The Graduate Counselling Students Experiences on Online Counselling Session During The Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
Since the covid-19 pandemic swept the globe, it has a variety of impacts, including economics, health, human psychology, and so on. In Malaysia, many people suffer from stress, excessive worry, and anxiety about their lives and futures. As a result, individuals urgently require expert help and encouragement, regardless of their physical or emotional demands. Therefore, several parties have launched new efforts, particularly in the field of guidance and counselling, by utilising technology. However, graduate counselling students find several challenges in giving guidance and counselling in an online context. The study was conducted to explore the perceptions of graduate counselling students, identify the challenges faced and examine the actions taken to overcome the challenges during online guidance and counselling sessions. This is a qualitative method and used case study research design. The researcher performed focused group for data collection by interviewing three groups counselling session with six graduate guidance and counselling students to obtain the results of the study and were examined using thematic approaches. Three themes have emerged from the study objectives based on the sessions that have been held, namely: (i) perceptions related to online guidance and counselling sessions, (ii) challenges faced during online guidance and counselling sessions and (iii) ways to overcome challenges during online guidance and counselling sessions.
Keywords: Online Guidance and Counselling, Technology, Challenges, Perceptions, Covid-19

Introduction
The covid-19 pandemic has hit the world over the past year. Various changes have taken place regardless of aspects of life, career, education and so on. The new normative lifestyle has now made the use of communication and information technology (ICT) a basic need to society. As a result, the field of guidance and counselling services went through the same thing. Online guidance and counselling services, often known as e-counselling, have been around since the 1960s, but were far less frequently used in Malaysia.

Many people were affected mentally, emotionally, and physically since the covid-19 outbreak began. The number of researches on students' mental health throughout the quarantine period rose, and most of them reported anxiety during the lockdown. They are concerned about food and money (Baloran, 2020). A study found and recommended that continuous monitoring of mental health, especially in the most vulnerable populations, and appropriate suicide prevention efforts are needed during and after the COVID-19 outbreak (Ueda & Matsubayashi, 2020).

Although the process of providing online guidance and counselling services appears to be simple, counsellors and other counselling practitioners will undoubtedly confront a number of challenges.

Hence, the objectives of this study are to:
1) explore the perceptions of graduate counselling students regarding online guidance and counselling sessions
2) identify the challenges faced during online guidance and counselling sessions
3) examine the actions taken to overcome the challenges during online guidance and counselling sessions.

Literature Review
Online counselling, as defined by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, is a type of counselling that takes place in a text-based virtual environment over the internet, either via email or chat rooms (Hall, 2004). Cyber counselling is defined by the National Board for Certified Counsellors (NBCC) as the practise of professional counselling and information delivery that happens when clients and counsellors are in separate or remote places and interact using electronic technologies over the Internet (NBCC 1997, p.1).

The procedure of a professional counsellor meeting with clients one-on-one in a remote situation via technological means has been termed as online counselling (Lau, Jaladin & Abdullah, 2013; Maples & Han, 2008). There are two types of online counselling: "synchronous" and "asynchronous." (Suler, 2011; Gamble, Boyle & Morris, 2015). The "instant" form of counselling such as WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram and the "asynchronous" form of therapy like using e-mail are both synchronous and asynchronous (Gamble et al., 2015; Lau et al., 2013).

In general, cyber counselling refers to the use of communications technologies, such as the telephone and the Internet, to link counsellors and clients who may be in various locations at the same time. Nonverbal signal loss, mistrust, and internet disruption were the key problems in online counselling services, according to Amos, Bedu-Addo & Antwi (2020) in their research of undergraduate students in Ghana. Furthermore, because the counsellor could not see the client due to a poor internet connection, the client found it difficult to explain themselves and expressed nonverbal cues.

According to Bakar, Mejah & Amat (2020), the absence of physical guidance between the counsellor and the client might lead to the absence of emotional guidance such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. It might lead to misunderstandings about the

client's feelings. Therapists may miss non-verbal signs, and there is a risk of miscommunication between the counsellor and the client (Ahmed et al., 2020).

