

Students' Perceived Effectiveness of Online Counseling Sessions

Asma Zafar¹, Ayesha Farooq², Syeda Narjis Sherazi³

¹Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Virtual University Lahore, Pakistan.

²Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Virtual University Lahore, Pakistan.

³Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Virtual University Lahore, Pakistan.

Correspondence: aysha.farooq@vu.edu.pk²

ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Psychological problems in Pakistan have increased due to rising violence and social disruption, especially affecting youth. In response, Virtual University of Pakistan has introduced online counseling through Adobe Connect sessions to support students. These counseling sessions are aimed to improve their coping styles which ultimately help the students to achieve their personal and academic goals. The present study aimed to identify the psychological problems students were experiencing; they reported study-related issues, financial issue, sleep disturbance, family related problems and other issues including anger issues etc. Moreover, study also focused on students' perception, satisfaction and perceived effectiveness toward online counseling.

Methodology: Descriptive research design was used and data was collected online through Google form from 40 with the age range of 21-37 years old who previously undergone through counseling sessions.

Findings: The study found that 27.5% of participants had used online counseling, with a majority facing study-related issues, financial stress, and sleep disturbances. Most students had a positive perception of online counseling, viewing it as more accessible, cost-effective, and less stigmatizing than face-to-face counseling. Around 77.5% found it highly effective, with counselors perceived as caring and supportive.

Conclusion: Overall, the findings highlight that online counseling is a valuable and effective support resource for students, offering a convenient and confidential alternative to traditional face-to-face counseling.

Keywords: Online Counseling, Psychological Problems, Outreach, Distance Learning, Perceived Effectiveness of Online Counseling.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health among university students is globally acknowledged as a significant public health concern, with the prevalence of psychological issues in this group steadily rising (Castillo & Schwartz, 2013; Hohenshil, et al., 2013). Therefore, mental health needs of students have become the focus of attention by university authorities (Prince, 2015). Several educational institutes have taken initiative to establish

Article History

Received:
November 08, 2024

Revised:
February 10, 2025

Accepted:
February 15, 2025

Online:
February 24, 2025

counseling centres to provide face to face mental health services to students in need. Despite the availability of on-campus mental health services and support, utilization rate of these services is very low among students. Almost 70% students, who can get benefit from on campus mental health services, do not utilize this facility (Strepparava, et al., 2015; Quinn, et al. 2009; Hyun, et al., 2006). The major reason that discourages people to seek face to face mental health services is the hesitation and stigmatization associated with psychological problems. Particularly, researchers have found that, in Asian societies people are generally less likely to feel comfortable in self-disclosure and have more avoidance rate to seek face to face counselling (Youssef, et al., 2014; Gulliver, et al., 2010; Heflinger & Hinshaw, 2010). Therefore, to bridge this gap, many institutes have taken initiative to overcome psychological and educational problems of students by providing online educational and mental health services (Doha, 2012; Perle, et al., 2011).

With the advent of modern technology and access of internet, students can not only get educational facilities by merely sitting at their homes or being at distance rather they can seek information to understand and treat their educational and psychological problems. Internet based counseling services have continued to increase in its scope and effectiveness. It is helpful in overcoming the problem of distance especially people living in rural or remote areas, who may not have access to traditional counseling, can get benefit to seek counseling at their ease and availability (Perle et al., 2011; Robson & Robson, 2000). Online counseling centres have inherent quality to maintain the physical distance, privacy and visual anonymity of the students and are beyond from any geographical boundaries which make it more attractive option for students to seek for online services as no direct personal contact is required (Glasheen, et al., 2013). Furthermore, services provided by educational institutes have an advantage of being cost free which is beneficial for the students who cannot afford costly counseling sessions.

