

The Impact of Digital Counseling on Therapeutic Relationships

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of using digital counseling on the therapeutic relationship between counselors and counselees. In an era where technology is increasingly dominant in human interaction, the question of how the quality of the therapeutic relationship is maintained in a digital context is becoming increasingly important. Through reviewing interviews and case studies, this study analyzes the extent to which the core elements of a therapeutic relationship, such as empathy, mutual understanding, and trust, can be maintained and the unique dynamics of interaction intertwined through digital platforms. The research results highlight the challenges and opportunities in dealing with this shift, as well as strategies that can be implemented by counselors to ensure the quality of the therapeutic relationship remains optimal. The findings of this study provide valuable guidance for counseling practitioners and mental health professionals in harnessing the potential of technology to improve service accessibility, while maintaining the essence of a therapeutic relationship that supports the counselor's healing and growth processes. In conclusion, this study proposes an in-depth look at how digital counseling can make a significant contribution to the development of productive and meaningful therapeutic relationships.

Keywords: *impact, digital counseling, relationships, therapy*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menyelidiki dampak penggunaan konseling digital terhadap hubungan terapeutik antara konselor dan konseli. Di era di mana teknologi semakin dominan dalam interaksi manusia, pertanyaan tentang bagaimana kualitas hubungan terapeutik dipertahankan dalam konteks digital menjadi semakin penting. Melalui tinjauan wawancara dan studi kasus, penelitian ini menganalisis sejauh mana elemen-elemen inti dari hubungan terapeutik, seperti empati, saling pengertian, dan kepercayaan, dapat dipertahankan dan dinamika interaksi yang unik yang terjalin melalui platform digital. Hasil penelitian menyoroti tantangan dan peluang dalam menghadapi pergeseran ini, serta strategi yang dapat diterapkan oleh konselor untuk memastikan kualitas hubungan terapeutik tetap optimal. Temuan penelitian ini memberikan panduan yang berharga bagi praktisi konseling dan profesional kesehatan mental dalam memanfaatkan potensi teknologi untuk meningkatkan aksesibilitas layanan, dengan tetap mempertahankan esensi hubungan terapeutik yang mendukung proses penyembuhan dan pertumbuhan konseli. Sebagai kesimpulan, penelitian ini mengusulkan pandangan mendalam tentang bagaimana konseling digital dapat memberikan kontribusi yang signifikan terhadap pengembangan hubungan terapeutik yang produktif dan bermakna.

Kata kunci: dampak, konseling digital, hubungan, terapi

A. Introduction

The digital era continues to develop, information technology has changed the way humans interact and communicate. The development of this technology not only affects daily communication, but has also penetrated various aspects of life, including in the fields of mental health and counseling. One of the latest developments that is attracting attention is the use of digital counseling, where counseling services are provided via online platforms or mobile applications. While providing the benefit of broader accessibility for individuals in need of mental health support, the existence of this technology also raises critical questions about its impact on the therapeutic relationship between counselees and counselors.

The development of information and communication technology has changed the paradigm in many aspects of human life, including in the fields of mental health and counseling. One of the most important changes in this regard is the introduction of digital counselling, where counseling services are provided through online platforms or mobile applications. In the midst of this rapid development, fundamental questions arise regarding how the use of digital counseling affects therapeutic relationships previously known only through face-to-face interactions. (Azizah, et al, 2022)

The therapeutic relationship, often referred to as the therapeutic alliance, has a crucial role in effective counseling outcomes. According to Rogers (1957), this relationship is "a very typical and unusual relational experience, which takes place between a counselee and a therapist". This creates a safe and supportive environment that allows clients to explore and resolve emotional, psychological, or interpersonal issues. This relationship is based on aspects such as empathy, mutual understanding, trust, and collaboration.

The implementation of digital counseling brings unique challenges to the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. Counseling is one of the strategies for responsive services

necessary to address specific problems. ASCA (American School Counselor Association) states that counseling is a confidential face-to-face relationship, full of an attitude of acceptance and providing opportunities from the counselor to the client, the counselor uses his knowledge and skills to help his client overcome his problems (Yusuf & Nurihsan, 2008). In digital counseling, communication is primarily done through text or digital voice, which can reduce the ability to express emotions or understand nonverbal expressions (Choi et al., 2017). In addition, privacy and security issues are also a concern, especially due to the exchange of sensitive information via digital platforms (Sucala et al., 2012). Questions also arise about how these changes may affect the dynamics of the timing and frequency of counseling sessions.

