

Volunteer Online Counseling during COVID-19: Insights, Practices, and Future Directions

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Abstract. This study investigated the transition to online counseling by 34 counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the gap in access to mental health services due to restrictions of in-person interactions. The research employed online questionnaires and a virtual focus group discussion to gather qualitative data, which were analyzed using thematic analysis. Counselors reported addressing various client issues, including anxiety, depression, academic challenges, suicidal ideation, and family conflicts. The primary technical challenges identified were connectivity issues, clients' lack of technological resources, and limited digital literacy. Effective online counseling was associated with active listening, adaptability, trustworthiness, and technological competence. Although valued for accessibility, convenience, and confidentiality, online counseling poses challenges, such as impersonal communication and online fatigue. The findings underscore the need for improving tele-counseling practices, particularly in overcoming technological and communication barriers, to ensure the continued growth and development of the field.

Keywords: Online counseling; COVID-19; Mental health services; Thematic analysis; Technological challenges; Tele-counseling.

1.0 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted global mental health, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups, including students (Bloom, Fletcher & Yeh, 2021). Reports indicate a surge in anxiety and mental health breakdowns, highlighting the urgent need for accessible mental health interventions. In response, the Psychology Department of Bulacan State University implemented online counseling services to address the growing demand. However, the transition to digital platforms, while necessary, introduced new challenges, such as the perceived impersonal nature of telecounseling and the complex dynamics introduced by the reliance on technology. These dual aspects of telecounseling – its potential to both facilitate and complicate mental health support – have been explored in recent studies, underscoring the need for further investigation into its effectiveness and implementation (Behrendt et al., 2021).

The pandemic has acted as a disruptive force, altering daily routines, straining family dynamics, and exacerbating financial insecurities, all of which have contributed to the heightened incidence of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders (Fisk et al., 2020). Counselors have rapidly adapted to these evolving conditions, often deploying various theoretical frameworks to maintain continuity and efficacy in online counseling sessions (Shoai, 2014; Wosik et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, common psychological issues such as fear, stress, and depression

have become increasingly prevalent during this period, raising critical questions about the efficacy of online counseling and its impact on counselors.

Existing literature offers valuable insights into the psychological effects of the pandemic and the adaptations made in counseling practices. For example, Salari et al. (2020) documented the widespread prevalence of psychological distress during the pandemic, while other studies have explored the effectiveness of online interventions in mitigating these issues. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the lived experiences and practical challenges faced by counselors engaged in online counseling, particularly in chat-based synchronous formats. Furthermore, the personal toll on both professional and para-professional counselors remains underexplored, presenting a critical gap in the literature.

This study examined the insights and practices of volunteer counselors who provided chat-based synchronous online counseling during the pandemic. Through thematic analysis, it sought to contribute to the growing literature on telecounseling by offering a nuanced understanding of its challenges and opportunities. The findings are expected to inform the development of comprehensive training programs for telecounselors, ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of online counseling practices during and beyond the pandemic.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research employed a qualitative, phenomenological and content analytic design with the use of online survey questionnaires. This consisted of semi-structured open-ended questions. A virtual focus group discussion was conducted to gather additional qualitative data which were analyzed using thematic analysis.

2.2 Research Participants

The study involved 34 mental health professionals selected from social media posts, particularly on Facebook, where they advertised their "free online counseling" services during quarantine. These participants volunteered to provide online counseling in response to the increased demand for mental health support during the pandemic despite the challenges posed by social distancing.

