and a better sense of progress. This concentrated approach and the freedom to handle additional themes in following sessions improve online counselling clients' therapeutic experience and outcome.

Limitations for Online Counselling

Online counselling presents distinct limitations compared to traditional counselling due to its unique mode of delivery. The evolution of counsellor roles through technology has facilitated the creation of an "intimate setting" for service delivery (Richards & Viganó, 2020). While information technology supports efficient counselling sessions Sucala et al (2012), it's important to address limitations like confidentiality Lambert et al (2020), non-verbal communication challenges King et al (2021), professionalism considerations Smedley & Morehead (2019), cross-cultural practices Abdul Kadir et al (2020), and technical issues (Sucala et al., 2012). Navigating these limitations is essential to ensure high quality client care and support in the context of online counselling.

1. Confidentiality

A major concern that is brought up frequently is the privacy issues that one may face when having an online counselling session. Concerns ranging from security and potential online intrusion into private information to the fear of being overheard, have been shown to

be a limiting factor for some clients. Some clients may not have a private area where they can receive online counselling, similarly, there is also no way to ascertain for sure that the session is not being overheard, as opposed to if they were both in a conventional counselling setting (Osborn & Trottier, 2014). Furthermore, not everyone has the privilege to access the internet or a computer, however, the problem is being addressed more effectively due to the continuous advancement of technology and our growing alliance with electronic devices (Eells et al., 2015).

2. Non-verbal communication

Face-to-face counselling relies on non-verbal clues to reveal clients' emotions, reactions, and well-being (King et al., 2021). Online counselling is difficult without nonverbal indicators. Online counselling is sometimes criticised for its inability to read non-verbal signs such body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions (Koczkodaj & Reyna, 2019). Nonverbal communication provides subtle but crucial information that words cannot. These indicators reveal a client's emotional condition, comfort level, and engagement in therapy. Nonverbal cues can be misconstrued in online therapy, because both participants may not be visible due to the communication medium.

In text-based internet counselling, written communication is easily misinterpreted. Moods, emotions, and intentions may be misinterpreted without nonverbal clues. A counsellor's inability to grasp and respond to a client's needs and experiences without non-verbal cues can impair therapy (King et al., 2021). Online counselling presents issues in generating rapport and trust due to the lack of non-verbal clues. Without physical presence, non-verbal cues can make it tougher to build a therapeutic alliance. Non-verbal interactions can build rapport and trust, but online conversations may be weakened.

Counsellors struggle to spot client distress without nonverbal indications. Missing subtle signals of underlying difficulties or emotional discomfort can lead to gaps in understanding and help. Counsellors must rely on verbal clues or explicit remarks from clients, which may not adequately reflect their experiences. Counsellors can compensate for online counselling's non-verbal communication issues. This may include explicit questioning, encouraging clients to contribute contextual information, and using video-based counselling platforms to incorporate non-verbal clues (Norcross et al., 2018). Online counselling can provide valuable support for clients without non-verbal signs thanks to technology and good therapeutic practices.

3. Professionalism Practice

Lack of online counselling training is a major issue (Smedley & Morehead, 2019; Berryhill et al., 2019; Andersson & Cuijpers, 2019; Titov et al., 2010). Counsellors may struggle to handle internet counselling's unique dynamics and problems without proper training. Technology, the lack of face-to-face interaction, and the necessity to adapt therapy procedures for online settings demand specialised expertise and training. The lack of specialised study on online counselling services makes professionalism difficult for counsellors (Smedley & Morehead, 2019). Online counsellors may struggle to deliver high-quality therapy due to a lack of detailed and evidence-based guidelines or best practices. Counsellors may struggle to adapt to clients' changing requirements without appropriate knowledge and resources.

Unprofessional or unqualified providers of similar services may also influence online counsellors' professionalism. Concerns about ethical violations and client harm occur. Online counselling is unregulated, which can endanger clients (Smedley & Morehead, 2019). Multiple ways are needed to address these limits. It involves substantial online counselling training for therapists. More study is needed to establish online counselling standards and best practises. Proper regulation and quality assurance can also ensure that only ethical and certified practitioners deliver online counselling (Smedley & Morehead, 2019). In the digital age, resolving these limits can improve counsellor skills, online counselling services, and client care.

