



Atebubu college of education students experiences with online counselling

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Abstract

Counselling is an age-old practice with roots dating back to the 20th century. The twenty-first century's technological boom has created new alternatives for counselling practice, allowing clients and counsellors to communicate online without needing face-to-face conversations. This study aimed to investigate students' experiences with online counselling at Atebubu College of Education. A qualitative phenomenological technique explored college of education students' experiences with online counselling. Five student clients communicated via WhatsApp messaging, two via email, and one via WhatsApp video. Respondents were assigned codes to organise the reoccurring themes retrieved from the data. Each participant received a code us: SC1 through SC8 (SC1= WhatsApp video, SC2 and SC3= email and SC4 to SC8 = WhatsApp messaging). The experiences of the student clients were analysed using a thematic approach. The study showed that convenience, accessibility, mobility, and privacy were all major benefits of online counselling. In contrast, mistrust, lack of nonverbal clues, and poor internet access were significant challenges in accessing online counselling. However, their issues were resolved via the use of online counselling. It was recommended that counsellors be trained in using online resources for counselling, and the College of Education's administration can introduce counselling technology devices to learners to make online counselling convenient and accessible.

Keywords: Technology, online counselling, nonverbal cues, face-to-face counselling

Introduction

Counselling is a vital profession that has had numerous effects and has evolved in diverse ways in the twenty-first century. Counselling has grown in popularity since it has enhanced people's lives. It has helped people comprehend themselves, sustain positive relationships, and develop effective communication and interpersonal skills (Adu, 2022) ^[1]. The evolution of counselling may be traced back to the founding of guidance associations in the 1950s, the strengthening of school guidance programmes, and the training of school counsellors in the U.S. (Adu & Nimo, 2023 ^[2, 3]; Buku, 2016) ^[8]. Counselling expanded into settings such as schools, hospitals, communities, and colleges during the 1960s and 1970s. The licensure movement involved counselling in the 1980s and 1990s and helped increase professionalism by establishing standards and guidelines of practice. In the 21st century, globalisation and technology have changed the profession by creating online counselling and multiculturalism (Kolog, 2014) ^[21]. Because of this globalisation, counselling has expanded to many areas, including sports and leisure, management of stress, career counselling, academic counselling, and community and geriatric mental health. All these sources came from technology and globalisation. This is because the world has a massive association with problems, and technology is frequently employed to speed up processes; consequently, many issues will be solved in less time. Information and communication technology (ICT) is progressively assisting in transforming people's lives in unexpected ways. ICT is streamlining innovation and revolutionising public service delivery; counselling is not an exclusion. ICTs have grown prominent in that e-health interventions are effective at dealing with health issues; approximately four out of every five internet users report requesting counselling on their health issues online (Remley & Herlihy, 2020) ^[31].

Although online counselling is becoming more popular, professionals have expressed concerns about the legal and moral standards of delivering care (American Counselling Association, 2014), while those who oppose most things technologically wonder how successful this approach is when compared to traditional face-to-face counselling. (Wang *et al.*, 2010) ^[38]. Similarly, other experts hesitate to adopt ICTs because of fear of change and lack of understanding. Surprisingly, both the scientific community and the counselling profession in industrialised countries such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom have consistently maintained that, while exclusive (using technological means), online therapy is just as effective as face-to-face counselling is (Barak & Grohol, 2011).

Review of the Literature

Employing ICT has provided opportunities for communication (Wang *et al.*, 2010) ^[38]. Online counselling has aided counsellors in supporting clients via text messaging, Zoom sessions, online chats, phone calls, and email, helping clients with mental wellness (Adu & Srivastava, 2023) ^[2, 3]. Clients can discuss problems with counsellors in confidential and convenient settings without physically seeing the counsellor. As a result, online counselling and computers have simplified the work of counsellors who always arrange appointments to communicate with clients face-to-face and lessened the workload of clients who must travel to meet their counsellors. This has enhanced the counselling profession and improved performance (Amos *et al.*, 2020) ^[5]. The traditional method of face-to-face counselling is now considered extremely practical, vigorous and accessible. A professional counsellor talking with a client one-on-one through electronic means in a remote situation is called online counselling (Adu & Srivastava, 2023) ^[2, 3]. Online counselling falls into two categories. They operate in

asynchronous and synchronous modes (Gamble *et al.*, 2015)^[17]. Asynchronous forms of counselling are time-delayed (email), but synchronous forms are immediate; that is, communications are transmitted in real time (Viber, WhatsApp, video chats) (Suler, 2011)^[37].

