

E-Counselling: The Intention, Motivation and Deterrent among School Counsellors

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Abstract Internet technologies are rapidly changing our lives, so school counsellors are now facing challenges to provide innovative ways in order to support students in their preferred communication mode. This study sought to understand the perception of school counsellors towards *e*-counselling on (1) their intention to use *e*-counselling; (2) the motivators for them to offer *e*-counselling; and (3) the deterrent factors from offering *e*-counselling. 66 school counsellors completed this online survey. All had online communication experience with their students. Counsellors showed positive intention to apply *e*-counselling in schools only when *e*-counselling facilities were provided. Lack of competence in technical skill seemed to outweigh their intention to use *e*-counselling. Appropriate professional development, technical training and the practice-based research in school comparing effectiveness of *e*-counselling and face-to-face were the leading three motivators for school counsellors to use *e*-counselling. Fear of miscommunication due to unfamiliar online language, lack of professional development and technical skill training, lacks of technical resources were the key deterrents that deter their intention to offer to *e*-counselling. The major contribution from this study indicated that school counsellors were receptive to offer *e*-counselling in school with the conditions that they were given adequate and appropriate professional development, technical trainings and *e*-counselling facilities.

Keywords Perceptions, School Counsellors, E-Counselling

1. Introduction

Internet technologies are rapidly changing our lives especially the pattern of how we communicate with one other. It has become a major part of the lives of some young people who spent a large amount of time using social

media to communicate with friends and family (Mesch, 2012; Campbell & Colmar, 2014). In Malaysia, those aged below 20 years old spent 6.7 hours daily online (Malaysia Communication Multimedia Commission, 2018), which is more than one quarter of their time online chatting, gaming, shopping and sourcing for information (National Health and Morbidity Survey 'NHMS', 2017).

With this phenomenon, school counsellors are now facing challenges to provide innovative ways in order to support students in their preferred communication mode. It is necessary for school counsellors to incorporate technology such as *e*-counselling into their counselling modalities so as to maximize the effectiveness of their role especially with the high penetration of Internet usage among students (Kok, 2016, Cipolletta, & Mocellin, 2017).

E-counseling is also known as online counselling, cyber-therapy, and e-therapy (Richards & Viganó, 2013), is defined as delivery of therapeutic interventions where communication between a trained professional counsellor and client are through online technologies at two different locations, without meeting face-to-face. (Richard & Viganó, 2012; Zainudin & Yusop, 2018). Traditionally, counselling relationship in school is through face-to-face communications pattern (Wilczenski, & Coomey, 2006; Teh, Acosta, Hechanova, Garabiles, & Alianan Jr, 2014). With the robust of Internet, *e*-counselling is expected to grow.

School counsellors were receptive towards *e*-counselling as an additional method of counselling (Glasheen et al., 2013; Kok, 2015; Teh et al., 2014), especially when their time in schools was stretched and the demand for counselling from students was increasing (Kit, Teo, Tan & Park, 2017; Teh et al., 2014). The benefits of *e*-counselling practice allowed school counsellors handle students' issue at their convenient as there are no time restriction, space and distance concerns (Paterson, Laajala, & Lehtelä 2017). Moreover, accessibility is made easy nowadays as long as there is Internet access for counsellors and clients

(Zainudin & Yusop, 2018).

The disinhibition effect in *e*-counselling helps clients to eliminate their counselling stigmatizing problems, thus more receptive to counselling (Bambling, King, Reid & Wegner, 2008; Cook & Doyle, 2002; Gatti et al., 2016; Suler, 2004). Clients felt less intimidated and safer to discuss without the presence of counsellors (Mishna, Bogo & Sawyer, 2012, Beidoğlu, Dinçyürek, & Akıntuğ, 2015; Glasheen, Campbell and Shochet, 2015).

However, another school argued that the optimism to practice *e*-counselling may not have much evidence of effectiveness (Cook & Doyle 2002; Zamani, Nasir & Yusop, 2010). The skepticism was mainly on the absence of body language or non-verbal cues that resulted in the missing elements of genuine and empathy which are vital in counselling session (Bambling et al., 2008; Sobella, Poynton & Isaac, 2010; Beidoğlu et al., 2015).

Furthermore, school counsellors expressed their concerns on lack of confidence in technological knowledge and skills (Steele, Jacokes & Stone, 2014; Fang, Tarshis, McInroy & Mishna, 2017). School counsellors found that keeping up with technical knowledge on learning new software, operational procedures and managing administrative issues posed challenges to them (Fang et al., 2017; Glasheen et al., 2013).