There are a variety of problems that are unavoidable when it comes to group counselling sessions. One of the drawbacks of group counselling, according to Oramas (2017), is the sharing of confidential and personal information among group members. It is difficult to foresee how a person will think and behave, no matter how dedicated a counsellor is. Furthermore, some fake websites that can hack data are likely to pose a threat to clients' personal information confidentially (Ahmed et al., 2020). Ethical issues can be vague, hard to define, and difficult to resolve, and they can even confuse counsellors (Oramas, 2017).

Counsellors' ability to grasp students' concerns and feelings is also affected by technological media in counselling services. Students and guidance counsellors have trouble connecting to the internet, which prevents them from carrying out their tasks and responsibilities. Poor Internet connection is proved in all situations, according to studies on online learning, leading to poor student engagement (Arrieta, Valeria & Belen, 2021). According to similar research, there are various challenges to deliver distant learning, the first of which includes internet accessibility (Asio & Bayucca, 2021).

According to Grohol (1997) in (Hussin, Ahmad & Othman, 2013), The lack of nonverbal communication is one of the drawbacks of online counselling. One of the possible issues with tele-counselling services is nonverbal communication. This flaw can have a negative impact on the well-being of clients who seek online counselling services since there is a risk of misunderstandings due to the lack of nonverbal communication. (Bakar et al., 2020). These limitations will interfere with the effectiveness of the session, endangering the client's well-being, and are likely to cause the client to lose faith in the counsellor's ability to provide counselling services. Because of the shortcomings of online counselling, counsellors pay less attention to facial expressions and body language. As a result, the counselling process's dynamic evolution receives less attention (Sari, 2021).

Then there are the concerns of confidentiality and privacy to contend with. According to Sari (2021), various issues that may arise while using internet counselling should be closely monitored: Ethical problems, such as those relating to the counselling code of ethics, which counsellors and others must adhere to. Concerns regarding unethical counsellors recording discussions during therapy sessions without requesting the client's permission and agreement, then sharing the session, are examples of ethical dilemmas (Bakar et al., 2020) counsellor's lack of grasp of the client's location and environment: the use of location throughout the counselling process also helps to keep the concerns addressed confidential. The balance of internet access and information, concern for privacy (personal confidentiality), and intrusion by irresponsible parties are all issues that must be addressed in order to deal with the problem of client security and confidentiality breach (Bakar et al., 2020) and the credibility of the counsellor. Some fake websites that can steal data are likely to put clients' personal information at risk of confidentiality breaches (Ahmed et al., 2020). Clients' well-being and safety will be jeopardised if such information is exploited by a third party (Bakar et al., 2020)

Methodology

The is qualitative approach using a case study design by collecting information data from identified sources. The main purpose of this study was to learn more about the perceptions, challenges and ways to overcome challenges faced during online guidance and counselling sessions that graduate counselling students experienced during the covid-19 pandemic. As a consequence, the researcher conducted a three-session group counselling with six graduate counselling students to obtain the study's findings. The results of the study were analysed using thematic methods.

Result and Discussion

According to the findings of this study, there are three themes that result from the objective, namely: (i) perceptions related to online counselling sessions, (ii) challenges faced during online counselling sessions and (iii) ways to overcome challenges during online counselling sessions.

Perceptions Related to Online Counselling Sessions

The first theme is the perceptions related to online counselling sessions. There were 3 subthemes indicate the perceptions of graduate counselling students related to online counselling sessions during the covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the respondents shared a bit about their background and experiences in conducting online counselling sessions. The three subthemes related to their perceptions on online counselling session including, 1. awkwardness and nervousness, 2. comfort, and 3. excitement.

1. Awkwardness and Nervousness

Three respondents noted that the feelings they felt while conducting online counselling sessions were a bit awkward, yet they tried to adapt to the situation. Furthermore, while meeting someone for the first time, it is common to feel nervous. They expressed their concerns about not being able to manage the sessions smoothly.

