Counsellors' Approaches in Handling Online Counseling in The Midst of COVID-19

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Abstract

Purpose of this study is to explore the counsellors' online experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic that hit Brunei in August 2020 where all educators were forced to shift from physical to virtual meetings. Semi-structured interview was conducted with six counsellors from secondary government school in Brunei Darussalam who experienced online counseling during the medium transition period. From the interview, the data was transcribed and categorized the responses in different themes. Using thematic analysis, it was found that e-counseling is possible provided that counsellors are future ready, equipped with necessary skills, knowledgeable and skillful. In addition, experienced counsellors shared information on how to improve online counseling services as well as the challenges they encountered throughout carrying out the sessions online. This study could be beneficial to add as literature and useful for future researchers to conduct similar research based on this research topic.

Keywords: counsellor; online experiences; pandemic;

Introduction Section

COVID-19 is an unprecedented event and has major implications from all over the world emerging in the late 2019. In most parts of the world where lockdown was imposed, physical communication and meetings had turned to online mediums to keep pace. Brunei Darussalam was not exempted from the turn of events. One of the actions taken by Brunei's government was the school closure to limit face-to-face interaction. This change had affected instructors as well as counsellors who needed to ensure students' physical and mental well-being. According to recent studies conducted in the United States, the ongoing pandemic has had a long-term harmful impact on most students' mental health (Son et al., 2020). As a result, it is critical for counsellors to be able to use technology to develop a strategy or approach for providing counseling services, particularly one-on-one and group counseling sessions.

The main focus area in this research is to share their experiences during online counseling. This is important to discuss in this present time given they are currently experiencing e-learning and digital application as education tools. Furthermore, given the limited number of studies conducted on online education and counseling during COVID-19, it is necessary to establish a relevant reference for the purposes of this study.

The objectives of this research are to explore the counsellors' online experiences that can be used as a reference for future counsellors in the event of an unexpected event, such as a pandemic and to describe the counsellors' challenges from their experiences using e-counseling. Hence, in order to achieve the research objectives, the research questions are as follow ; how can counsellors' online experiences be used as a reference for future counsellors in the event of an unexpected event, such as a pandemic and what are the challenges from the counsellors' experiences using e-counseling.

Figures and tables

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counseling, by definition is a talking therapy, trained therapists, psychologists and counsellors listen to people who come to them seeking the counseling services and they help them find solutions in dealing with emotional issues (Supriyanto et al., 2020). The pandemic has instilled fear and anxiety, not just in Asia since its impact has been a global issue through loss of income thereby triggering mental health issues, therefore, there has been high demand for the counseling services hence the counsellors had to have new approaches of handling the increased demand. The goal of this literature review is to focus generally on the counsellor's approaches in handling services in the midst of COVID-19 in terms of their experiences, challenges and silver lining. COVID-19 is spreading worldwide, impacting enrolled students, educators, parents and the vulnerable individuals. Asian countries have taken measures to mitigate the spread of the pandemic but this has not stopped learners and educators from suffering. According to a study by Maloney and Taskin (2020), COVID-19 mitigation measures have led to slow economic activities hence the parents have reduced income. Apart from freezing the ability to fund learning, the government has issued measures that have led to closure of schools and the education institutions.