Online counselling method has been proved a promising alternative to conventional counselling and as effective as face-to-face counseling (Gainsbury & Blaszczyński, 2011). There are number of students who are facing tension, stress, anxiety and other psychological problems and are in need of counselling but they avoid seeking for conventional counselling so, they prefer internet-based mental services with its advantage of experiencing no guilt or shame associated with disclosure of psychological problems. Researchers have confirmed that students perceive online counseling and support as more attractive, easily accessible and helpful in their psychological adjustment (Ching, et al., 2009). In a survey, Wong, et al. (2018) found that students considered online counseling as highly accessible and cost-effective method and majority preferred to utilize online counseling services than face to face counseling. Amstadter, et al. (2009) reported online intervention programs as an effective source of reducing and improving anxiety and depression symptoms.

Though, different methods of distance communication (i.e. texting, chatting, voice call etc.) have been use since 1950s (Perle, et al., 2011) but mostly institutes providing online counseling relied on single method of communication. Keeping these methods in mind, Virtual University of Pakistan has taken the initiative to provide the online counseling facility to students via Adobe Connect Sessions which is unique and easiest method of communication and entails the characteristics of combining chat, video and voice calling service. These counselling sessions require no physical constrain, students just click on a provided link and enter into the counselling room where they can talk to the counsellor as per their feasibility as well as the method of communication is purely based on the choice of the students/clients i.e. they may only use texting method, voice or video calling or combination of any two depending on their requirement and a sense of anonymity. The Adobe counselling sessions are aimed to improve the coping styles of students which ultimately help them to achieve their personal and academic goals.

As it is universally believed that students' ability to learn is not only affected by the physical and academic environment but it is also greatly influenced by the mental peace and healthy psychological wellbeing, so, maintenance of their mental health and provision of effective counseling services is the prior goal of university. In this regard, this study is being carried out with the aim to identify the problems distance learning students are experiencing. Another objective was to explore their general perception

regarding online counseling sessions. Furthermore, study also aimed to examine the level of satisfaction of students and perceived effectiveness regarding online counseling sessions.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the present study are to:

- Identify a range of psychological, personal and social problems students are experiencing.
- Measure perception of students regarding online counseling.
- Measure students' level of satisfaction with online counseling.
- Measure students' perceived effectiveness of online counseling.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design and Sample

The study is descriptive captivating quantitative research approach. The sample of the study included students from bachelor and master degree programs. Students, who have already received online counseling sessions, were approached via email to respond to the questionnaire. Almost 55 students were approached for data collection out of them only 40 responded to the on-line survey. Overall response rate was 72%. Original sample of the study comprised on 40 participants with age range of 21-37 years old. Detailed demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Frequency, percentages, Mean and Standard Deviation of Demographic Characteristics of the study Sample (N=40)

Variables		f (%)	M(SD)
Age			25.23 (3.03)
Gender	Men	15(37.5%)	
	women	25(62.5%)	
Family system	Nuclear	23(57.5%)	
	Joint	17(42.5%)	
Employment status	Employed	13 (32.5%)	
	Unemployed	27 (67.5%)	
family income			46325(17669.89)
Marital status	Married	18 (45%)	
	Unmarried	22 (55%)	
No. of children (for married only)	0	31 (77.5%)	
	1	4 (10%)	
	2	2 (5%)	
	3	3(7.5%)	

Note. SD= Standard Deviation, M= Mean, f= frequency, %= percentage

As shown in the table 1 of demographics, 37.5% of the sample included men and 62.5% were women. Sample belonged to both joint and nuclear family system.

2.2 Data Collection

The data was collected online. Participants were asked to report the problems for which they approach the counselor as well as the frequency of online counseling were also assessed. To assess the perception of students towards online counseling, a 7-items questionnaire was developed (i.e. I believe online counseling has more advantage than face to face counseling). Participants responded on 2-point response choice (No=0, Yes=1). In order to analyse the data, descriptive statistics were used. Client Satisfaction Inventory short form (CSISF) developed by McMurtry and Hudson (2000) was used also measure the level of satisfaction of clients who received online counseling. The CSISF is consisted of 9 items with scoring on a 7-point Likert scale (i.e. None of the time=1, Very rarely=2, A little of the time=3, Some of the time=4, A good part of the time=5, Most of the time=6, and All of the time=7). The Cronbach alpha reliability of the scale was .69.