> *"… My feelings when I am doing this online counselling session, first of all, I feel a bit awkward because usually we do it face to face. It's nice to communicate directly with clients, but when online, I felt awkward to ask more. But I tried as best as I could …. because we have to adapt to a situation like this…" (AK1)*

> *"… Mostly I felt nervous because I am not sure if I can conduct the session well. Not to mention, if the client is older or experienced…" (AK3)*

> *"… Of course, it feels awkward at first. Because I am still learning to master the guidance and counselling skills. For individual sessions, it's okay, but when it comes to group sessions, the feeling becomes more awkward mixed with nervousness. Because the group session consists of a lot of people, with different kinds of characters. It's quite challenging when trying to handle a session. But overall it's not as bad as I thought… " (AK4)*

2. Comfort

A respondent stated that the feeling of comfort while conducting online counselling sessions with adult clients.

"… Honestly, I am quite comfortable doing virtual counselling sessions depending on the type of client. If my client is an adult, I feel happy and comfortable to perform the online session because they are more understanding and easier to share…" (AK2)

3. Excitement

There were three respondents stated about being excited to conduct online counselling sessions and able to assist their clients.

"Another kind of excitement is also a reason to be able to explore new things. Others depend on the dynamics of the session. Sometimes, depending on the client response, usually the flow of the session was smooth. Sometimes I was stuck but still needed to continue the session by trying to apply the skills. After all, it is necessary to be practical to master counselling skills because our clients are human, and as a human being we are always changing, and they have their own pattern if they can detect it. In conclusion, I think I should practice more…" (AK3)

"… Is it weird if I say I feel excited when I get to do a session? Maybe it is because of this pandemic that makes us miss meeting other people. I was excited when I found out that I needed to do a guidance session with my client. It feels like I haven't seen and helped other people for a long time. Alhamdulillah, the session went smooth, although there were a few problems like the internet connection, but I understand. The client also understands that kind of situation…" (AK5)

"…I was the same. I can't wait to help people and listen to their issues. Because as we know many people are stressed, impressed by the current situation. With PDPR, WFH and so on. Maybe we see people around us can still manage their life, but there are still other people we may not notice their struggle. When there is an opportunity like this, I feel excited and eager to help even though it may not be much…" (AK6)

The overall findings revealed that awkwardness and nervousness, comfort, and excitement were among the group members' feelings and perceptions of the online sessions. Despite this, the members of the group were able to perform their counselling sessions smoothly.

Challenges faced by graduate counselling students during online counselling sessions
The second theme is the challenges faced by graduate counselling students during online counselling sessions. There were three subthemes related to the challenges, including, 1. internet access disruption, 2. the loss of non-verbal cues, and 3. the issue of confidentiality. Technology's convenience offers a number of benefits to both users and counsellors. However, there are several challenges that limit the scope of these online counselling sessions. The respondents stated that the challenges they faced were associated with the use of technology online.

1. Internet Access Disruption

Students and guidance counsellors have trouble connecting to the internet, which prevents them from carrying out their tasks and responsibilities (Arrieta S Gilbert, et al., 2021). When it came to internet access disruption, all respondents had similar issues. As a result, the session would last longer than the session's real time. They find it challenging to conduct therapeutic and conducive counselling sessions due to these constraints.

> "... The biggest issue while going online is the internet data stability, which isn't always reliable. That is the most difficult... As a result, the therapy session will not be ideal because there are so many difficulties with situations like these... " (AK1)

> "... The internet line is frequently the source of difficulties. Because if our line is fine, it's possible that the client's line isn't. Then there's the time limit. It will largely drag time and excess from the given time if it is done online. Other things or sessions will be disrupted as a result... " (AK2)

> "… In terms of challenges, the internet situation is uncertain. If the internet is not ok, the session will not go smoothly…" (AK3)

> "… When using applications such as google meet, there are internet access interruptions and other interruptions around us. So, a therapeutic and conducive counselling session is difficult to create during the session…" (AK4)

> "… The slow internet connection also makes the situation difficult. Because the client line is stuck so the sharing session is stunted and not clear…" (AK5)

> "… When a group session is being conducted, it is more challenging because in the crowd there must be at least one person who has internet problems, some even disturb other group members…" (AK6)

2. The Loss of Non-Verbal Cues

The next challenge is related to the loss of non-verbal cues. The majority of the respondents stated that they had few problems with non-verbal cues from clients. This is because non-verbal signs may be missed by the counsellor, and there is a risk of miscommunication between the counsellor and the client (Ahmed et al., 2020).