2.3 Research Instruments

An online survey consisting of three parts was used. Part I focused on demographic variables, capturing the profiles of the tele-counselors and their group affiliations. Part II contained semi-structured questions designed to explore the participants' experiences with online counseling during the pandemic, including preparation, session flow, technological challenges, interventions used, and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the online format. Part III involved a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted virtually with six respondents to delve deeper into the topics covered in the survey. The semi-structured questions in Part I were developed based on a literature review and the researchers' personal experiences as online counselors. Experts in the field then validated these questions, and a pilot test was conducted to assess their appropriateness.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The study's instruments were administered via Google Forms and emailed to the target participants. Due to delayed response times, the researchers had to follow up with participants over two months, ultimately receiving completed forms from 34 participants. A virtual Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted using Microsoft Teams to complement the online questionnaire. The researchers facilitated this session, which allowed participants to exchange ideas openly about the challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights they had experienced. The data gathered from the FGD enriched the initial survey findings and provided a more comprehensive analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach goes beyond merely summarizing the data by interpreting and making sense of the responses. The researchers conducted a rigorous cross-validation process to ensure the themes' objectivity and accuracy. This involved familiarizing themselves with the data through repeated readings, generating codes, and developing themes. Further deliberation among the researchers ensured that the themes were objective and appropriate.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Profile of the Respondents

Most participants are female (88%), with males constituting 12% of the sample. Regarding age distribution, the largest group (29%) falls within the 31-40 age range, followed by 23% in the 21-30 age range and 15% in the 41-50 age range. Regarding academic qualifications, the participants are ranked as follows: Rank 1 includes Registered Psychometricians and other licensed professionals, rank 2 includes Registered Guidance Counselors, rank 3 includes Registered Psychologists and Rank 4 includes Registered Social Workers. Notably, as tele-counseling is a voluntary and noble endeavor, there is significant representation from volunteers who are educators at the tertiary level (16%). It is also important to note that many participants hold multiple professional licenses.

3.2 Profile of the Group Affiliations

The affiliations of volunteer telecounselors were categorized into four main groups: government/school-based, government/community-based, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private entities. The government/school-based category, which included institutions such as the BulSU-Psych Department (4 representatives), DepEd Bulacan (1 representative), Patnubay at Sanggunian Center (1 representative), BulSU Guidance and Counseling (GC) (8 representatives), BulSU Bustos Campus (2 representatives), Marcelo Senior High School Department (1 representative), Juan Liwag Memorial High School (1 representative), Batangas State University Office of Guidance and Counseling (1 representative), CLSU Guidance Services Unit OSA (1 representative), and Kabataang Humanista (1 representative), accounted for 56% of the participants. This indicates a strong representation of government school-based institutions.

Government/community-based institutions, although fewer in number, also contributed to the tele-counseling efforts. This group included representatives from the Cavite Center for Mental Health and the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office (PSWDO), comprising 6% of the tele-counselors in the study. The results suggest a lower representation from government community-based units. NGOs also played a significant role, with organizations such as United Registered Social Workers (4 representatives), Lingap Isip (1 representative), LPU Manila Guidance and Testing Center (1 representative), Counselling and Career Center (1 representative), and ICAM Guidance Center (1 representative) collectively making up 27% of the respondents. The involvement of these non-governmental institutions highlights their critical contribution to the tele-counseling initiative. Lastly, the private sector was represented by two participants: one who did not declare their affiliation and another from Run Through on Personal Advocacy, comprising 6% of the study's participants.

In terms of staffing within the respective institutions, private and NGO-affiliated offices generally had 0-5 staff members. Government/community-based institutions typically reported having 6-10 staff members, with two participants noting staff sizes of 21-25. Six participants within the government/school-based group reported staff sizes of 11-15, while three reported having more than 25 staff members.

The tele-counselors served a diverse clientele, including students, school personnel, community members, and referred individuals. This finding underscores the essential role of these institutions and their staff in providing support and care, particularly during challenging times (Fisk et al., 2020). Regarding the online platforms utilized for tele-counseling, many tools were employed, including SMS, Messenger chats and calls, video calls, Google Meet, and Zoom. The use of multiple platforms reflects the necessity for tele-counselors to stay current with technological trends to effectively reach and engage with their clientele (Richards & Vigano, 2013).