3. RESULTS

Initially participants were asked to report the frequency of seeking online counseling session. Majority of the participants reported that they never seek online counseling before (*see table 2*).

Table 2: *Frequency of Online Counseling (n=40)*

	Yes	No	
Have you ever sought for online counseling before this session?	72.5%	27.5%	
	Never	1-4 times	4-8 times
How many times do you use online counseling?	72.5%	17.5%	10%

The results of table 2 showed that 27.5% of the participants have used online counseling services with 17.5% opted services for 1-4 times and 10% for 4-8 times before while 72.5% have never gone for online counseling before this.

Participants' personal, social and psychological problems were also identified. (*See table 3*)

Table 3: *Personal, Social and Psychological Problems of Students*

Problems	f (%)
Study-related issues	19 (47.5%)
Financial issues	6 (15%)
Family-related issues	5 (12.5%)
Sleep-related issues	6 (15%)
Others	4 (10%)

Majority of the students reported that that they were experiencing study-related issues including exams anxiety, presentation anxiety, poor concentration, lack of interest in study, difficulty in managing workload, procrastination and stress of meeting timelines. In financial issues, students reported stress due to joblessness and financial crisis. In family-related issues, few reported to have issues with parents, over possessiveness for loved ones and one of them reported stress due to tantrum and mood swings of her child. 15% reported to experience sleep-related issues i.e. sleep disturbance, lack of sleep and sleep deprivation during exams. 10% of the students reported to have anger issues, difficulty in controlling emotions, low self-esteem, general stress, mood swings, tension and irritability.

Furthermore, students' perception toward online counseling was assessed. They reported to perceived online counseling better than or equally beneficial to face-to-face counseling as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Perception of students towards Online Counseling (n=40)

No.	Items	Yes	No
1	I believe online counseling has more advantages than face to face counseling.	80%	20%
2	I believe online counseling provides a sense of confidentiality to clients.	100%	0%
3	I believe online counselor requires similar characteristics that face-to-face counselor possessed.	100%	0%
4	I believe online counselor requires similar knowledge that face-to-face counselor has.	95%	5%
5	Online counseling helps the clients living in far places.	100%	0%
6	Online counseling is an easiest and cost-efficient service for the client.	100%	0%
7	Online counseling is helpful in overcoming the embarrassment and stigma associated with psychological problems.	92.5%	7.5%

Results indicated that most of the sample showed positive perception towards online counseling. Result indicated that 80% of the sample perceived online counseling better than face-to-face counseling. All of the participants considered online counseling as the easiest to approach and cost efficient providing a sense of confidentiality. Almost 92.5% of the sample perceived online counseling a better way to overcome embarrassment and stigma associated with traditional counseling.

Students' level of satisfaction was also assessed regarding the online counseling provided to them by university counselors. They reported to be greatly satisfied with the services (*see table 5*).

Table 5: Satisfaction of Online Counseling (n=40)

No.	Items	None of the time	Very rarely	A little of time	Some of the time	A good part of the time	Most of the time	All the time
1	People here seem to care about me.	-	2.5%	-	2.5%	12.5%	25%	57.5%
2	I would come back here if I need help again.	-	-	-	2.5%	15%	27.5%	55%
3	I would recommend this place to people I care about.	-	-	5%	-	10%	30%	55%
4	People here seem to know what they are doing.	-	-	-	-	2.5%	27.5%	70%
5	I get the kind of help here that I really need.	-	-	-	-	10%	25%	65%
6	People here accept me for who I am.	-	-	-	5%	15%	20%	60%
7	People here seem to understand how I feel.	-	-	-	5%	17.5%	25%	52.5%
8	I feel I can really talk to people here.	-	-	-	-	15%	20%	65%
9	The help I get here is better than I expected.	-	-	-	-	12.5%	22.5%	65%

Majority of the student reported that they find the online counseling helpful and counselor's attitude was positive toward them. They feel a sense of being cared and understood by counselor and services provided were better than their expectations. None of the participant responded on category 1 (none of the time). Only 1 participant responded on very rarely.