Therapeutic Approaches in Online Counselling

1. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Online counselling is excellent for creating therapeutic rapport and crisis intervention, according to several counsellors. Since clients can use their typical setting, online counselling is less confrontational (Baker & Ray, 2011). CBT is a popular online strategy. CBT, which changes negative thought patterns and behaviours, works well online. The development of Computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (cCBT) and Electronic CBT followed (Ostrowski & Collins, 2016). Online and offline applications are possible. Self-guided, interactive computer programmes lead clients through cognitive behavioural therapy approaches and interventions without real-time therapist encounters in cCBT. cCBT incorporates real-time contacts with a therapist via video conferencing, email, instant messaging, or other technologies. Individualised therapy planning and delivery are possible with this technique (Andersson & Cuijpers, 2019). Managing mental health disorders with cCBT and eCBT is beneficial. Unlike cCBT, eCBT can be used alone or in combination with traditional therapy (Mallampalli & Carter, 2017). eCBT had a slightly greater effect size than cCBT, presumably due to its more personalised and adjustable nature (Karyotaki et al., 2018). Both treatments are popular in academia and the public.

2. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) works online too. Accepting challenging ideas and feelings helps people focus on value-driven behaviours in this therapy. Identifying values and goals and making promises to follow them helps clients who struggle with motivation and direction (Fledderus et al., 2020). It works well online because it can be arranged. Due to its versatility, ACT approaches and activities can be simply adapted for online delivery. It can be given in individual, group, or self-help modes. Online sessions with ACT are structured to keep clients and counsellors on track (Levin et al., 2020).

Online counselling can incorporate mindfulness, a key component of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT has been demonstrated to treat a wide range of mental health conditions, including stress, anxiety, PTSD, depression, and chronic pain (Kvillemo et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). A single session of online ACT-based mindfulness training decreased anxiety and increased psychological flexibility, according to a Malaysian study. Pang et al (2022) found that the intervention did not improve levels of depression, anxiety, fear of COVID-19, or mindfulness, indicating that multiple sessions may be necessary to achieve desired outcomes.

Methodology

The research design for the current study was a qualitative descriptive research design. In essence, a qualitative research design was the most appropriate for the research topic. For this study, the specific type of qualitative research design that was selected was descriptive research design. As posited by Siedlecki (2020), a descriptive research design seeks to describe the characteristics of a phenomenon under study. In the case of the current study, the phenomenon under study is online counselling. Thus, the current study is keen on ascertaining the underlying patterns of online counselling concerning the experience conducting counselling sessions in Malaysia.

A counsellor (also known as a therapist) will use psychotherapy to help clients who are experiencing mental health issues. In few situations, professionals may refer to themselves as psychotherapists. Others may call themselves a counsellor or therapist (Gifford, n.d.). Thus, in this study, the researchers used counsellor as a sample as it is also referred to a therapist who used psychotherapy approach in conducting a counselling session.

For the current study, the sampling method that was selected was convenience sampling around Klang Valley, Malaysia. This type of sampling can be described as one where the participants who are selected to take part in a study get selected because they are the ones that the researchers can easily access (Stratton, 2021). The participants are among those providers of counselling services. Thus, individuals who were not counselling service providers did not stand a chance of being included in the study.

The researchers recruited five participants to take part in the study from a pool of 15 potential participants. The other criteria for inclusion in the study were as described below: the participants had to be aged between 25 and 65, they had to be registered with Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia (LKM) as certified counsellors and be providers of counselling services/sessions through synchronous or real-time online platforms using video, audio, or chat. In addition, the participants were asked to specify their therapeutic approach, which could be either directive or nondirective. The participants needed to specify their therapeutic approach as it had a bearing on their online counselling experiences. The researcher further categorised the counsellors who took part in the study as either practitioners of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Person-Centred Counselling (PCC), or practitioners who used any other approach to counselling.