> "… This virtual session is difficult for me, because we can only see the client's face, but could not see the other part such as their body language. That's if the client switches on their camera. This will make it tough for us to grasp the client's true feelings as well as what the client has shared…" (AK2)

> "… The biggest challenge is when the client does not switch on the camera. Because facial and body language affect the process as well, because we can tell whether the client is uncomfortable in such a way so we can change. If I don't see the client, I feel like we are just talking through a phone call. But still I'll entertain them…" (AK3)

> *"… For the referred clients it is difficult to get a response from them especially during the group session. Some of them don't switch on the camera so it's hard to see their facial expression…" (AK5)*

> *"… Conducting guidance and counselling sessions in a group for the first time is tough for me since I have never seen the client before, making it more difficult to understand the client's body language." Perhaps the client is nervously gripping his hand under the table, which we are unaware of. Details like those may have a lot of significance for the client, but we don't realize it… " (AK6)*

3. The Issue of Confidentiality

The final challenge is the issue of confidentiality. The issue of confidentiality is also stressed by the respondents since it is likely that such information being exploited by other parties may harm the well-being or safety of clients (Bakar et al., 2020).

> *"… We are with clients virtually and we don't actually know who is around them. I can keep it confidential and there is a designated area throughout the session, however clients may not be aware of where they should be during the session. Therefore, what they share may be heard by others…" (AK1)*

> *"… Other obstacles in terms of the environment are also quite tough for me while conducting a counselling session… maybe those things do not come from my side alone, but the clients feel the same way." When they're sharing, their family members are often present and listening to what the client has to say. So, I'm not sure if the session met its goal or was simply a typical talk… " (AK4)*

> *"… The group counselling session was quite challenging because some of the clients referred were classmates, although they had never met face to face before but still knew each other. It may be a breach of secrecy with other people as well. There are many things to consider if you run a group session, let alone online like now…" (AK5)*

Overall, the respondents stated that the challenges faced by the group members were internet access disruption, loss of non-verbal cues and issues of confidentiality.

Ways to Overcome Challenges Faced during Online Counselling Sessions

The third theme is the ways to overcome challenges faced during online counselling sessions. The findings indicate several ways to overcome challenges during the online counselling session and were divided into three subthemes: 1. pre-session preparation, 2. develop a pleasant bond, and 3. questioning approach.

1. Pre-session preparation

Following that, the respondents evaluate the efficacy of the steps they have performed together. They took the initiative to ensure that the internet plan used was enough, as well as providing numerous methods to ensure that the online counselling sessions ran well.

> *"… First related to the internet problem, I will try my best to get a better internet plan. Therefore, I will also act more forward or make other plans with actions that can solve my problem, for example, may be able to interact via phone or email according to the permission or discretion of the client as well. For myself, I will try to make a thorough preparation and try to deepen the session as well as possible … as well as other factors that also affect this online session, to overcome may be a bit difficult but can be helped by the client. This may indirectly be the reason for the goodness of the counselling session to be conducted later…"* (AK1)

A responedent prefer to plan ahead the course of online guidance and counselling sessions. Therefore, he will get a clear picture on how the session is going to be conducted.

> *"… I plan first and list everything that I will do with the client. List out step-by-step of what I will do in the session. Regardless of individual or group sessions. It's easier for me to see how my session flow will be in that way…"* (AK6)

2. Develop a Pleasant Bond
A research found that educating mindfulness techniques, self-awareness, and communication skills for school counsellors might be beneficial (Kim & Lambie, 2018). The negotiation with the client about the session time and other circumstances is necessary.

> *"… To solve the line problem, I will discuss with the client before the session time to know if the line problem can be solved. This is because the client definitely wants to continue the session. I got a client who is willing to change lines and use WIFI just to continue the session and at the same time facilitate his activities to do work (WFH). Or discuss a suitable time to hold a session. To overcome the next challenge, I will set the conditions and discuss with the client to get approval. If the client has a lot to share that day, maybe I will listen more than ask questions. And vice versa…"* (AK2)

Therefore, two respondents mentioned that they must prepare by comprehending the topics to be discussed as well as developing a pleasant bond with the client. Anthony (2015) proposed that in order to transfer abilities learned in a face-to-face context to an online forum, education is required.