Lastly, students' perceived effectiveness of online counseling. They perceived online counseling quite effective (*see table 6*).

Table 6: *Perceived Effectiveness of Online Counseling (n=40)*

	Not effective	Slightly effective	Moderately effective	Very effective	Highly effective
Perceived Effectiveness	-	-	5%	17.5%	77.5%

Majority of the participants 77.5% reported to find online counseling highly effective while some find it very effective and only 5% found it moderately effective. None of the participant responded on category 1 (not effective) and 2 (slightly effective).

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to explore the Virtual University students' perceived effectiveness of online counseling sessions. Results indicated that they would prefer online counseling to face to face counseling if they had to choose between the both. Reason behind the preference of online counseling is very much related to some cultural factors. Pakistan is a collectivist country where relationships with other members of the society and the interconnectedness between people play a central role in each person's identity. They are less likely to seek professional psychological help due to a number of factors such as cultural stigma and reliance on informal social networks. These factors create a hindrance in seeking face to face counseling and that's why students demonstrated a high level of preferring online counseling. According to Richards and Vigan (2013) online counseling can have a similar impact and is capable of replicating the facilitative conditions as face-to-face counseling. Being first online university in Pakistan, in Virtual University online counseling is becoming more popular and viable form of counseling with advances in Information and communications technology (ICT). According to Zamani and her colleagues (2010) online counseling has been available and widely used as more users are going online, and it is important to note that more people will continue to look to the internet as a resource for dealing with their problems.

Results of the present study showed positive attitude and tremendous effect in their life by using online counseling, these results similar to the results of the studies conducted by Zamani et.al. (2010) and Bato and Marcial (2016). Results indicated that students perceived counselor as a most positive figure, who has relevant knowledge and listening skills and clients felt more comfortable in sharing their problems. Students experienced empathy and unconditional positive regard in the counseling relationship. Where there is empathy, warmth, and positive regard in the relationship, the process of counselling is bound to be effective. The client's experience of feeling empathically understood has been shown to be a primary component of effective counseling and the best predictor of a successful outcome. Skills and competence of the counselor were seen to play a significant role in making counseling more effective.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall results showed that students preferred online counseling more than traditional face-to-face counseling and they were satisfied with the services they got throughout the counseling sessions. They also showed positive perception towards the skills of the counselor.

5.1 Limitations and Future Directions

One of the major limitations of this study was its small sample size thus limiting the ability to generalize the findings to other counseling students. Therefore, the study recommends further research on larger sample size as well as to explore the gender differences between in the perception of online counseling. Additional areas of research should be considered to understand how attitudes toward online counseling related to some variables like age, gender, socioeconomic status, marital status.

Acknowledgements

Participation of all participants is highly acknowledged.


Conflict of Interest


Authors declared NO conflict of interest.


Funding Source

The authors received NO funding to conduct this study.