The researchers started by furnishing the potential research participants with participation information letters. This step was carried out before the interviews were conducted. The participation information letters helped inform the participants about different aspects of the study to help them decide whether they were comfortable taking part in the study. Some of the elements that were covered in the participation information letters included a summary of the scope of the study, what was expected of the participants during the interviews, and the contact details of the researcher. The researchers further informed the potential participants that the interviews would be recorded through Google Teams. All that the potential participants had to do to take part in the study was to append their signatures. As such, the ones who appended their signatures were recruited as the final participants for the study as explained in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Table of Participants

Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Technology type	Therapy Approach
1	Rohini	F	Google teams	PCC, CBT
2	Wong	F	Zoom	PCC, CBT
3	Kah	M	Zoom	Integrative, CBT
4	Kristy	F	Google teams	Integrative, CBT
5	Pearl	F	Zoom	CBT

The current study used interviews as the primary method of data collection. All interviews were conducted online via video chat using Google Teams. Each interview was set to last one hour. Using interviews as a method of data collection was appropriate for the current study as they allowed the researcher to gather adequate data from the participants on the research topic.

After gathering data by interviewing the participants, the researchers transcribed the data verbatim to ensure that no data from the interview was lost. The transcription was made from the recordings of the interviews capturing all the responses of the participants. Google Teams had been used to record the interviews.

For this study, the researchers opted to use interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Essentially, IPA is a qualitative data analysis technique that tries to understand lived experience and how the participants in a study make sense of their experiences (Love et al., 2020). This was the most suitable data analysis method for the current study as it aimed to understand the experiences and perceptions of online counsellors in Malaysia.

Results
The study sought to assess the experience of online counselling in Malaysia. To this end, the researcher interviewed five participants to get their perspective concerning their experience in so far as online counselling is concerned. Table 2 displays the superordinate and subordinate themes that were identified from the responses of the participants:

Table 2
Theme and Subordinate Theme of the findings

No.	Theme	Subordinate Theme
1	Positive Experience Conducting Online Counselling	1. Flexibility, Cost Effectiveness, and Convenience 2. Effectiveness of Online Counselling
2	Challenges Faced by the Counsellors	1. Limited Resources 2. Interference 3. Limited body language displayed 4. Limited space to establish rapport
3	Preference Approach Through Online	1. Client Choice, Person-Centred Counselling

Positive Experience Conducting Online Counselling
1. Flexibility, Cost Effectiveness, and Convenience
        The findings of this study pointed to the fact that counsellors perceived online counselling as more flexible compared to physical counselling. Interestingly, online counselling has been in existence in Malaysia for quite some time. However, as Rohini pointed out during her interview, Asians tend to believe in face-to-face connection.

> *"… But for me especially being an Asian coming from an Asian country, we believed
> in face-to-face connection being physically in a room together, right."* (Rohini)

        Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Malaysian counselors were compelled to use online counseling because of the controls put in place to stop the virus's spread. As Rohini noted, she had a difficult start after being made to provide counseling services online. She did acknowledge that things had gone more smoothly after she got the knack of online counseling, though. Perhaps more crucially, she emphasizes how flexible online counseling is, citing her own experience providing time-saving counseling services via the internet.

        Another aspect of flexibility in internet counselling is how easy it is for people to obtain counselling services. There has always been a stigma associated with mental health concerns in various regions of the world. For example, Wong emphasized that stigma around mental health and mental healthcare persists throughout Asia, not just in Malaysia. However, Wong pointed out that because people can seek mental health services online without leaving their homes, it is simpler for them to do so without fear of being stigmatized.

> *"… So that's why online when start online now they're familiar with online also. So,
> a lot person, also they ask for online counselling."* (Wong)

Janice emphasized that there are advantages to online counseling that people cannot obtain through in-person or in-person counseling. According to her, online counseling has advantages over physical counseling, including reduced expenses, greater accessibility, and better time management. Although she recognized that there are certain limitations to internet counseling, she was certain that it allows her to reach more individuals than she could compared to face-to-face counselling. She also loved that she could accomplish all of this from the comfort of her own home. Rohini has been able to serve clients from all over the world without them having to travel because internet counselling eliminates the need for logistical arrangements.

