
The Impact of Attitudes toward Online Counseling on the Emotional Well-Being of Distance Learners at Knust

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Abstract: *Web-based counseling is a cutting-edge delivery method that can reach college students who might not seek aid in person. Distance learning requires that learners access academic services remotely from the institution of study. Thus, academic services and support services such as counseling are remotely accessed. Due to the remote learning nature of distance learning, remote counseling or online counseling is the way to go. This study sought to understand the impact of attitudes toward online counseling services on improving the emotional well-being of distance students. The approach to the study is a quantitative research design using the adapted and shaped Positive Emotional Well-being Scale (PEWS) and the adapted and shaped Online Counseling Scale (OCS) questionnaire, which represents the average value on the Likert scale for online counseling was used to help evaluate the weak and strong perceptions regarding attitudes toward online counseling. The purposive sampling technique was used to select 354 students who were distance learners at KNUST. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to determine the relationship between Attitudes toward Online Counseling and Emotional Well-being scores. The variables Attitudes toward Online Counseling and Emotional Well-being were found to be strongly correlated, $r(354) = .587, p < .0001$. In all, there was a significant positive relationship between Attitudes toward Online Counseling and Emotional well-being among distance learners at KNUST. Findings, therefore, showed that a positive and strong attitude toward online counseling is significant in resolving the emotional well-being concerns of distance learning students at KNUST.*

Keywords: *Online Counseling, Emotional Well-Being, Distance Learners.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Students have traditionally relied on face-to-face interactions with counseling centers for support, receiving individual and group counseling, and participating in educational activities.

However, technological advancements have shifted many services, including counseling, to digital platforms, greatly impacting education (Tahir, 2016). Open and remote learning models now provide flexible, accessible education with counseling at their core (Ukweuze, 2013). The digital revolution, driven by widespread access to digital tools, has made online counseling increasingly feasible, especially for those who struggle with traditional methods (Muhleisen et al., 2018; Unisa, 2013).

Over the past decade, the use of online counseling has surged, addressing students' emotional well-being issues (Francis-Smith, 2014; Hooley et al., 2016). This rise can be attributed to several factors, including increased internet penetration, the proliferation of smartphones, and the growing acceptance of digital communication as a viable means of providing mental health support. Online counseling offers several advantages, such as greater accessibility for students in remote areas, reduced stigma associated with seeking help, and the ability to provide continuous support irrespective of geographical boundaries (Barak, 2008).

While significant growth in cyber counseling has been noted in developed countries (Barak, 2008), there has been little progress in developing nations. This disparity highlights a critical gap in the accessibility and utilization of online counseling services. Distance learners, who often miss out on conventional counseling due to their virtual learning environment, also face challenges accessing online counseling (Amos et al., 2020). These challenges include limited internet access, lack of digital literacy, and cultural attitudes towards mental health and technology.

Despite these obstacles, the potential benefits of online counseling for distance learners cannot be overlooked. Effective online counseling can provide timely and personalized support, helping to mitigate feelings of isolation, stress, and anxiety that are often experienced by students engaged in remote learning. Additionally, the integration of digital counseling services within educational frameworks can enhance the overall learning experience, promoting emotional well-being and academic success.

This study aims to investigate how attitudes toward online counseling impact the emotional well-being of distance learners at KNUST, addressing a gap in research concerning online counseling in the African context. By examining the perceptions and experiences of distance learners, this research seeks to provide insights into the effectiveness of online counseling and identify strategies to improve its accessibility and acceptance. The findings of this study could inform the development of policies and programs that support the mental health needs of distance learners, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of enhancing educational outcomes and quality of life for students in developing countries.