Ethics in online counseling also mean that one should practice informed consent, be open and realistic with their services, namely treatment goals, treatment expectations and a promising report on privacy policies (Cooper, 2019). Ability to explore and gain as much as they could for the client's information like the name and contact information to encourage them to share this information fearlessly. Finally, Cooper (2019) stated that it is ethical to let the clients know when or what time they are normally available and cater for the emergencies in their services. Counsellor's online platforms have helped by responding quickly to emergencies during the outbreak. Mielgo-Conde et al. (2021) records that the counsellor's platforms are one of the health technologies sectors and they have helped in providing online psychological services in countries across Asia during the pandemic. Southeast Asian healthcare platform BookDoc is yet another e-counseling platform which is offering virtual health advisory services in line with mental health teleconsultations. Several studies have been carried out to determine the technology utilized by counsellors to discuss and attend to students' problems. In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, an increasing number of students at all levels have requested to see a counsellor because they have been experiencing a variety of problems that require immediate attention. According to Pragholapati, the main reason students attend counseling sessions is to talk about their problems with the counselors (2020). The study highlighted a number of issues, including mental health, disinformation, education, coping mechanisms, and health (Pragholapati, 2020). It demonstrates how important it is for a counsellor to pay attention to these issues. As a result, school counselors were compelled to act quickly to cater to this need. This allowed them to use technology like YouTube videos, short films, and WhatsApp, which were used by school counselors in Indonesia, according to Ifdil et al. (2020). Moreover, Greenhalgh et al. (2020) discovered that consultation videos were considered as fitting to lighten students' concerns during COVID-19, especially those with heightened issues, whilst those who merely sought general counsel were managed using a website or phone calls. In contrast, a study by Ifdil, I (2020) have found a newly introduced strategy for online mental health services. For instance, the Mobile App Survey and online health use of social media.

Handling counseling sessions face the technological challenges of requiring the internet, a device and the application for the video meeting (Jena, P. K. 2020). Clients who are not versed well about this technology may find difficulties accessing the services. Counsellors also experience challenges trying to reach those especially in the rural areas but choose to have online sessions instead of in-person therapy. Studies by Mielgo-Conde et al. (2021) provide that clients could miss vital non-verbal cues when communicating with the counsellor and this is a challenge since the message will not be received as delivered by the counsellor. In addition, it is also pivotal to touch on what COVID-19 has brought silver linings to the area of education, the pandemic has taught educators including counsellors how to maximise the online platforms available to deliver a quality education, learning and skills. This is supported by Burns, M (2020) where she mentioned technology has become an educational lifeline ever since the pandemic, educators have advanced proficiency in expanding their technology use for better engagement and learning. Not only that, it also helps the counsellors to see that helping clients is possible with or without the need of physical interaction. Online counseling is as effective as face-to-face therapy, availability makes it more effective since one can access services from professionals that would otherwise be costly meeting them in person (Amos et al., 2020). Amos, P. M. et al. (2020) adds that online therapy removes barriers of physical limitations from accessing the services, people do not need to travel to an

office to get the guidance they need. It reduces stigma as some clients may not like to appear in public when seeking for guidance, it helps them access the counseling sessions in private and get the help. It is convenient as one can do it from the comfort of their home. Online counseling is affordable since the service fee is standardized for most platforms and it saves on the money that would have been spent travelling and booking appointments with face-to-face counsellors.

Counseling is vital as it aids psychological illnesses that result from stress. From the evidence in this literature review, it is clear that online counsellors have taken approaches to ensure that citizens are receiving the counseling sessions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this research as a preparation for future counsellors supported with a study observed by Prahani, B. K. et al. (2020) that the impact of "new normal" in majority parts of the country including Brunei is a choice towards healing from the pandemic. Therefore, further planning, researching, evaluation, implementation and preparation are essential for learning and education. Hence, the results of this research are deemed to be valuable in the field of education. To conclude, this literature review has seen limitations in the study as they lack solid research on the pandemic as a silver lining, therefore, future research should look into this matter. This paper has reviewed the details pointing only the most important points hence it has not exhausted all the information as far as the subtopics are concerned, this is therefore, a wider area where further review can be done for extension of this review.

Methodology

The research is qualitative data where six participants were recruited via convenient sampling and interviewed as one on one basis. The inclusion criteria were the Government Secondary School Counsellors with experience of using technology to reach out clients in the midst of COVID-19. Participants were interviewed which was semi-structured, with a format structure to guide the research interviews with an open-ended question throughout the process. The interviews were recorded for the purpose of transcribing and reflecting what was being mentioned during the interview.