"… By the same time, I can provide more sessions to more people in a day compared to a physical session. You know, I can do it from the comfort of my own place, of course. Even if I am in my centre, I can still provide multiple sessions to multiple people from different parts of the world. Not, you know, without stressing the time or my logistics even." (Janice)

2.   *Effectiveness of Online Counselling*

Some claimed that because internet counselling eliminates the physical interaction between counsellors and clients, it is less successful than in-person counselling. However, the participants' experienced reveals that counsellors in Malaysia believe it is just as beneficial as the face-to-face counseling. During her interview, Rohini stated many aspects of internet counselling are effective as face-to-face counselling. Rohini also emphasized the effectiveness of the counselling process, which she defined as sitting with her clients in silence while enabling them to express their emotions. Based on her experience, she believed she was not obligated to provide physical support to her clients. She simply observed them in silence, and her routine remains the same whether she counsels online or with face-to-face counselling.

"… for most point, I'm just gonna sit with you in the silence and just let you feel your emotions. So, when you look at that, then it's pretty similar with online and physical."
(Rohini)

Kah provided an interesting viewpoint that contributes favourably to the discussion over the effectiveness of internet counselling. This view reveals that internet counselling is just as effective as face-to-face counselling. Based on her experiences, there are dynamics that influence the effectiveness of whatever approach an individual chooses when seeking counselling services.

"… So, chances are a person who chooses online, they tend to want to. Do this as well. So now I know that, OK, chances are that's what we can do to give them. The beneficial therapeutic experience so to speak." (Kah)

Challenges Faced by the Counsellors
Limited Resources

Even though internet counselling is gaining acceptance in Malaysia, participants' comments indicated that it has some limits when compared to face-to-face counselling. According to the responses gathered in this study, one of the primary constraints of online

counselling is the restricted resources available for counsellors to use when providing their services. According to Finlay (2019), counselling tried to help people cope better with their current situation and challenges. Counsellors must ensure that individuals have complete control over their surroundings while also analyzing how they respond to and interact with their environment. Kristy stated during the interview, the counsellors must develop creative ways to improve the effectiveness of online counselling because they are confined to verbal communication.

> *"… So, I think one that I mentioned is just the tools and resources that are available online. Then it is in person online, it's quite limited or rather you are really you know as a counsellor you already needing to find creative ways to convey something and as compared to in-person because again it's all very much verbally you can share screen and show them certain resources."* (Kristy)

As Kristy further pointed out, online counselling limits the resources that counsellors can use when dispensing their services to clients. She recounted that online counselling is restricted as counsellors can only solely rely on a simple screen between them and the clients. She argued that presence is a critical aspect of human culture and thus ought to play a significant role in the dispensation of counselling services.

> *" … Yeah. Just certain tools and resources they are not able to use very much on online already is very restricted. Yeah. The Vibe or the atmosphere created in-person as well visits online? Yeah. So, the online little bit harder when you have a screen in between, you know, two people"* (Kristy)

Pearl added to the thoughts expressed above about the limited nature of online therapy by claiming that online sessions are typically characterized by a lot of talking. According to Pearl, therapy sessions should incorporate a variety of instruments, such as arts and cards. Pearl used Google forms in her counselling sessions and provided her clients the opportunity to draw them. She also employed mind maps. As a result, the nature of her service provision lends itself well to in-person therapy sessions, which allow her to use paper and pencils.

> *"… We keep it a lot to talking, only instead of, you know, including my arts, including like cards or different stuff, tools to be used in inside session, yeah."* (Pearl)

Interference

During counselling sessions, it is always imperative for both the counsellors and the client to be fully focused to get the best out of the session. To this end, there are specific elements that counsellors need to control to ensure that the clients are not distracted. For instance, during an online counselling session, a client may be in their home and have people next to them. Under such instances, it is easy for them to be distracted as Rohini claimed in her interview. She asserted that there ought to be a certain level of attention or attentiveness, which can be quite challenging because both the clients and counsellors are just looking at screens. She, however, stated that even though online counselling sessions are prone to the clients being distracted, their effectiveness can be assured if the distractions are curbed.