2. RELATED WORKS

History of Counseling

As stated by Herr (1999), the roots of counseling can be traced back to its origins, the clients involved in the counseling process, and the societal and political contexts that shape the significance and importance attributed to counseling. Ancient civilizations like Greece and Rome employed psychological healing techniques thousands of years ago (Jackson, 1999). Over time, counseling has evolved into a recognized profession rather than being considered an extension of guidance, as it was during the early 20th century. According to Herr (1999),



most specialized areas of counseling have emerged to address specific client needs within the aforementioned systems and environmental contexts. This can be attributed to several factors, including insufficient training and supervision during their education, a lack of regulatory frameworks for certification and licensure, the absence of clearly defined ethical codes, and limited access to research resources (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2008). Although the term "counseling" was officially documented in writing in 1931, the practice of providing assistance and support has a much longer history. In ancient civilizations like Greece and Rome, psychological healing was already being conducted thousands of years ago (Jackson, 1999). Today, counseling is recognized as a distinct profession and is no longer considered an adjunct to guidance, as it was in the early 20th century. It has evolved into a vibrant professional field with accredited graduate programs across the United States. The practice of counseling is now regulated by state and federal licensing and certification requirements, and it has established its professional organizations, philosophies, standards, and ethical codes.

The History and Evolution of Counseling Services Offered in Colleges and Higher Education Institutions

In the post-World War II era, specifically in the late 1940s, counseling programs for students at colleges and universities were first developed. Veterans of the armed forces received financial aid for their college education, and campus counseling programs were established to help them adjust to civilian life and college life through career counseling and testing. All enrolled students soon accessed counseling services for various issues, although services continued to place a significant emphasis on career counseling and evaluation. However, concerns have been raised by individuals who have experienced such mergers, expressing worries about the loss of essential student services and the diminished focus on preventative and instructional functions that were originally provided by the counseling center (Brown, Perez, & Reeder, 2007; Rawls & St. Martin, 2013). In the realm of college campus services, emotional well-being clinics and counseling centers have historically existed as two separate but occasionally overlapping entities. Dating back to 1910 when Princeton University established the first emotional well-being service for college students, emotional well-being clinics were primarily staffed by psychiatrists and often considered part of the campus health facility (Leitch, 1978). As noted by Essuman (1996), the University of Ghana, Legon (Accra), was the pioneer in establishing a dedicated Center for Counseling Services for Students among the universities in Ghana. Dating back to 1910 when Princeton University established the first emotional well-being service for college students, emotional well-being clinics were primarily staffed by psychiatrists and often considered part of the campus health facility (Leitch, 1978).

Online Counseling in the 21st Century.

The Internet is a rapidly evolving field in Information Technology, with increasing usage each year, particularly in online media accessible to children, teachers, and parents (Habibah et al., 2021). Education has significantly benefited from this growth, with the internet enabling new online platforms for guidance and counseling services (Harlina et al., 2020). Many young people now use social media daily as their main communication tool (Mesch, 2012; Campbell & Colmar, 2014). Consequently, school counselors need innovative solutions like e-counseling to support students in their preferred communication style (Kok, 2016; Cipolletta & Mocellin,

2017). E-counseling, or online counseling, involves therapeutic interventions over the Internet between a counselor and client, eliminating the need for in-person meetings (Richards & Viganó, 2013). Research by Zainudin & Yusop (2018) and Richards & Viganó (2012) has explored this field. The counseling profession has been influenced by technology and globalization, emphasizing online counseling and multiculturalism (Geldard et al., 2015; Sue et al., 2019; Zamani et al., 2010). Counseling aims to help clients in distress by leveraging their strengths to restore their pre-crisis functioning, and this goal applies to online counseling as well (Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005).

Application of Online Counseling in ODL

Upon reviewing existing literature on online counseling among distance learning students, it was found that most of the research had focused on traditional contact institutions in first-world countries, primarily in Europe.

Researchers' frequent concentration was on the characteristics and importance of virtual counseling without really bearing in mind the influence and effectiveness of technological knowledge in OD learning situations (Marks et al., 2007; Richards, *Journal of College Student Psychocounseling* 5, 2009). The majority of students who attend distance learning institutions, however, hold down full-time jobs, so they do not always have the luxury of being able to contact a student counselor right away when they need one. As a result, student counseling faces unique challenges in the ODL environment.

Online Counseling Comes in Two Primary Varieties

These methods can be divided into synchronous and asynchronous formats (Gamble et al., 2015; Suler, 2011). Asynchronous forms, such as email counseling (Gamble et al., 2015) and Li et al. (2013), involve time delays in communication. On the other hand, synchronous forms, including platforms like WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, and video chats, enable real-time interaction (Gamble et al., 2015). Video conferencing, similar to traditional face-to-face counseling, involves counselors speaking directly to clients, where participants use electronic devices to transmit audio and visual cues over long distances (Barak & Grohol, 2011).