A pilot study was done in this research with two participants which allowed the researcher further improvement and amendments to the interview questions where necessary. The researcher used thematic analysis to analyse data which was transcribed and encrypted. Confidentiality was ensured as all the information gathered was protected and would only be accessible by the researcher. Also, the researcher used a coding system to name the participants. Lastly, the researcher received ethics approval letters from stakeholders prior to collecting the data. Reliability of the research was considered as in using a qualitative method, participants were able to express their true feelings about the questions, as opposed to only using writing methods, such as pen and paper, which is restrictive.

Moreover, the participants' responses were also rephrased in such a way that they were in agreement with what was being said. Validity of this research was also taken into consideration by reflecting on what they said and probed further. Interpretation was also used to decipher the hidden meaning from their responses, so that both parties' understandings were connected and understood correctly. Finally, after the researcher has finished transcribing, the researcher double-checks the consistency of the responses from the participants to ensure validity. The transcription, for example, is presented to the participants so that they can agree.

Findingas and Discussion

Table 1. Major themes generated from research questions

Research Questions	Themes
How can counsellors' online experiences be used as a reference for future counsellors in the	The use of e-counseling

event of an unexpected event, such as a
pandemic ?

What are the challenges from the counsellors'
experiences using e-counseling ?   Challenges faced

Research Question 1 : How can counsellors' online experiences be used as a reference for future counsellors in the event of an unexpected event, such as a pandemic ?

The findings from this study suggest that counsellors must be prepared regardless of any situations. During COVID-19's initial wave in Brunei Darussalam, most participants were unprepared for online counseling. The structures and ethics of e-counseling in Brunei Darussalam were still unclear due to lack of guidelines from stakeholders. This is demonstrated when one counsellor admits they need to ask stakeholders for consent while other counsellors need to consult each other. Future counsellors should learn from this experience and be prepared with knowledge, information, and skills. The American Psychological Association (2020) has issued guidelines for practitioners, psychologists, and counsellors that use internet therapy. Competence, informed consent, secrecy, and boundaries are the three important principles in the COVID-19 ethical guidance that must be followed. Maintaining boundaries and getting the authorities involved are two of the many ethical considerations needed in e-counseling. From the results, the counsellors stated that they needed information from the Attorney General Chamber (AGC) and the Ministry of Education (MOE) to properly conduct online counseling. This should be taken into account by stakeholders in order to offer counsellors with clear and systematic ethics rules as mentioned in American Psychological Association (2020). It is critical to have informed consent in counseling, especially when dealing with clients' personal issues. From the study by Cooper (2019), a practice counsellor must get an informed consent from a client just like in traditional counseling. In the information consent, counsellor must be transparent in the ethics of counseling such as confidentiality. Moreover, Participant 3 stated that she aspires to learn more about internet platforms. Prior to the pandemic, they did not know or learn how to use technology until education changed to virtual environments. This serves as a reminder for future educators, especially counsellors to start learning them now without having to wait for unexpected circumstances to happen. As mentioned by the American Counseling Association (ACA), counsellors must utilise the use of electronic communication with full preparations in terms of information and equipment, particularly platforms used by the counsellors (Situmorang, 2020).

     In terms of platform used, all counsellors in this research provided their clients with platforms of their choice. This means that the platforms that a counsellor should use have to be agreeable for both parties. In addition, counsellors can give options considering students were not aware of the available platform. In this case, a counsellor must be well integrated in using ICT, draw on the pros and cons of each platform and only give the best options for the clients. In this study, there was a counsellor who also carried out a survey for the purpose of finding an accessible and most preferred platform from the student's perspective, which, in the researcher's opinion, is a good idea. On the other hand, if a counsellor feels like a face-to-face platform would be the best option, it would be better to have an agreement with the clients. In this research, the majority of the participants were using WhatsApp. This is contradicted with a statement by Abdullah, S (2021), an experienced counsellor from *Persatuan Kaunseling* (PEKA) who handled various clients in session during the pandemic, whereby he preferred and highly recommended counsellors to maximise the use of face-to-face online platforms for counseling sessions. In that case, he would suggest clients of the available medium such as using Zoom application (Abdullah, S). On the other hand, Walker (2007) asserted that the act of writing can be therapeutic in and of itself. Writing has long been regarded as a useful tool for self-disclosure, externalization of difficulties and most importantly, self-awareness (Barak, 1999). Aside from that, writing can help people cope with their emotions by allowing them to express themselves in whichever way they wish (Yager, 2001). Poh Li et al. (2013) strongly agreed that when compared to face-to-face counseling sessions, some people are more honest and expressive in writing, in this case, the use of WhatsApp is helpful.