> *"… Make preparations. Understand the topic to be shared, remember counselling steps such as structuring so that the client understands the process throughout the session. After that, try to be as friendly as possible. Due to online constraints, sometimes clients do not switch on the camera, it is difficult to respond so I have to be more active in encouraging clients. Lastly, make sure the internet coverage is in good condition, otherwise it will interfere with the process…"* (AK3)

> *"… While building rapport, I attempt to be as nice as possible and ensure that my brain is more attentive to absorb sentences, utilise questioning skills, give encouragement, and other basic counselling skills..."* (AK4)

3. Questioning Approach

On the other hand, a respondent believes that in some cases, if it is connected to an internet network problem, it is difficult to solve. As a result, the respondent just maintained the session by asking questions and receiving responses from the client. Several ideas based on the availability of communicative cues have sought to explain online expressions. To compensate for the loss of nonverbal clues online, users are said to depend more on verbal communication techniques (e.g. content and language) (Walther, 1992).

> *"…If there is an internet problem, there is no solution, because different clients have different problems. Like the area where they live, sometimes it is difficult for all types of telco services to get a signal. So, if it is group counselling, I just continue. But in terms of getting the client's response, I just asked them questions. So, the session was more in the way of asking a lot of questions…"* (AK5)

Overall, all respondents shared and evaluated the effectiveness of the actions that had been taken to overcome the challenges during their respective online counselling sessions. To guarantee that the session proceeds smoothly and efficiently, they felt that thorough beginning planning and understanding coaching and counselling skills are essential.

Implications and Recommendation

Technology has had an impact on counsellor educators, and counsellor training programmes are continuing to expand their online presence (Association for Counsellor Education and Supervision [ACES], 2016; [CACREP], 2018). Situations like this need counsellors' and other counselling practitioners' preparation and adaptability to learning technologies in order to provide effective guidance and counselling services. As a result, counsellors and other counselling practitioners must be aware of the present situation, technology, and the growth of information technology and the internet network in order to enhance their competence in accordance to society demands. It's crucial to understand that legal and moral standards differ from country to country. Relevant parties should also evaluate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic so that new and open forms of services may be developed.

Finding strategies for counsellor educators to collaborate and support one another in order to unify the academic experience would promote best practises and a shared professional counselling identity (Hale & Bridges, 2020). During the recruiting phase, the counsellor and other counselling practitioners should discuss it with the client and acquire their approval before initiating a therapeutic relationship. Counsellors and other counselling practitioners will be able to elaborate on the significance of client acts and gestures as a result of this. This will also help the two sides build trust, as some clients convey their worries in nonverbal ways.

In addition, counsellors and other counselling professionals should make every effort to ensure that clients are able to genuinely express themselves online, as well as to develop a suitable network for clients to receive counselling. Not just that, counsellor can also schedule time with clients so that they may meet in person at least once or twice during their online interactions. Finally, a counsellor must grasp advanced content knowledge in order for the counselling session to be outstanding (Jasmi & Tamuri, 2008). Counsellors and other counselling practitioners must possess a high level of creative capacity as well as the ability

to read the written word as well as the many types of movement and animation used in the communication process.

Conclusion

As a result of the entire group sessions conducted with three sessions of guidance and counselling graduate students, it can be concluded that online counselling or online guidance and counselling is desirable, in addition to this COVID-19 pandemic season. These online guidance and counselling services have emerged in response to the present pandemic. This service is becoming increasingly popular among individuals who require help. However, it is undeniable that whatever is done will undoubtedly face challenges. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the perceptions of graduate counselling students, identify the challenges faced and examine the actions taken to overcome the challenges during online guidance and counselling sessions. This research is intended to benefit students studying guidance and counselling, as well as trainee counsellors, registered counsellors, and other counselling professionals.

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