The final aspect of the analysis focused on the types of clients served by the tele-counselors. The appended graph revealed that a significant proportion of the clients were students (83%), followed by school personnel (66%). Community members and referred individuals accounted for 46%, while 11% were others. This data illustrates the wide range of individuals who sought counseling services during the pandemic.

3.3 Insights on Online Counseling

The study provided valuable insights into the experiences of online counselors. Preparations undertaken by counselors were ranked as follows: inventory of referrals and existing cases, participation in webinars and related training, acquisition of gadgets, equipment, and technology, establishment of a conducive counseling

environment, and self-conditioning. Shoai (2014) emphasizes that the counselor's readiness is the most critical aspect of preparation.

The cases managed by the counselors were ranked in the following order: clinical issues (such as anxiety, stress, and depression), academic concerns, suicidal ideation, family issues, forensic matters, and financial or economic difficulties. These findings align with the work of Bloom, Fletcher, & Yeh, (2021) who noted that the pandemic and the shift to tele-counseling led to diverse and challenging experiences for counselors as they navigated varying mental health statuses among their clients.

The study also identified several technical barriers that impacted the tele-counseling process, including issues with connection signals and bandwidth, lack of mobile data among clients, stigma and its associated negative effects, unfamiliarity with online platforms, lack of technological knowledge, and concerns about electricity consumption. Larry (2020) corroborates these findings, noting that the adoption of telehealth often comes with significant challenges related to technology use, particularly among individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

In response to these challenges, counselors employed eclectic interventions, combining various approaches as needed, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness/meditation techniques. Sometimes, the standard counseling process was adapted to focus on immediate problem-solving, leading to solution-focused therapy. This approach is consistent with Fisk et al. (2020) assertion that counseling must be tailored to the counselor's specific needs, resourcefulness, and concern for the client.

Finally, the study highlighted several qualities that were deemed essential for effective tele-counseling: active listening and communication skills, compassion, adaptability, innovation, trustworthiness, technological literacy, and a sense of spirituality or prayerfulness. A novel insight from this study is the increasing importance of technological literacy, which complements Cherry's (2021) observation that the benefits of tele-counseling must be carefully weighed against its potential drawbacks.

3.4 Online Counseling Practices

The research examined the practices employed in online counseling across different tele-counselors. The flow and pace of sessions typically varied, ranging from a brief introduction to exploration, counseling proper, summarizing the session, and assigning homework. Some counselors conducted an assessment before the counseling session, while others proceeded from an introduction to problem identification, followed by exploration. As one volunteer tele-counselor noted,

"There is a need to establish rapport, then explore the issue at hand, proceed with the intervention proper, and if the counselee is already okay, terminate the counseling session."

The flow and pace of counseling sessions appear to adapt to the presentation and urgency of the client's issues. However, a common sequence generally emerged: building rapport and facilitating relaxation after obtaining informed consent, followed by the counseling session proper, and concluding with evaluation or synthesis. A brief introduction, combined with minimal assessment and relaxation techniques, is often employed at the beginning of the session to ensure effective and well-informed virtual counseling. This is followed by the exploration of issues, counseling proper, and, finally, evaluation, follow-ups, and homework assignments, particularly in the context of brief cognitive-behavioral therapy (Shoai, 2014).

Regarding handling privacy and confidentiality in tele-counseling, several practices were identified: securing informed consent and the counseling platform, using disclosure notes, providing a space conducive to counseling, refraining from posting or recording sessions, safeguarding passwords, maintaining discretion, and ensuring anonymity. One volunteer tele-counselor wrote,

"Through the use of informed consent, stating the complete guidelines of what the client is to expect," and "I make sure that during the session, I am in a room alone where no one can see or hear me. The same applies to my client."

These practices underscore the modest and sincere efforts of volunteer tele-counselors to provide help to clients most in need, ensuring that the counseling platform is secure and that the flow of the session is appropriate to the situation and the capabilities of the clients (Richards & Vigano, 2013).