Traditional face-to-face counselling is similar to video conferencing in that it involves the counsellor communicating with the client face-to-face (Suler 2011)^[37]. In video conferencing, the images and voices of the people engaged in communication are conveyed over significant distances, and all of these operations are carried out by electronic means due to their essential nature. Gamble *et al.* (2015)^[17] argued that video conferencing could be applied in our educational system for online lectures and distance learning for students and professors without excluding its critical application in counselling.

There are various advantages to using online counselling. Mishna *et al.* (2015)^[28] argued that clients find it easier to discuss themselves with therapists electronically than face-to-face. This is because basic demographic data such as age, sex, and name may be concealed. Other research shows that clients' honesty may improve; additionally, they may feel less vulnerable, defensive, and fearless (Maples & Han, 2008)^[27]. This is because they cannot see the counsellor during encounters. They also do not have to struggle with and interpret the therapist's instant emotional feedback signals, which might alter emotions and delivery (Kotsopoulou *et al.*, 2015)^[23].

Anonymity online counselling is provided when clients establish a new email account with no link that might be used to determine whether their names may be beneficial. Clients' anonymity boosts their confidence, minimises stigma, and alleviates their pain when interacting with counsellors about their issues (Manhal-Baugus, 2001)^[26]. The anonymity of online counselling could also decrease clients' anxiety and stress (Mishna *et al.*, 2015)^[28]. Based on the discussions around anonymity, it was determined that anonymity may be advantageous for clients suffering from rape and abuse who are afraid of being judged (Kotsopoulou *et al.*, 2015)^[23]. Therefore, online counselling clients have been found to reveal critical information faster than face-to-face counselling (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018)^[9].

There is space for online counselling just as there is for face-to-face counselling. However, because online counselling is data-driven, counsellors and clients are progressively more focused on the issues to be discussed; as a result, more time is saved for counsellors to attend to other responsibilities as well as clients (Young, 2005)^[39].

Online counselling offers numerous advantages regarding convenience, accessibility, and cost. For example, counsellors and clients can easily access counselling anywhere rather than being restricted by the constraints of the counsellor's consulting chamber (Young, 2005)^[39]. Online counselling is needed to relieve stress, eliminate stigma and frustration, boost clients' confidence, and improve accessibility. Given this, clients, particularly students, can receive counselling anywhere and maintain contact with their therapists regardless of location. Again, it allows counsellors to follow up on clients even after they have graduated without having to rely on the type of area in which they are confined. The procedure of online counselling makes it adaptable and straightforward to use. According to related research, clients prefer online therapy because they may contact their therapists in their leisure

time without travelling to see a therapist (Rummell & Joyce, 2010)^[32]. Clients with hearing disorders and eye issues may also benefit from online counselling (Rummell & Joyce, 2010)^[32].

It is also believed that online counselling is less expensive. Although appropriate resources must be purchased to communicate remotely, accommodation, time, and travel costs are significantly lower than face-to-face counselling costs. This allows both parties to save time for other activities while lowering risk (DuBois, 2004)^[14].

The utilisation of nonverbal clues is one of the distinguishing elements of therapy. Nonverbal cues are known to account for approximately 80% of communication. Counsellors must quickly comprehend and respond to clients' issues (DuBois, 2004)^[14]. This technique, however, is lacking in online counselling (Amos *et al.*, 2020)^[5]. Nonverbal communication increases communication, particularly on the therapist's part, and makes clients feel more welcomed and accepted in therapeutic relationships (Rummell & Joyce, 2010)^[32]. These findings are consistent with those of the Rummell & Joyce (2010) qualitative study, which showed that the absence of nonverbal cues caused less contact with the client and made interactions more complex and challenging to understand. It is claimed that clients may also experience a loss of control in the absence of a nonverbal cue from the therapist.