The perception towards *e*-counselling was often affected negatively when there is inadequate training and professional development. School counsellors felt less competence in their skill without constant update on the latest in online world and emerging online problems (Anthony, 2015). Besides, these trainings have to be appropriate and on-going as the online culture is dynamic and fast evolving (2015).

Additionally, barrier in online language between school counsellors and students become an obstacle for school counsellors to practise *e*-counselling (Haberstroh, 2010, Harrad & Banks, 2016). The fear of miscommunication, misunderstanding and misinterpreting all the abbreviated texts and emoticons used is a valid worry among school counsellors (Callahan & Inckle, 2012). This is because counselling relationship would easily affect, if not jeopardized, with misunderstanding of communication (Bambling et al., 2008).

There seemed to be a broken connection between the required services with the current upsurge information technology trend. Therefore, school counsellors should adjust and adopt this advanced tool in order to meet the needs of *e*-counselling (Gatti, Brivio & Calciano, 2016; Kok, 2016; Zainudin & Yusop, 2018).

Despite the increasing demand on *e*-counselling services by students, research on the perception of school counsellors towards *e*-counselling was limited. This study aimed to understand the perception of school counsellors towards *e*-counselling in Malaysia on (1) their intention to use *e*-counselling; (2) the motivators for them to offer

e-counselling; and (3) the deterrent factors from offering *e*-counselling

2. Objectives

The objective of this study is to identify factors that affect the perceptions of school counsellors in adopting *e*-counselling, and to identify what are the possible motivators for offering the service and barriers that inhibit their use. This study sought to understand the perception of school counsellors towards *e*-counselling on (1) their intention to use *e*-counselling; (2) the motivators for them to offer *e*-counselling; and (3) the deterrent factors from offering *e*-counselling.

3. Methodology

The research study incorporated a descriptive survey design with school counsellors in one of the district in Selangor, Malaysia. The questionnaires contained total of seven demographic questions and 34 items measured by 5-point Likert type scale.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections as follows: demographic information, counsellors' intention to use *e*-counselling (Glasheen, Campbell & Shochet, 2013), motivators for school counsellors to use *e*-counselling (Hennigan & Goss, 2016), and factors that deter counsellors from using online counselling (Hennigan & Goss, 2016). Permissions had been granted from authors for the use of instruments.

Besides descriptive analysis, Pearson correlation coefficient was used to see the relationships between the various categorical dependent variables. Demographic variables included gender, age, level of education, years of experience, status of counsellors' registration, type of schools in and experience of online technology with students, were used to identify the relationship against the categorical variable.

4. Results

Demographic characteristics of school counsellors

A total of 66 school counsellors responded to this survey. The demographic details that collected entailed gender, age range, highest level of education, years of experience as school counsellor, status of counsellor's registration, type of government schools (primary, secondary, national type and religion schools) and experiences of using online technology with students. Respondents were predominantly female at 83% ($n=55$) and 17% ($n=11$) were male. The ratio for this study has a slightly higher female

dominated response. This skew mirrored to the gender distribution of teaching profession in Malaysia, which has a ratio of 70:30 for female and male (Malaysia Education Statistics' Quick Fact 2018).

59% ($n=39$) was from age range of 30 to 39 years. Both 40 to 49 years, and 50 years old and above recorded 17% ($n=11$) respectively. 74% ($n=49$) was degree holder with 60% ($n=40$) has more than 10 year experience. 55% ($n=36$) of total respondents were registered counsellors. It was very encouraging to know that 95% ($n=61$) of respondents had either email or chat or both usage experiences with students.

Counsellors' intention to use e-counseling

For section three on 'Counsellors' intention to use e-counseling' (see Table 1), 65% ($n=43$) indicated a positive intention to use e-counseling when facilities were made available in school; 54% ($n=36$) believed it was an effective counselling tools and only 51% ($n=34$) would be confident with a secure chat room to counsel. Only 45% ($n=30$), less than half has confidence in their technical skill to provide e-counseling services. Overall the standard

deviations were close to normal distribution.

Main motivators to work therapeutically online with students

Section two on 'Main motivators to work therapeutically online with students (see Table 2), showed an average of 77% ($n=51$) respondents giving positive statements for each item, except question on 'Financial reward' that was less agreeable at 41% ($n=27$). This statement was less applicable in Malaysia school context.

The leading motivators for school counsellors to use e-counseling were 91% ($n=60$) in favour of availability of technical equipment; 80% ($n=53$) showed positive attitude toward practice based research that was comparing e-counseling and face-to-face help; 79% ($n=52$) would practice if there were evidence of reaching students that may have psychological barriers easier compared to accessing face-to-face help and demand from students that e-counseling would make accessing the service easier.