To assess the success of counseling, several themes emerged: eliciting feedback from clients, acknowledgment of the counseling effort, client empowerment, validation of assessment results, validation with significant others, and positive evaluations from clients. Volunteer tele-counselors are crucial in empowering clients, enabling them to reflect and regain autonomy. Indeed, counseling can be effectively tailored to clients' needs, even in a virtual setting, demonstrating that the helpfulness of these efforts is beyond measure (Cherry, 2021). Volunteer respondents shared sentiments such as

"Feedback coming from clients is heart-wrenching."

"The gratefulness is there as they say, 'I am okay now,'"

"Saying, 'Now I can think on my own.'"

Volunteer counselors have made significant strides in reaching out to individuals needing support, offering a listening ear and a space to share their pressing concerns. The adjustments telecounselors make have proven effective, as clients appreciate these efforts, provide positive feedback, and attest to feeling empowered. The perceived advantages of tele-counseling were categorized into several themes.

The first theme, *Ease of Access*, highlights that tele-counseling benefits individuals in remote areas and those with physical limitations. Counselors find it a convenient option given the widespread adoption of e-Counseling or teleconsultation. One respondent emphasized that tele-counseling was favorable due to its convenience and the fact that everyone has adapted to this mode of counseling. The second theme, *Economy and Convenience*, underscores how tele-counseling transcends space, distance, and time barriers while being cost-effective. One respondent noted that it is economical and breaks down traditional barriers to accessing counseling.

The third theme, *Interactivity*, reflects the advantage of tele-counseling in reducing client shyness and facilitating more open communication. Counselors observed that the interactive nature of online sessions helps clients feel more at ease. The fourth theme, *Skill Development*, indicates that counselors have acquired new skills, such as listening via audio, which they view as a valuable addition to their practice. The fifth theme, *Contagion Safety*, points to the reduced risk of virus transmission associated with tele-counseling, making it a safer option during health crises. Finally, the theme of *Preservation of Confidentiality* reveals that counselors can maintain confidentiality effectively online, a critical aspect of the counseling process.

These insights underscore the enduring commitment of counselors, reflecting the adage "once a counselor, always a counselor," even when reaching out to those in remote areas. The recognition of tele-counseling's practicality, economy, and convenience highlights its role in making counseling more accessible and effective. The interactive nature of online counseling allows clients to open more freely, which is a significant advantage. Additionally, counselors have acknowledged developing new skills and maintaining safety and confidentiality in this format (Ahuvia et al., 2022).

The study also addresses the perceived disadvantages of online counseling, which were categorized into several themes: technology barriers, lack of personal touch, communication issues, limited time, loss of counselor's privacy, difficulties in making follow-ups, need for documentation, suitability for only mild cases, and the tendency for online fatigue.

Technology barriers were a significant concern, as noted by participants who mentioned interruptions due to poor internet connection, with one respondent stating,

"Sessions can be interrupted because of poor internet connection."

Additionally, counselors expressed a *lack of personal touch*, feeling that online counseling lacks the personal connection in face-to-face interactions, affecting the overall experience. The feedback echoed this:

"Maintaining communication during the session is lacking."

Communication issues were evident, with counselors requesting clients to restate their concerns due to buffering and choppy audio. One counselor noted,

"I must request my clients to restate their concerns as we often encounter buffering and choppy audio."

Limited time was also a concern, with comments like,

"Limited time to share stories, clients can only be accommodated depending upon the counselor's mood, and no proper observation of the client's behavior."

The loss of the counselor's privacy was another disadvantage, as clients' access to personal contact details led to unexpected communications outside of scheduled sessions. One respondent mentioned,

"Since clients know our cell phone numbers and Facebook accounts, they can text us anytime or night."

The challenge of making follow-ups was also highlighted, with counselors expressing frustration about clients disappearing without a trace,

"Sometimes they would just disappear, and we no longer know what happened to them."

The need for documentation was another issue, with the additional burden of recording conversations due to the chat format, as noted,

"Most conversations are recorded because the conversations are through chat."