In counselling psychology, paraphrasing is an essential ability. Counsellors paraphrase to better understand their clients' issues during counselling, which cannot be overstated. On the other hand, Rummell & Joyce (2010)^[32] observed that quickening responses in asynchronous counselling is challenging for clients. Clients are doubtful if the counsellor has comprehended them, which can cause them to be skeptical. As a result, the authors believe that clients' emotions are misinterpreted during online counselling.

Another issue with online counselling is time delays. Counselling by email usually causes a delay in the session. Since online counselling is asynchronous, communication may take some time to establish. Clients may also refuse to receive emails if they do not wish to fulfil assignments during the therapy process. Again, messaging via email can be more delayed than face-to-face therapy. Poor network connectivity might cause communication delays for either party (counsellor or client), leaving both parties unsure whether the other party is still connected (Bedu-Addo, 2016)^[7]. As counsellors and clients strive to process what has been communicated, ambiguity can arise due to a message's latency.

The magnitude and significance of online counselling are highly desirable. Conversely, Merry *et al.* (2011) indicated that using chat rooms reduces the use of secrecy for clients. The information revealed in chat rooms may be exposed due to both therapist and client irresponsibility and may be hacked.

In addition to the synchronous and asynchronous modes of online counselling, several tools, such as gamification, have been developed to aid in this respect (Fleming *et al.*, 2017). Computer games, for example, are planned to stimulate young people by challenging them to achieve their goals and finish challenging tasks. Moving toward their goals assists them in reducing stress, boosting confidence, and boosting emotions (Franco, 2016)^[16]. Adventures, puzzles, and

quests are programmes/games that teach basic skills and help with stress management. They are intended to allow users to customise it for their specific work and embark on an adventure to bring happiness into their problematic lives. Although online counselling is necessary, it has limitations. Some clients and counsellors may find the medium uncomfortable due to the lack of nonverbal cues, asynchronous time delays, technical issues, or loss of physical presence. Others, however, find this strategy more appealing due to its anonymity, low cost, convenience, and privacy.

The technological boom of the twenty-first century has created new options for counselling practice, allowing therapists and clients to connect digitally without the need for real contacts in the advanced world. In Ghana, no structured online counselling is offered at colleges of education, senior high schools, or health facilities due to a lack of essential technology tools and practitioners for online counselling. It has been claimed that, depending on the severity and nature of the problem at hand, a client would prefer to use the online counselling mode; as a result, they feel less stigmatised because they are not seen by others, such as administrative staff, clients in a waiting room, or people walking past a counselling centre.

However, other experts believe that online counselling is unsuccessful because it lacks face-to-face interactions (Dennis & O'Toole, 2014) ^[13]. Many practitioners are concerned about the rapidly increasing field of online counselling (Ersahin & Hanley, 2017) ^[15]. Many occupations have been transformed by the arrival of ICT, from physical contact to computerised problem-solving methods. Counselling is no exception, as some clients prefer to engage with online practitioners (Wang *et al.*, 2010) ^[38]. Face-to-face counselling is still necessary and unavoidable, especially when deep-seated issues arise (Amos *et al.*, 2020) ^[5]. As a result, the rapid advancement of ICT in counselling should not be used to replace traditional face-to-face counselling.

In Ghanaian colleges of education, structured online counselling is scarce. Few studies have been conducted to investigate students' perceptions and attitudes about online counselling (Kraus, 2011b) ^[24]. Previous research has focused on secondary school learners who are prohibited from using phones or computers. The research was based on the hope game online model, which is thought to provide people with inherent skills that motivate them to succeed in life, as well as the ability to create ways to achieve their desired objectives and encourage individuals to use those approaches (Awabil & Clifford, 2018;) ^[6]. Research with college students has focused on attitudes about online counselling. These students had no experience with online counselling, but this study aimed to establish the amount or level to which they would use online counselling if the chance arose (Kolog *et al.*, 2014) ^[22].