Similar to section three, no significant correlation was found within the all the demographic variables against the summed single scale score of section four.

Table 1. Section 3 - Counsellors' intention to use e-counseling

Item	SA or A		SD or D		NE		M	SD
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>		
If e-counseling facilities were available in my school I would use them	65.1	43	15.2	10	18.6	12	3.64	1.01
E-counseling would be an effective way to counsel students.	54.5	36	18.2	12	27.7	18	3.49	0.95
I would be confident that a secure chat room would be a suitable place to counsel students.	51.5	34	28.8	19	20.0	13	2.91	1.09
I have the required technical skills to provide e-counseling in my school.	45.5	30	36.4	24	21.2	14	2.95	1.01

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; NE=Neither; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree. Percentage may not total 100 due to rounding

Table 2. Section 4 - Main motivators for school counsellors to work therapeutically online with students

Item	SA or A		D or SD		NE		M	SD
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>		
Availability of e-counseling training for school counsellors.	87.8	58	3.0	2	7.5	5	4.27	0.67
Financial Reward.	40.9	27	18.2	12	40.9	27	3.37	1.05
Availability of technical equipment and support.	90.9	60	7.6	5	1.5	1	4.43	0.71
Evidence of reaching students that may have psychological barriers to accessing face-to-face help	78.8	52	3.0	2	18.2	12	4.11	0.87
Practice based research in schools comparing online with face-to-face working.	80.3	53	1.5	1	18.2	12	4.18	0.79
Evidence of demand from students that it would make accessing the service easier for them.	78.8	52	9.1	6	12.1	8	4.03	0.92
Evidence of cost effectiveness.	74.2	49	6.1	4	19.6	13	4.00	0.88
Evidenced efficacy of email or other e-counseling	77.2	51	3.0	2	19.6	13	4.09	0.82
Support from principals	78.8	52	9.1	6	12.1	8	4.15	0.85

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; NE=Neither; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree. Percentage may not total 100 due to rounding

Main deterrent factors from offering e-counseling in school

For section five on ‘Main deterrent factors from offering e-counseling in school (see Table 3), at least 83.3% respondents agreed or strongly agreed all the deterrents which were impact of absence of body language; lack of own technical skill; lack of conviction of effective results; quality of therapeutic relationship; accountability of written communication; lack of specific training in e-counseling; and professional development; concern of risk of clients requiring urgent help; fear of miscommunication due to unfamiliar with students’ online language; lack of technical or other resources and lack of time boundaries. The lowest score in this section was on question of ‘Issues around confidentiality’ which was at 80.3% (n=53). In short, all respondents agreed quite strongly to each of the deterrent item that would hinder them from practicing *e-counseling*.

The fear of miscommunication due to unfamiliar with students’ online language topped at 90.1% (n=60%). Lack of professional development training and technical

resources scored at 89.4% (n=59) respectively.

This could indicate school counsellors still lack of confidence to carry out their *e-counseling* task and without adequate technical support. It was noteworthy to know that 88% (n=58) school counsellors were concern on the risk of managing urgent help online and its therapeutic effect.

A statistically significant correlation was shown in this section between type of schools and deterrent at $p = .015$. Strong concerns on these deterrent factors were likely come from 86% of the secondary schools counsellors in this survey.

Cross sectional analysis

The correlation between intention to use e-counseling and motivator was statistically significant with $p < .005$. Relationship between the deterrents factor and intention to use e-counseling indicated at $p < .045$, which was statistically proven significant. However, there was no indication on level of significance between motivator and factor of deterrents, which reflected that both were independent of each other (see Table 4).

Table 3. Section 5 - Main deterrent factors from offering e-counseling in school

Item	SA or A		D or SD		NE		M	SD
	%	n	%	n	%	N		
Impact of absence of body language	86.4	57	9.1	6	6.1	4	4.22	0.82
Issues around confidentiality	80.3	53	9.1	6	10.6	7	4.09	0.93
Lack of own technical skills.	83.3	55	10.6	7	6.1	4	3.98	0.98
Lack of conviction of effective results	84.8	56	13.6	9	1.5	1	3.98	0.98
Quality of therapeutic relationship	87.8	58	9.1	6	3.0	2	4.15	0.92
Accountability of written communication	84.8	56	9.1	6	4.5	3	4.06	0.79
Lack of specific training in e-counseling and professional development	89.4	59	3.0	2	7.6	5	4.23	0.72
Concern of risk of clients requiring urgent help.	87.9	58	3.0	2	9.1	6	4.29	0.70
Fear of miscommunication due to unfamiliar with students’ online language	90.1	60	4.5	3	4.5	3	4.29	0.76
Lack of technical or other resources.	89.4	59	4.5	3	6.1	4	4.17	0.74
Lack of time boundaries	86.4	57	6.1	4	7.6	5	4.11	0.79