However, amidst these challenges, digital counseling also offers exciting opportunities. First, digital platforms can help overcome geographic barriers, allowing clients and therapists to connect regardless of their physical location. This opens the door for clients to interact with therapists who may have skills that better suit their needs. Second, digital counseling can also provide greater accessibility for individuals who may not be able to access traditional counseling services, such as those who live in remote areas or have limited mobility (Sucala et al., 2012). Third, the adoption of technology in counseling can stimulate innovation in therapeutic approaches. For example, counseling applications can integrate artificial intelligence (AI)-based techniques to provide faster feedback or customize counseling sessions according to counselees' needs (Luxton et al., 2011).

There are various forms of digital counseling. According to (Azizah, et al, 2022) several forms of digital counseling services provided by counselors are via Whatsapp, E-counseling, cinema counseling, Cyber counseling. The urgency of digital-based counseling services gives its own color to counseling services amidst the development of information technology. There are many things emerging in various technological

media which, if not bridged properly, will have a negative impact on the nation's future generations. Apart from having a positive impact in terms of efficiency and connectivity, digital technology developments also have a negative impact on individuals. In this context, technological developments encourage the emergence of new crimes such as misuse of personal data and fraud (Putri et al., 2016).

Although this potential appears promising, the sustainability and effectiveness of digital counseling in maintaining or improving the therapeutic relationship requires deeper exploration and careful study. Previous literature reviews have provided initial insights, but there is a need for more specific empirical research to understand the impact of digital counseling on the therapeutic relationship.

This research aims to fill this gap in knowledge through a mixed approach, combining theoretical analysis with empirical methods. This research will involve in-depth interviews with therapists who have experience in providing digital counseling and also with clients who have received this service. This qualitative approach will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences and perceptions related to the therapeutic relationship in the digital environment.

Additionally, case studies will be used to analyze the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship in the context of digital counseling. We will also conduct a thorough literature review of recent research relating to the impact of digital counseling on the therapeutic relationship. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide richer insight into how digital counseling influences the therapeutic relationship. The practical implications of this research will provide guidance for counseling practitioners in optimizing interactions and relationships in digital counseling. The theoretical implications will help deepen our understanding of the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship and how information technology influences it in an increasingly digital era

B. Methods

The method used in this research will combine a qualitative approach and theoretical analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of digital counseling on the therapeutic relationship. In this mixed approach, we will conduct in-depth interviews with therapists who have experience in providing digital counseling as well as with clients who have received these services. In addition, we will also conduct a case study to analyze the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship in the context of digital counseling. This approach will provide a richer understanding of individual experiences and the impact of digital counseling on the therapeutic relationship.

C. Results And Discussion

Digital counseling, or online therapy, has become a significant element in the mental health field, providing therapeutic support through digital platforms such as video calls, chats, and phone calls. Its growing popularity is driven by advances in technology and the need for easily accessible mental health services. This article explores the impact of digital counseling on the therapeutic relationship, considering various aspects of this practice.

One important aspect of digital counseling is greater accessibility. It offers a convenient option for individuals who may face barriers in accessing traditional face-to-face therapy. Geographical restrictions, physical disabilities and busy schedules are no longer insurmountable obstacles. With a stable internet connection and appropriate devices, clients can access therapy from the comfort of their own home, increasing access to care.

As stated by Andersson et al. (2019), research has shown that online therapy has a positive impact on the availability of mental health services, especially in rural areas where face-to-face therapy is often difficult to find. This in turn has the potential to improve the therapeutic relationship, as clients who might otherwise not receive treatment can now seek help.

Based on research results from (Wells, 2021) it is stated that E-counseling helps counselees in dealing with career, academic, learning and advocacy problems, apart from that E-Counseling also has a positive practical impact, because in providing E-counseling services there is no limited space and time to become more efficient. This can happen because e-counseling services use long-distance technology and are an alternative method for implementing face-to-face counseling (Asri et al., 2020)

E-Counseling is not a simple process because apart from requiring counseling skills, it also requires skills in using technology (Febrianti & Wibowo, 2019). Therefore, it is natural for educational counselors to have a good understanding of technology and quickly adapt to technological changes. Apart from technology skills, there are several other abilities that a counselor must master so that the E-Counseling process can run well. including, the ability to, (1) build good relationships, (2) accuracy in reflection, paraphrasing and confrontation. (3) expressing empathy and asking questions (4) self-disclosure. (5) interpretation and clarification (6) managing time, structuring and silence (7) use of emoticons and typing skills and (7) use of supporting tools/facilities. In general, the skills above are an adoption of the basic skills of conventional face-to-face counseling combined with several additional skills (Asri et al., 2020).