Due to the counsellor's busy schedules, they were able to interact with some students in online counselling. The counsellors were convinced that their contact with students had positive consequences. However, the benefits of these contacts cannot be considered the sole basis for adopting and successfully implementing online counselling at educational institutions. Although online counselling is being used, it is largely unrecognised. Regarding policy, there have been no norms or processes involving online counselling in our colleges of education. As a result, the

researchers proceeded with this study to address the concerns voiced by student clients throughout their online counselling experiences.

The following objectives guided the study

1. Identify the benefits that student clients had with online counselling.
2. Identify the challenges with students' experiences of online counselling.
3. Identify how student clients relate in a nonverbal environment.
4. How can online counselling be successfully implemented in college education systems?

The following questions were raised for the study

1. What are the benefits of student client experience with online counselling?
2. What are the challenges with students client experience with online counselling?
3. How can student clients relate to the counsellor in a nonverbal environment?
4. How can online counselling be successfully implemented in colleges of education?

Online counselling can reach an enormous population while also saving time. The study's findings could lead to the use of an excellent resource, particularly in Ghana, to plan online counselling to ensure the success of the services offered to students and offer a more in-depth context, as well as provide a lack of knowledge regarding counsellors' strategies for online counselling and training in Ghana.

The data acquired from this study will be added to the literature on online counselling, precisely that of Africa and Ghana.

Method

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological technique to examine the student clients' experiences with online counselling. The participants in the study were student clients who had undergone counselling at the Atebubu College of Education.

The sample was chosen purposively. The purposive sample method was utilised because the study focused only on students who had received online counselling from the College of Education counsellors. As previously noted, online counselling is unofficial and is rarely used. As a result, these students had been receiving online counselling for some time and could answer the questions required for this study. The study involved eight student teachers. These were students aged 22 to 35 years from the Atebubu College of Education. Five males and three females were used. The challenges presented for their online interactions were relationships with the opposite sex, study habits and challenges with roommates. One student utilised WhatsApp video, two used email, and five used WhatsApp messaging. Respondents were assigned codes to organise the reoccurring themes retrieved from the data. Each participant received a code us: SC1 through SC8 (SC1= WhatsApp video, SC2 and SC3= email and SC4 to SC8 = WhatsApp messaging). WhatsApp is the most popular online chat service used by young and older adults in Ghana. It was obvious that six of the respondents used WhatsApp. The Internet is WhatsApp's driving engine, allowing users to communicate text messages, images, audio and videos. It is

also capable of making video and voice calls. The service is comparable to other short messaging services, except that WhatsApp utilises the Internet. As a result, the cost of utilising WhatsApp is far lower than that of short messaging services. When emailing was asynchronous, the student client used the Google application to send messages through the counsellor's email account. Due to the college's location, one major obstacle to adopting WhatsApp was a lack of internet connectivity.

An interview guide was applied in gathering data. The interview guide included five main items designed to extract information about online counselling from student clients. The tool included demographic data. In terms of validity, counselling experts determined the interview guide's content and face validity regarding Lincoln and Guba's (1985) [25] reliability of qualitative data.

Students who took part were briefed on how to respond to the items. The student clients were thoroughly explained the questions asked during the briefing. The researchers maintained the confidentiality of the student clients by performing all debriefing online via WhatsApp messaging and phone calls. Some questions posed were "What application did you use to interact with your counsellor online?" "What online application did you use to interact with your counsellor?" "What major experiences can you share while using the application for counselling?" "What are some of the challenges you encountered during the counselling process online?" As previously stated, poor internet connectivity prevents effective contact with student clients.

However, the interviews went well. Each student client's interview lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. Each respondent provided the time for the interview process online based on their schedules. As a result, the interview procedure for those student clients who used WhatsApp took five days. Given that one respondent used email, he interviewed on the same channel. Because the procedure was asynchronous, it took two days for the respondents to respond, and the student client answered the email at leisure. Thematic analyses were used for the interview responses. This technique enabled the categorisation, organisation, and interpretation of transcribed data. Additionally, rigour was guaranteed by giving the transcripts to four experts, who checked that there were no mistakes or contradictions between the researchers' transcripts and their intended understanding of the responses given by the respondents for the study. Individuals in this study provided consent before the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [12]. As a result, consent was acquired from the respondents before the interviews were conducted.