Research Question 2 : What are the challenges from the counsellors' experiences using e-counseling ?

Based on their responses, many found e-counseling to be a challenge as they had to adapt with the setting after being comfortable with the traditional counseling. All of the counsellors agreed that, while the challenges came from the external factors such as the clients, most of it came from within themselves. There were counsellors that discussed their hardship adapting to the new technologies despite the age factor. Another challenge that was being mentioned in the finding was exploring counsellors' way of reaching to all students in their respective schools which some of them found impossible due to students' lack of accessibility to new technologies especially those who are underprivileged. Lastly, the inability to trace clients' facial expressions and their difficult situations that limits the use of e-counseling. As agreed by Suler (2004), online sessions have caused lack of physical interactions and only focused on the connection of the introspective.

On the other hand, according to Wagner et al. (2014), while there were restrictions in terms of physical cues and connectedness in online counseling, clients with certain mental health conditions may benefit from the session due to its anonymity nature where they felt more secure. To overcome this, Stofle (1997) revealed that symbols such as "smileys" and emoticons can indicate a wide range of emotions and facial expressions. Clients and counsellors can create a collection of standardised emoticons and acronyms. To avoid misunderstandings and to ensure that both the client and the counsellor understand each other, the counsellor should constantly check with the client (Stofle, 1997). In addition, based on the responses, the participants managed to overcome their challenges instead of just accepting them as inevitable struggles. An ultimate way in handling the challenges was having the passion in the job was a tremendous help in conquering the obstacles and this was shared in the finding which made it as an overall strong statement in how the counsellors manage to overcome their own challenges. Furthermore, having to consistently improve themselves despite their years of experiences is a way to increase self-awareness and surround themselves with more open resources. Counsellors should seek out essential training in technology, theory, applications, and ethics, as well as licensing rules, to ensure the competency of online counseling services (Zack, 2008).
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Conclusion

From the findings, the researcher relates how online counseling is being delivered as the researcher is a future counsellor and experienced online counseling in the midst of the pandemic in Brunei. The researcher benefited greatly and made use of the data collected from the experienced counsellors which proved to be useful. Hence, it is safe to say that this research would bring major contribution to future counsellors should an unprecedented event were to occur such as COVID-19 outbreak. Online counseling, like face-to-face counseling, carries a significant deal of responsibility. Both face-to-face and virtual relationships should be treated with the utmost professionalism and ethics as even if an online client is communicating virtually, his or her problems are real and exist. The findings from this research are useful and implementable since it could help future counsellors improve their interventions or approaches. Overall, they all shared their online experiences and obstacles to answer the research questions. It is hoped that more researchers are open to study COVID-19 situations in Brunei. This research can be improved to measure the effectiveness of counsellors' online approaches. Also, this research only looked at the online approaches used by counsellors and did not consider whether the platforms used were efficient and functional for counseling sessions. Additionally, this research will be complimented if more research on online counseling experiences with other parties is explored. For instance, the students' view and opinion on the efficacy of online counseling and their online preferences. Lastly, further exploration on the use of technology and platforms for different and individualised functions such as Google Form to collect clients, Telegram for online session, Zoom for face-to-face session would be beneficial to include to support the literature.

Acknowledgement

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