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; NE=Neither;D=Disagree;SD=Strongly Disagree. Percentage may not total 100 due to rounding

Table 4. Pearson Correlation of Three Main Sections of the Perception of School Counsellors Towards e-counseling

		Intention to use e-counseling	Motivators	Deterrents
Section 3: Intention to use e-counseling	Correlation	1	.343**	-0.249*
	Sig.		.003	.023
Section 4: Motivator	Correlation	.343**	1	.157
	Sig.	.003		.106
Section 5: Deterrents	Correlation	-0.249*	.157	1
	Sig.	.023	.106	

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

It was interesting to note that female counsellors reflected level of statistical significance between motivators to provide e-counseling and intention to use e-counseling at $p=.0004$. A statistically significant relationship registered for 30 - 39 years old at $p=.047$ between intention to use e-counseling and motivators for school counsellors to work therapeutically online with students.

Another statistically significant was also showed between motivator and factor of deterrents at $p=.001$ for 30 – 39 years old group. School counsellors with 10 – 15 years of school counselling experiences also indicated a high level of statistical significance between intention to use e-counseling and motivators at $p = .019$. This group was also had a statistical significance of $p = .013$ between factors of deterrents and motivator.

5. Discussion

The results of this study showed an insight on the perceptions of school counsellors towards the use of *e-counseling*. This study revealed that the intention to use *e-counseling* was predominantly affected by the competency in technical skill and *e-counseling* skill training. It is not surprising that more than half of respondent acknowledged their lack of confidence in technical competence in providing *e-counseling* as evidenced in other discussions (Glasheen et al., 2013; Steele et al., 2014). Timely and regular training in technology would definitely help to enhance their confidence level to use *e-counseling* (Sabella, Poynton & Isaacs, 2010; Steele et al., 2014).

In addition to that, school counsellors were more comfortable with availability of *e-counseling* equipment and chatroom to render their *e-counseling* services. Schools' additional infrastructures primarily came from decision by school principals (Glasheen, et.al, 2017). Therefore, principals played a vital role in providing not only on *e-counseling* facilities but also sending school counsellors to appropriate professional development and technical trainings to empower them in their overall skill (Othman, 2000; Anthony, 2015; Steele et al., 2014; Hennigan & Goss, 2016; O' Dea et al., 2017). Past studies indicated that adequate professional development was the key to overcome the barrier in applying *e-counseling* in schools (Glasheen et al., 2013; Finn & Barak, 2010; Hennigan and Goss, 2016).

Unlike some studies reported that school counsellors were skeptical about the effectiveness of e-counseling (Sabella et al., 2010; Glasheen et al., 2013 & 2015), more than half of the school counsellors in this study expressed their belief in the effective of *e-counseling*. The results were in line with some studies in Malaysia that school counsellors acknowledged the effectiveness of *e-counseling* (Zamani et al., 2010; Salleh et al, 2015)

Majority of them experienced the efficacy of emails or other method of *e-counseling* besides face-to-face counselling. As discussed in past studies, effectiveness was benchmarked against students' responses that were more honest and authentic due to anonymity and 'safe' environment, accelerated speed of disclosure thus allowing crux of the issues revealed faster (Glasheen et al., 2009; Baker and Ray, 2011; Salleh et al., 2015).

Almost all (90%) viewed that they needed technical equipment to enhance their *e-counseling* role. This is likely due to the fact that not all counselling and guidance units in Malaysia schools are appropriately equipped with required Internet technology (Othman, 2000). This inclination implied that support from ministry level or school-specific such as principals is essential. Almost 80% of the school counsellors in this survey viewed principals as a motivator to offer *e-counseling* service as school principals could determine such practice for implementation and financial support (Glasheen et al., 2017; Kok & Low, 2017). Online communication technologies with latest hardware and software are deemed important to support *e-counseling*.

Despite various views on the effectiveness of e-counseling, it actually opens more opportunities for school counsellors to reach students in their IT-savvy culture (Zamani et al., 2010; Kok, 2016; Teh & Acosta, 2014). Demand on *e-counseling* from students reflected that students were keener to seek counselling help online than face-to-face counselling due to stigma issues (Fang et al., 2017; Zainudin & Yusop, 2018). Studies had reported that many young people with issues would not approach for help if online help were not made available to them (Dowling & Rickwood, 2014; Glasheen & Campbell, 2009; Glasheen et al., 2015). Therefore, *e-counseling* provides a platform for anonymity and a safe environment that allows more students to be connected, reached and counselled (Bambling et al., 2008; Harrad & Banks, 2016; Hanley et al., 2017).