Results

The student clients were asked interview questions to assist the researchers understand the students' actual experiences during online counselling.

According to the data acquired, all the student clients received online counselling via email, WhatsApp videos, and WhatsApp chat. As noted earlier, two student clients applied for email, one student client applied for WhatsApp video, and five student clients applied for WhatsApp chat. The following themes were developed from the interviews: (a) the benefits of online counselling, (b) the challenges of online counselling, (c) the resolution of student client issues, (d) a nonverbal relationship between a client and a

counsellor, (e) available online counselling applications, and (f) ways to enforce and enhance online counselling.

The Benefits of Online Counselling

According to the data collected, student client counselling provided several benefits to online counselling. Some student clients ascertained that they previously had face-to-face counselling; therefore, they could test whether obtaining counselling online was different. Mobility increases privacy, access to counselling in one's personal space, anonymity, accessibility to the counsellor, and the capacity to solve problems in a virtual space. These are some of the advantages of online counselling. For example, one of the respondent mentioned mobility.

SC1: "I like online counselling because it allows me to communicate with the counsellor without travelling to his or her office".

Concerning ease and accessibility to both sides, respondents stated,

SC4: "It benefited me as a client a lot since the counsellor regularly checked on me by sending messages, which has significantly shaped my life till now".

SC5: "Problems are communicated openly, which saves time".

One respondent commented,

SC1: "You feel at ease" (a comfortable space for expressing yourself without being shy".

SC2: "It is not under any pressure".

SC8: "You acquire a lot of independence in the counselling process as well as a lot of friendly interaction".

In terms of time, privacy and anonymity, a respondents noted that,

SC3: "Privacy and anonymity are good in online counselling. Attending the counselling centre, where officials ask questions and point fingers at others, can be eliminated".

One of the respondents said of the virtual solution,

SC1: "It helped me solve my issue without having to see the counsellor".

Another respondent stated,

SC8: "Yes, the counsellor assisted me in resolving my issue; the counsellor resolved my issue due to rapport. I felt at ease discussing my issues".

According to the data, respondents felt at ease while accessing online counselling, although they asserted it had problems.

The Challenges of Online Counselling

The following are excerpts from respondent's perspectives on online counselling challenges:

On the issue of nonverbal clues and mistrust, some respondents reacted,

SC6: "The counsellor's facial expressions and demeanour were missing. As a result, I'm unsure if the counsellor is upset with me about our issues".

Similarly, one respondent stated,

SC8: "Lacked trust because the encounter with the counsellor was not face-to-face".

Lack of attention:

SC5: "Responding to, using, and following nonverbal cues was challenging because it was online rather than face-to-face counselling".

Fear:

SC2: *"I was terrified. I did not trust the counsellor because I could not see him, but I had to use the tool online since I could not travel from home to visit him; the journey was long. However, as I acquired his trust, everything went smoothly".*

While some respondents claimed interpersonal issues as a result of online counselling challenges, others mentioned a lack of resources. A poor network, slow communication, and a favourable environment. For example, a respondent reported,

SC8: *"Poor communication due to network issues hindered the discussion".*

SC5: *"The environment was noisy because I am a residential student, and my classmates made noise in the background on the veranda, hindering me from listening well".*

A Nonverbal Relationship between a Client and a Counsellor

Almost all the respondents provided the same information concerning student client behaviour or how they related to a nonverbal environment. One major issue was that they could not explain themselves or show their nonverbal clues because the counsellor could not see them. A respondent (**SC1**) who utilised video chat said he gave the same response but added that even though they can see each other, the counsellor cannot see some of the gestures, and the network is often poor. Here are a few examples:

SC1: *"We can see each other, but occasionally, I do things the counsellor cannot see, and we also have bad networks".*

SC4: *"Because it was not face-to-face but rather online counselling, following nonverbal clues was challenging".*

One respondent was concerned. He explained,

SC3: *"I was afraid that this was because I did not trust the counsellor that much because I could not see him, but I had to use the tool online since I could not travel from home to see the counsellor; after all, the journey was long. However, after I acquired her trust, everything went smoothly".*

Resolution of Student Client Issues

Despite their misgivings, most respondents believed that online counselling could rectify their issues. One of the respondent stated,