ORCID iDs

Asma Zafar¹  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6546-7836>

Ayesha Farooq²  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6614-8591>

Narjis Sherazi³  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1935-1121>

REFERENCES

- Amstadter, A. B., Broman-Fulks, J., Zinzow, H., Ruggiero, K. J., & Cercone, J. (2009). Internet- based interventions for traumatic stress related mental health problems: A review and suggestion for future research. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29, 410–420. doi:[10.1016/j.cpr.2009.04.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.04.001)
- Castillo, L. G., & Schwartz, S. J. (2013). Introduction to the special issue on college student mental health. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(4), 291-297. DOI: [10.1002/jclp.21972](https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.21972)
- Chester, A., & Glass, C. A. (2006). Online counselling: A descriptive analysis of therapy services on the Internet. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 34(2), 145-160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880600583170>
- Ching, A. M., Yeh, C. J., Siu, W. Y., Wu, K. A., & Okubo, Y. (2009). Evaluation of a school-based internship program for Chinese immigrant adolescents in the United States. *Adolescence*, 44(175). PMID: 19950872.
- Christensen, H., Griffiths, K. M., Mackinnon, A. J., & Brittliffe, K. (2006). Online randomized controlled trial of brief and full cognitive behaviour therapy for depression. *Psychological Medicine*, 36(12), 1737-1746. doi: [10.1017/S0033291706008695](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291706008695)
- DoHA, Department of Health and Ageing. (2012). E-mental health strategy for Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-pubs-eemstrat>.
- Eisenberg, D., Gollust, S. E., Golberstein, E., & Hefner, J. L. (2007). Prevalence and correlates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among university students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 77(4), 534-542. DOI: [10.1037/0002-9432.77.4.534](https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.77.4.534)
- Gainsbury, S., & Blaszczynski, A. (2011). A systematic review of Internet-based therapy for the treatment of addictions. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 31(3), 490-498. DOI: [10.1016/j.cpr.2010.11.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.11.007)
- Glasheen, K., Campbell, M., & Shochet, I. (2013). Opportunities and Challenges: School Guidance Counsellors' Perceptions of Counselling Students Online. *Australian Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 23(2), 222-235. doi: [10.1017/jgc.2013.15](https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2013.15)
- Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K., & Christensen, H. (2010). Perceived barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young people: A systematic review. *BMC Psychiatry*, 10(1), 113. doi: [10.1186/1471-244X-10-113](https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-10-113)

- Heflinger, C. A., & Hinshaw, S. P. (2010). Stigma in child and adolescent mental health services research: Understanding professional and institutional stigmatization of youth with mental health problems and their families. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 37(1-2), 61-70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-010-0294-z>
- Hohenshil, T., Amundson, N. E., & Niles, S. G. (2013). Counseling around the world: An international handbook. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-30459-000>
- Hyun, J. K., Quinn, B. C., Madon, T., & Lustig, S. (2006). Graduate student mental health: Needs assessment and utilization of counseling services. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(3), 247-266. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0030>
- Kruisselbrink Flatt, A. (2013). A Suffering Generation: Six Factors Contributing to the Mental Health Crisis in North American Higher Education. *College Quarterly*, 16(1), n1.
- Perle, J. G., Langsam, L. C., & Nierenberg, B. (2011). Controversy clarified: An updated review of clinical psychology and tele-health. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 31(8), 1247-1258. DOI: [10.1016/j.cpr.2011.08.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2011.08.003)
- Prince, J. P. (2015). University student counseling and mental health in the United States: Trends and challenges. *Mental Health and Prevention*, 3(1-2), 5-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2015.03.001>
- Quinn, N., Wilson, A., MacIntyre, G., & Tinklin, T. (2009). People look at you differently: Students' experience of mental health support within higher education. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 37(4), 405-418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880903161385>
- Richards, D., & Viganó, N. (2013). Online counseling: A narrative and critical review of the literature. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(9), 994-1011. DOI: [10.1002/jclp.21974](https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.21974)
- Robson, D., & Robson, M. (2000). Ethical issues in Internet counselling. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 13(3), 249-257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070010037911>
- Rodgers, L. S., & Tennison, L. R. (2009). A preliminary assessment of adjustment disorder among first-year college students. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 23(3), 220-230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnu.2008.05.007>
- Strepparava, M. G., Bani, M., Zorzi, F., Corrias, D., Dolce, R., & Rezzonico, G. (2015). Cognitive counselling intervention: Treatment effectiveness in an Italian university centre. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 44(4), 423-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2015.1110561>
- Wong, K. P., Bonn, G., Tam, C. L., & Wong, C. P. (2018). Preferences for online and/or faceto-face counseling among university students in Malaysia. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 64. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00064>
- Youssef, F. F., Bachew, R., Bodie, D., Leach, R., Morris, K., & Sherma, G. (2014). Knowledge and attitudes towards mental illness among college students: Insights into the wider English-speaking Caribbean population. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 60(1), 47-54. DOI: [10.1177/0020764012461236](https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764012461236)