"… So, there will be distractions around you. But if those can be curbed, then your session will be as effective as being in the same room together." (Rohini)

From Rohini's responses when it comes to online counselling, the dynamics are different in the sense that clients can choose to use their phones during the sessions by placing their phones out of the view of the therapist. Thus, the scope of control of therapists is limited as clients can be distracted without the therapist knowing. According to her, distractions such as ringing cell phones are retrogressive because they interrupt the rapport-building process, which is more complicated in online counselling sessions than physical sessions.

"… It is much easier to be distracted when you're in online session because you are with a laptop, you are with the phone, so you may get messages popping up or calls popping up so it can be a bit more distracting which can cut off their rapport building moment". (Rohini)

Limited Body Language Displayed

Body language is one of the most important strategies for ensuring the success of counselling or therapy sessions (Kelly, 2019). Body language is commonly utilized as a strategy to reinforce previously uttered words and to help counsellors understand how their clients feel. Based on the responses of the participants, this study reveals that counsellors regard online counselling to be limited in terms of how it accommodates body language. According to Janice, it was easier for counsellors to analyze their clients' body language in face-to-face sessions and determine whether they are paying attention. However, the same cannot be stated for online therapy sessions because counsellors have a limited view of what they can see.

"… But with an online session. You lack certain things Of course. You look at your face a lot, but you don't see what is your hands are doing. What are the legs doing? Do you see their legs, tremor or shake? Those kinds of things you lack so you don't have that much of visibility?" (Janice)

The excerpt from Janice's interview above demonstrated how difficult it is for therapists to manage body language during internet counselling sessions. For example, a client may be anxious about attending an online therapy session. Observing someone's behavior is one of the finest methods to determine anxiousness. A counsellor may take note of the client's hand placement and leg movement. Once the counsellor has determined that a client is frightened or worried by reading their body language, they can calm them down before beginning the counselling session.

In her interview, Kristy emphasized the importance of nonverbal communication in a session. According to her, clients may be fighting internal struggles that are difficult to express. As Kristy pointed out, online sessions provide counsellors with a very limited view of what they can see. The way the displaying devices are designed, the counsellors can only see the clients' heads and shoulders. There is much that counsellors could not see from this perspective. For example, counsellors could not tell what the client was doing with their hands and legs. Thus, it was difficult for them to determine whether clients were really

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engaged in the treatment session, or if they were distracted by anxiety or other activities such as reading their phones.

"… in person when you actually see the whole client and the whole body, sometimes you may notice the clients are doing something with their hands with their legs. And so, we can't really see that online." (Kristy)

Limited Space to Establish Rapport

Counsellors have to establish an emotional connection with their clients when providing counselling services. Positive emotional connection or rapport between therapists and clients is critical to the success of counselling sessions because it makes clients feel at ease (Elliot et al., 2018). Clients can only open up to the therapist after they feel comfortable. People open up to those they trust. Establishing a good rapport helps the customer feel comfortable sharing their concerns. Despite the significance of rapport in therapy sessions, counsellors struggle to build it online. Rohini stated in her interview that therapists must detect nonverbal cues in order to connect with clients, which is difficult in online counselling sessions.

"…Building rapport quickly in terms of catching bodily cues and even non-bodily queues. And just providing that comfort being in the same room together, right? With online sessions, of course, you lack those things. You lack those." (Rohini)

Rohini believed that face-to-face interactions are more effective than internet treatment sessions for creating a good relationship. She believed that a 'physical vibe' enables counsellors to discover more about their clients without asking excessive questions. This makes face-to-face sessions a better choice for clients as compared to online sessions. However, she pointed out that significant technological advancements will help elevate online counselling to the same level as in-person counselling sessions. Rohini emphasized the need to establish a positive rapport before starting any therapy session. Even though it is tough and slow to establish a good connection during online counselling sessions, Roshini believed it is possible to do so when providing therapy services online.