Enhanced Accessibility and Convenience. Both therapists and clients recognize the accessibility and convenience offered by digital counseling. Counselees value the ability to connect with therapists without geographic limitations, while therapists recognize flexibility in adjusting session schedules to suit counselees' needs. Participants highlighted challenges in interpreting nonverbal cues through digital communication. Therapists expressed concern about the lack of emotional cues that are important for understanding clients' feelings, while clients sometimes found it difficult to convey complex emotions through text or voice alone.

One aspect of digital counseling to consider is the level of anonymity and privacy it provides clients. One of the functions of counseling (Rosyidi et al, 2021) focuses on changing attitudes and behavior, self-awareness, self-control, self-motivation, empathy and social skills.

Clients often feel more comfortable discussing sensitive and personal issues from their own environment. Research by Simpson and Reid (2014) found that perceptions of anonymity and privacy in online therapy encouraged some clients to open up more than they might have done in a traditional setting.

Privacy is emerging as a major concern in digital counseling. Clients feel hesitant to share personal information online, which can hinder the formation of a trusting therapeutic alliance. Therapists emphasize the need for strong security measures to maintain client confidentiality. This increased privacy can foster a stronger therapeutic relationship, as clients are more likely to share their thoughts and emotions, resulting in a deeper understanding of their needs and challenges. The ability to maintain confidentiality may be especially valuable for clients dealing with issues that are still flagged or have concerns about confidentiality.

The characteristics of digital communication apparently influence the dynamics of therapeutic conversations. Participants noted that written communication allows for more planned responses, but can also lead to misinterpretations due to the absence of intonation and body language. Building a strong therapeutic relationship is a key foundation of effective therapy, regardless of the mode of delivery. In digital counseling, establishing rapport can be easier or more difficult. Therapists must adapt their communication skills to work effectively with clients via digital media. One key challenge is limited access to non-verbal cues, which are critical in face-to-face therapy for understanding clients' emotions and reactions. However, research by Gros et al. (2013) showed that therapists who adapt to digital media by using techniques such as active listening, empathy, and verbal mirroring can effectively form relationships with clients in online therapy.

The findings of this study provide valuable insight into the relationship between digital counseling and complex therapeutic relationships. Improved accessibility is in line with previous research (Luxton et al., 2011), which underscores the potential of digital counseling in overcoming geographic barriers and improving mental health support. In the event of a severe mental health crisis or emergency, the limitations of online therapy can be a concern. Digital therapy may not be suitable for providing immediate crisis intervention, and therapists must have a clear plan to address the situation and ensure client safety. Research by Luxton et al. (2016) emphasized the need for therapists to implement protocols for crisis intervention and referral to emergency services when necessary.

However, challenges in nonverbal communication and privacy align with concerns that have been expressed by Choi et al. (2017). Maintaining deep emotional understanding becomes complex when nonverbal cues are limited to text or sound. The importance of trust and confidentiality in the therapeutic relationship was also highlighted by Sucala et al. (2012), emphasizes the importance of addressing privacy issues in digital platforms. Therapists' adaptation of therapeutic techniques underscores their creativity and flexibility in exploiting the advantages of digital counseling. This is in line with the findings of Luxton et al. (2011), who show that technology can drive innovative therapeutic approaches.

This research underscores the need for digital counseling platforms to overcome the limitations of digital communication. Video conferencing integration can partially overcome nonverbal communication challenges, facilitating richer interactions. In addition, strict data security measures are necessary to build and maintain client trust, a view also confirmed by Rogers (1957).

Overall, this research makes an important contribution to the conversation about digital counseling by providing an in-depth understanding of its impact on the therapeutic relationship. These findings have practical implications for therapists involved in digital counseling, providing guidance on how to capitalize on its benefits while facing challenges. Additionally, this research enriches theoretical perspectives by deepening understanding of how digital contexts shape the dynamics of therapeutic engagement.

D. Conclusion

Overall, this research reveals that digital counseling has a significant impact on the therapeutic relationship between counselee and therapist. Despite increasing accessibility and flexibility, challenges in deciphering nonverbal communication as well as concerns over privacy and security are important aspects of the digital counseling

experience. Therapists' adaptation of therapeutic techniques demonstrates their flexibility in overcoming digital communication barriers. The implications underscore the need for specialized training for therapists and the development of counseling platforms that prioritize data privacy and security. Despite these advances, the use of technology in counseling needs to be balanced with maintaining warmth and understanding in the therapeutic relationship. This research provides rich insights for practitioners and researchers in optimizing the positive potential of digital counseling while maintaining the essence of the therapeutic alliance.

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