SC2: *"Yes, even though we did not meet face-to-face, the counsellor spent his time and guided me through many discussions and deliberations whenever I called. Finally, I realised myself and discovered a solution to my issue".*

Another respondent supported the prior findings:

SC7: *"Yes, because my counsellor had time to listen to me, she came up with her recommendations, which I focused on and made my own decisions. As a result of my decision, she assisted me in resolving my issue".*

However, two respondents said,

SC8: *"No! I was frightened to discuss my genuine issues".*

SC1: *"No, initially, counselling was bad due to an unstable and unreliable network. After some time, I had to resort to face-to-face counselling".*

This means that although online counselling has had a beneficial impact, extra counselling must be provided to assist clients in resolving their issues.

Available applications for online counselling

Counselling facilities in some developed nations frequently provide various online tools and services to aid clients

without requiring a chat or video conversation with the counsellor. These activities include short plays, counselling session cartoons, counselling games and podcast listening. As a result, respondents were asked if they preferred such services to aid in counselling. A few of the responders agreed, while the majority disagreed.

The responses are as follows.

SC1: *"Yes, since the counselling role can provide me with confidence, hope and insight when I communicate my issues with the counsellor".*

Another respondent had a similar observation:

SC6: *"Yes, since I could feel shy in front of the counsellor face-to-face, but with the video, I can relax and come up with ideas for my issues in the comfort of my home".*

Another respondent found it both a remedy machine and an entertainer:

SC7: *"Yes, because the counselling games can be entertaining for me".*

On the other hand, others responded negatively:

SC3: *"No, I do not have time to watch a cartoon".*

This finding suggested that he disliked the cartoons.

Another respondent disliked listening to the recording.

She says:

SC2: *"No, I am not a fan of podcasts".*

Ways to Enforce and Enhance Online Counselling

Respondents were asked if they thought online counselling should be established and accessible. All eight respondents said affirmatively. The respondents stated that some issues must be addressed before online counselling can be widely accessible and practical.

The majority of respondents suggested that school internet WIFI be improved, as well as proper online counselling courses for counsellors and clients.

For example, one respondent suggested that,

SC4: *"Internet access should improve, and students should be better educated about online counselling".*

SC3: *"It could be implemented as a portal on the school's website".*

SC1: *"Education is essential and relatively inexpensive. It will be simple for students to use an app when it is available on their phones".*

Another respondent made a unique remark. Students believe that online group counselling is possible if group counselling is organised face-to-face.

This is what the respondent says:

SC7: *"Online counselling might be improved by forming groups depending on their issues and having a counsellor supervise the groups; in this way, more issues could be addressed through just group counselling online".*

Respondent comments:

SC8: *"Online counselling complements face-to-face counselling; thus, significant work must be done to build efficient online counselling in colleges of education in Ghana".*

Major Findings of the Study

The study's findings were as follows:

1. The benefits of online counselling include mobility, privacy, and resolving issues without physical interaction, as well as convenience, accessibility, and anonymity.
2. Challenges in online counselling include the following: loss of nonverbal cues, mistrust of physical contact,

- lack of attention given to the client and the counsellor, and poor access to the Internet.
3. Experience in virtual space: Lack of written communication and lack of nonverbal cues to continue the conversation.
 4. Resolution of issues: Issues were resolved; however, clients were occasionally forced to work face-to-face due to network issues.
 5. Available applications for online counselling: Positive reinforcement of gamification and podcasts, video games, and role play can all be used for online counselling.
 6. Ways to enforce and enhance online counselling include student education on online counselling, increased internet access, the introduction of online group counselling, and online portals.

Discussion

Technology is here to stay, and we must take advantage of its numerous benefits. These findings are based on the experiences of the few respondent student clients who seek counselling, specifically online counselling. As a result, their thoughts cannot be generalised to the entire student population. We hope that this study will assist in paving the way for the formal introduction of online counselling at colleges of education in Ghana.

This study showed the many benefits of online counselling. These included mobility, assurance of privacy, a relaxed process for client follow-up and easy access to a counsellor. These findings support the findings of other researchers (Manhal-Baugus, 2001^[26]; Li *et al.*, 2013), who suggested that clients prefer online counselling due to its accessibility and convenience.