"… So, rapport building can be a bit of a hassle, so it may take. An extra one or two sessions perhaps? Compared to physical session." (Rohini)

Preference Approach Through Online
Client choice, Person-centred counselling

Although counselors have an idea of what their clients may require when seeking counseling services, clients may have a say in the technique they wish to use throughout their treatment sessions. Rohini's responded that counsellors might incorporate client choice into their treatment delivery. When asked what therapeutic technique she utilized when providing therapy services to her clients, Rohini stated that she employs choice theory. According to Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan (2018) choice theory emphasized the need of developing a strong internal locus of control as well as a sense of responsibility for one's actions. The goal of choice theory is to help clients gain new perspectives that will enable them to manage the issues they face on their own. As Rohini puts in, counsellors must guide clients to create solutions to their problems. However, the responsibility of suggesting solutions lies directly with the clients.

"…Alright, so you're giving the control of life back to them rather than you. You still guide them with the way you create the solutions, but you don't actually suggest any direct solutions if that makes sense." (Rohini)

According to Wong and Rohini, they used a person-centered counseling approach akin to choice theory. Person-centered therapy assumes individuals can grow and self-actualize; thus counselors assist them explore themselves. Since rapport is built between therapist and client, Wong feels person-centered therapy is ideal. This strategy relies on counselors' belief that clients are capable and know what they want. Wong solely assisted customers in self-discovery. The approach is suitable for both face-to-face and online therapy sessions. In person-centered therapy, counselors like Wong listen to the clients, give them feedback, and encourage them to improve.

"… Then just listen to them. Give them some feedback and encourage them." (Wong)

All these can be effectively and comprehensively achieved through online counselling. According to Wong, she found that customers need someone to listen to. Wong added that while internet therapy is good for self-exploration, it may not be the best for those with major mental health issues who need more professional care.

Discussion

The use of online counselling services allows counsellors to accommodate clients regardless of their physical location. The participants explained that internet counselling has expanded the number of clients who can benefit from it when compared to face-to-face sessions. This belief is because mental health is still stigmatized; as a result, many people choose to suffer in isolation rather than seek out the physically available therapeutic facilities. The findings of this study are consistent with those of other studies Corrigan & Watson (2002); Kudva et al (2020) that investigated the effects of stigma on people with mental illnesses. The study's findings showed that people with mental illnesses have issues that can be classified into two groups.

The first category addresses the challenges individuals face in managing mental health symptoms, while the second addresses challenges caused by stereotypes and prejudice. This study supports the second category, which addresses prejudice and preconceptions that lead to discrimination against individuals with mental health disorders. There are two forms of stigma experienced by individuals with mental health issues. The categories are public and self-stigma. According to Corrigan and Watson (2002), public stigma refers to the broader population's reaction to individuals with mental health issues, while self-stigma is the prejudice individuals with mental health issues face against themselves.

Positive Experience of Online Counselling

A recent study indicated that online counselling's flexibility helps mental health clients seek counseling. Clients can receive online therapy at home. They should not be ashamed for seeking mental health treatment. Online counselling is promising since it can serve greater clients and is cheaper because no physical space is needed. Participants believed online counselling is cheaper than face-to-face because it eliminates client-therapist logistics and space. Besides, it is flexible and stigma-free. However, the study reveals that clients and

counsellors also face several challenges. The findings support Kotera et al. (2021)'s claim that online therapy lacks control.

Successful counselling requires the counselor and client to establish rapport. However, counselors find it challenging to interact with clients online. According to the current study, online counselors have few resources and little control, making it difficult for them to provide services. Face-to-face counselling allows counselors to quickly establish trust and rapport with clients, which is essential for offering counselling services. However, online counsellors engage with clients entirely through a screen. Thus, the counselors must employ a variety of strategies to overcome the limits of online treatment. According to the current study, online counselling makes it more difficult for counselors to read nonverbal cues, which are critical to providing the services. The study aligns with Amos et al (2020) on undergraduates' online counselling experiences, which suggested that online counselling limits clients from reading nonverbal cues to evaluate their acceptance, limiting counselors' ability to help clients.