Online counseling was perceived as suitable for only mild cases, with difficulties handling severe mental health disorders and the need for collaboration with parents or caregivers. One counselor commented,

"Difficult to handle severe cases of mental health disorders; we need the collaboration of the parents," emphasizing the limitations of virtual settings.

Lastly, the tendency for online fatigue was acknowledged, with counselors noting that online sessions can be exhausting for both parties. As one respondent observed,

"Online fatigue cannot be avoided on both ends; it is tiring and exhausting."

These insights reveal that tele-counselors are acutely aware of the limitations and challenges associated with online counseling. Despite their efforts, achieving perfection remains elusive due to these constraints. Counselors must accept the reality of these limitations and strive to provide the best possible support given the available time and technology (Richards & Vigano, 2013).

The final problem examined the potential areas for training as suggested by the volunteer tele-counselors, which included e-counseling techniques, psychotherapy methods, help-seeking tools, and the care and management of tele-counseling.

3.5 Focus Group Discussion Proceedings

The FGD produced themes that were valuable in augmenting the data for the study. The themes refer to volunteer online counselors' challenges encountered, coping ways, and insights. On challenges, themes revolve around signal issues, loss of momentum, distractions during sessions, lack of privacy, insufficient time in counseling, nocturnal counselees, presenting urgency of the need for counseling, load issues, and concerns for parameters and limits. In terms of coping ways, themes revolve around patience with technology, exploration of platforms, crying

out, sharing with fellow counselors, preparing well, referrals, and posting available time for tele-counseling. Finally, insights revolve around the following themes: helpfulness of telecounseling, development of multitasking ability, opportunity for team counseling, need for reflections and self-care, call for commitment, need to upgrade competencies, capturing the opportunity for daily counseling.

4.0 Conclusion

The study confirms the significant role that online counseling has played during the pandemic, highlighting both its impact and the challenges faced by online counselors. The data indicates that online counseling addressed a range of issues, including clinical conditions such as anxiety, stress, and depression, as well as academic difficulties, suicidal ideation, family issues, forensic matters, and financial concerns. Technical barriers, such as connection signal and bandwidth issues, lack of client access to necessary technology, stigma, and electricity consumption challenges, were notable obstacles encountered during sessions.

Despite these challenges, certain qualities emerged as particularly beneficial for effective tele-counseling. These included active listening, strong communication skills, compassion, adaptability, innovation, trustworthiness, technological literacy, and prayerfulness. The perceived advantages of online counseling included ease of access, cost-effectiveness, convenience, interactional safety, and confidentiality. Conversely, the perceived disadvantages encompassed technological barriers, impersonal interactions, communication difficulties, concerns about sincerity, uncertainty, documentation requirements, limited session time, suitability for only mild cases, online fatigue, and loss of counselor privacy.

The pandemic has exacerbated anxiety and related disorders within communities, underscoring the crucial role of volunteers who adapted to technological challenges to provide support. Theoretical frameworks, such as those proposed by Behrendt et al. (2021), suggest that counseling promotes process quality by facilitating the processing of thoughts that hinder well-being, thereby fostering enlightenment and deeper reflection.

The insights and challenges experienced by tele-counselors offer valuable lessons that can be applied to future counseling endeavors. Skills developed during the pandemic, such as ensuring network stability, managing signal issues, and applying psychotherapeutic exercises online, have potential utility beyond the pandemic context. Future research should explore possible moderating and mediating factors influencing counseling success across different cohorts and situations. The results of this study are promising, demonstrating a growing interest in online counseling as a viable modality within the mental health field, both during and beyond the pandemic.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

The authors were guided by the project lead, who facilitated the proposal's conceptualization and submission to the university's Research Management Office for approval. Upon notice to proceed, full-blast literature mapping was conducted, and validation of the questionnaires was completed. The team helped well in the data collection and management. A parallel activity was conducted that offered learning support to select volunteers conducting Tele counseling. Upon completing the study, this was presented to the university colloquium.

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7.0 Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in submitting and publishing this research endeavor.

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