Unsurprisingly, convenience is consistent across cultures and countries. Apps such as WhatsApp, Webcam, email, and Skype are used in all regions since the same programmes and features may be used. However, there may be differences in network issues, location and accessibility. Despite online counselling being accessible, there are issues with internet connectivity in colleges of education in Ghana, preventing students from quickly reaching out to counsellors online when they meet challenges. Additionally, students prefer WhatsApp messaging since it is substantially less expensive than traditional phone calls.

Researchers believe that anonymity and issue solving in virtual space minimise stigma and support clients in exposing personal information regardless of sex, age, or socioeconomic background (Kraus, 2011b)^[24].

Since online counselling is considered anonymous, clients may reveal their identities to show how much anonymity they desire. However, working with clients whose names are unknown may present challenges for counsellors. The counsellor and the client must reach a better agreement to avoid these misunderstandings in counselling interactions. Counsellors should explain scenarios requiring face-to-face encounters with clients at intake (Sheppard *et al.*, 2007)^[34]. For example, meeting online with a suicidal client or individuals whom others may harm may be improper. These instances should be discussed with the client, and explanations about the amount of face-to-face contact and online crises required should be explicit.

Even though clients have seen some benefits from online counselling, they feel that there are numerous challenges with its accessibility. According to the analysis, student

client challenges revolved around inconsistencies in networks, not relating effectively or being incapable of expressing oneself online, and lacking trust because of lack of physical touch. However, it can be determined that while student clients had a positive online experience, they encountered trust issues. As a result, Haberstroh *et al.* (2014)^[18] suggested that experts believe that online counselling contradicts key essential features (nonverbal communication and verbal information) during the counselling process. Additionally, online counselling is ineffective since anyone can retrieve a client's data, and such counselling may be damaging owing to trust issues for the parties. As a result, caution must be exercised when delivering online counselling. Shandro (2007)^[33] also stated that nonverbal communication is an unavoidable resource during counselling sessions and should not be overlooked by counsellors. Therefore, the counsellor must see the client during the counselling sessions.

According to the study, clients cannot interpret precise clues to determine their acceptance by counsellors because they lack a physical connection with them. Counsellors cannot assist them on time due to the lack of physical contact.

Concerning clients' and counsellors' nonverbal behaviour and technological challenges, it should be noted that these issues will serve as challenges to counsellors and may be destructive to the therapeutic process. Research has indicated that the lack of nonverbal cues can marge counselling sessions because these cues are crucial in counselling relationships (Geldard *et al.*, 2015). The researchers feel that the lack of a nonverbal cue will reduce concentration as well as alertness during the counselling procedure.

The findings demonstrated that not all student clients preferred employing technology gadgets and programmes such as podcasts, cartoons and plays to help clients overcome their issues. A few respondents highlighted games and play as possible applications in counselling. This study supports the findings of Haberstroh *et al.* (2007)^[19] on the use of computer games to drive young people to gain skills and lessen depression. In the case of a game, for example, some games include play levels that motivate the client to accomplish a task to advance to the next level. Some games are designed to reduce anxiety, stress and depression, while others are courage and puzzle-like, with the goal of teaching habits and skills (Rummell & Joyce, 2010)^[32]. As a result, the counsellor should thoroughly analyse clients before beginning such devices in the counselling session.

Recommendations

1. Directors of counselling centres in the Ghanaian College of Education to be trained and entrusted with developing convenient and accessible outlets for counselling.
2. College counselling directors in Ghana must prepare resources to aid in counselling sessions.
3. Counsellors must ensure that clients communicate themselves online and that appropriate networks are available for student clients to seek counselling.

Conclusion

Online counselling was added as a supplement to face-to-face counselling. According to related research there were some benefits of online counselling, these benefits are expected in online counselling. The study showed that

convenience, accessibility, mobility, and privacy were all major benefits of online counselling. In contrast, mistrust, lack of nonverbal clues, and poor internet access were significant challenges in accessing online counselling. However, clients issues were resolved via the use of online counselling.

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