Thus, while online counseling has advantages, a lack of physical interaction is a major drawback. Lack of physical touch has significant effects on nonverbal communication, which is vital in counselling and contributes to the development of a therapeutic relationship between the client and the counselor (Amos et al., 2020). In face-to-face counselling sessions, counselors and clients primarily interact through nonverbal signs such as facial expressions, eye contact, and posture. Online counseling makes it difficult for counselors to read nonverbal cues, therefore misunderstandings are widespread. Counselors may have difficulty noticing anxious behaviour in online counselling, especially if the client maintains eye contact (Nagarajan, 2021). During an online counselling session, clients may write sad comments while laughing or enriching while sobbing which the counselor may fail to understand their client.

Challenges in Online Counselling

The study discovered that the lack of physical touch makes it easy for clients to lose focus and attentiveness, which are reinforced by face-to-face contact. Clients can contact their counselors for online counselling sessions from home, implying that counseling sessions are surrounded by factors that can interfere. Clients struggle to focus on online treatment sessions, according to (Weinberg, 2021). The researcher found that online therapy customers may be distracted by phone calls, emails, and other room disturbances such as other entering. Online counselling takes greater self-discipline to stay focused than face-to-face counselling, where counsellors have more control.

Participants reported that a "physical vibe" assists counsellors in understanding clients without asking several questions. However, the online counselling sessions lack this component, forcing counselors to rely only on client feedback. Clients may choose not to disclose treatment-related information. Online counselling may also take longer because they establish a new therapeutic relationship. Besides, clients and counselors must be able to use phones and computers when participating in online treatment.

Counselling Approaches

The current study revealed that a person-centered approach for clients is best because it involves them. Person-centered therapy argues that people naturally use their strengths and motivation to achieve their full potential (Renger, 2023). Counseling implies that clients

understand what is best for them, thus counsellors encourage and inspire them rather than instruct them what to do (Crisp, 2022).

Participants in the current study, as well as Smith and Gillon (2021), acknowledged the disadvantages of internet counselling yet continued to utilize it. Both studies acknowledge that the COVID-19 outbreak made face-to-face treatment sessions impractical, which may have influenced the decision to employ online counselling. Counselors had little time to learn about online therapy, therefore they battled to solve its challenges. The current study varies from Smith and Gillon (2021) in that the former's participant took a "leap of faith" by participating in online treatment sessions. More particularly, participants said they had to reassure themselves that their online therapy sessions were enough. They may have doubted online counselling's efficacy. Despite its drawbacks, the study participants considered internet therapy effective.

Conclusion

These findings revealed that counsellors reflect their experience and perception as influenced by several factors such as skill development, the use of technology, a sense of control, and personal freedom. Despite obstacles, online counselling in Malaysia is expanding. Internet counseling is limited because counselors cannot control numerous aspects. Therapeutic engagement is counselors' biggest control and success factor. Online counselors must use different methods to make online counseling as effective as face-to-face is. Participants liked online counseling for its convenience. Due to logistics, internet counselors can see more clients than face-to-face sessions. However, this study found that distractions, obstacles, and lack of control hinder online counseling. The participants' experiences indicated online counseling is as helpful as face-to-face.

Online counselling also highlighted client self-awareness. When clients are by themselves, they identify their weaknesses and strengths. Finally, the findings showed that online counsellors have to alter their skills and approaches different from what had been used in the usual face-to-face counselling process to strengthen their therapeutic session.

Assessing online counselors' experience may help construct online counselling training programs to better understand online settings, development, and practice improvement than in-person counselling. Future online counselling research should examine flexibility, self-awareness, and anxiety throughout sessions. Although the study results were positive and consistent with the previous study, developing an online counselling framework would be difficult.

This study suggests that future research should be focused on counselors' experiences during online approaches, such as the use of written language when conducting online counselling and the ethical considerations. Besides the involvement of the counsellors, the future study could also include clients' perspectives of online counselling to provide further insight into the issue.

Acknowledgement

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