While motivating factors could encourage higher use of *e-counseling*, there were critical factors that would deter school counsellors to render their *e-counseling* services. It was interesting to find that at least 80% ($n=53$) of school counsellors in this survey agreed or strongly agreed with the concerns on absence of body language, confidentiality, lack of technical skill, lack of conviction of effective results, quality of the therapeutic relationship, accountability on written communication, lack of trainings, risk of clients requiring urgent help, fear of miscommunication due to unfamiliar with online language, lack of technical resources and lack of time boundaries.

Top key deterrent that hinder school counsellors from offering *e-counseling* was the fear of miscommunication due to the gap with students' online language (90%). Familiarity of online language posed challenges for school counsellors. School counsellors had to constantly keep themselves updated with the online communication culture to reduce unnecessary miscommunication (Harrad & Bank,

2014; Hennigan & Goss, 2016; Fang et al., 2017).

Lack of technical resources and professional development were another critical factor in offering *e-counseling*. 91% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed to these two factors. This matched with the top preferred motivating factor. The availability of *e-counseling* facilities would encourage implementation of *e-counseling*. Conversely, the unavailability would discourage the use of *e-counseling*. Studies had highlighted that the need to connect with students, bridging the communication gap through their online culture (Sabella et al., 2010; Steele et al., 2014; Demers & Sullivan, 2014).

Another concern was the ability to respond to students' urgent help online. 88% showed viewed that as a challenge to manage urgent or emergency cases. School counsellors needed training to enhance their confidence in accurate assessment without body language, provide clear communication on alternative contacts for emergency cases after service hour (Steele et al., 2014).

School counsellors (86%) were worried about lack of time boundaries as they were a misconception that more time would be taken up in addition to their already heavy workload. This contributed to their reluctance and unwillingness to add this modality into their practice (Low et al, 2014; O' Dea et al., 2017; Glasheen et al., 2017). Online process can be controlled just like face-to-face counselling hours in school based on the needs (2017). School counsellors can allocate their time accordingly without additional work hours.

While writing is seen as therapeutic and can accelerate self-disclosure (Barak et al, 2008, Walker in Lau et al., 2013), 85% found less confidence in the accountability of their writing. Some school counselors viewed that as a burden to them since the chat responses in writing require careful thinking (Fang et al, 2017). It is notable that frustration may happen for school counsellors who are not good in writing (Haberstroh, 2010).

There was two contradictory area emerged in this survey. The results on intention of school counsellor to use *e-counseling* indicated a belief in the effectiveness of e-counseling for therapeutic relationship and yet 85% supported the lack of conviction of effective results in *e-counseling* at the same time. Doubt over the effectiveness would never create a healthy counselling alliance or therapeutic relationship. Thus, these two areas should be further examined.

In term of demographic profile of this survey, they was not much significant findings except female counsellors were more motivated to use *e-counseling* and those aged 30 – 39 years who made up 58% of total respondents, had a positive perception towards e-counseling in terms of intention to use coupled with motivating factors.

The result of this study showed that intention to use *e-counseling* was highly influenced by motivators and deterrents factors that would eventually determine their intention, It is obviously that school counsellors require

constant training and support to fully equip them to manage their *e-counseling* effectively and efficiently.

The authors suggested that professional development, technical skill trainings are extremely important to empower school counsellors and enhance their competency in order to confidently put *e-counseling* into practice. These trainings will help school counsellors to address their concerns, improve their skills and provide best practice for reference. It is also important to ensure schools are equipped with appropriate and latest online technology equipment to maximize their practice.

6. Limitation

This study is limited on the inferences in only one district in Selangor. Sample size is relatively small with a gender skewed. Therefore, possibility of biases could potentially affect the results. As such, the results of this study cannot be generalized.

Future research should have a larger sample size with wider coverage for a better representation to the population.

7. Conclusions

Instill competency and confidence in their *e-counseling* and technical skill are the key to encourage and propagate the use of *e-counseling* among school counsellors. These trainings, at continuous manner, will not only enhance the confidence of school counsellor in *e-counseling* but also address their concerns from time to time, giving school counsellors the needed comfortable level and support to implement this modality effectively so as to reach more students who are in need in their Internet world.

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