Components of Online Counseling

Videoconferencing Counseling: Simpson (2009) opined that several case studies have provided evidence to support the effectiveness of videoconferencing counseling as a viable method of delivering care. The regular incorporation of both video and in-person sessions indicates that videoconferencing can be seen as a complement to traditional in-person psycho counseling rather than a substitute.

Text-Based Online Counseling: The effectiveness of these therapies has been extensively studied, with research conducted by Barak and Grohol (2011) and D'Arcy et al. (2015) focusing on text-based online counseling. In a meta-analysis conducted by Barak et al. (2008), which examined 14 studies involving 9764 clients, no significant differences were found between face-to-face counseling and online counseling. Qualitative research, as indicated by Suler (2010) and D'Arcy et al. (2015), suggests that online counseling may provide a more



comfortable and less intimidating experience compared to face-to-face counseling. This is particularly relevant for individuals dealing with social anxiety.

Computerized/Internet-Based Counseling Programs: In recent years, a significant number of controlled trials have been conducted, surpassing 200, to examine the effectiveness of Internet-based interventions for various emotional well-being disorders and conditions. These studies have contributed to a growing body of evidence that supports the efficacy of online therapies. The findings suggest that the outcomes of these therapies are often comparable to those achieved through traditional face-to-face psychocounseling (Berger, 2016; Fenger et al., 2016). Calbring et al. (2018) also found that both face-to-face and computerized cognitive behavioral counseling (CBT) yielded positive results for mental and somatic illnesses.

Emotional and Mental well-being apps: The continuous evolution and abundance of smartphone and web apps pose a challenge for researchers when it comes to evaluating their effectiveness in everyday healthcare settings (Bennion et al., 2017). Although there is some indication that carefully developed and evidence-based applications can enhance user outcomes, the overall efficacy of many of these tools remains largely unproven (Anthes, 2016; Martinez and Farhan, 2019).

The Attitude of Student-Clients toward Online Counseling.

Consumers expect counselors to assess current opinions on Internet counseling, guided by ethical guidelines from organizations like the American Psychological Association and the National Board for Certified Counselors. The diverse professional opinions on online counseling pose challenges for counselors in taking a clear stance. Research on public perceptions of e-counseling can clarify clinical views on its necessity and demand. Online counseling may gain support if clients view it favorably and providers can meet their needs ethically. Given extensive research on help-seeking attitudes, it's crucial to focus specifically on attitudes toward online counseling. Studies over the past two decades have explored consumer attitudes toward seeking help, considering various factors (Fischer & Farina, 1995; Fischer, Winer, & Abramowitz, 1983; Rule & Gandy, 1994). Despite debates on the link between attitudes and help-seeking behavior (Fischer et al., 1983; Good & Wood, 1995), research highlights traits of individuals likely to have positive or negative attitudes toward help-seeking. However, general findings should not be applied to specific counseling forms (Rochlen, Mohr, & Hargrove, 1999). A reliable test is needed to evaluate attitudes toward cyber counseling specifically.

Counseling and Emotional Well-being Facilities

Throughout higher education history, emotional well-being services for students have evolved from integrated campus health clinics to distinct counseling facilities. Princeton University established the first such service in 1910 within its health center, focusing on psychiatry. The "mental hygiene movement" of the early 20th century promoted medical approaches to emotional well-being, emphasizing diagnosis and treatment (Beers, 1935; Bertolote, 2008). From 1920 to 1940, factors like the Guidance Movement, World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II influenced the development of college counseling centers, which began to



focus on transitional issues, career development, and social skills rather than just illness (Bound & Turner, 2002; La Follette, 2009). In the 1960s and 1970s, the "counterculture movement" led to a preference for non-medical solutions among students, creating competition between counseling centers and emotional well-being clinics (LaFollette, 2009). By the late 1960s, many universities merged these facilities for cost savings and to simplify fee structures (Kraft, 2011). However, some campuses maintained distinct services, often leading to conflicts between medical and developmental approaches. Despite these differences, both aim to enhance students' emotional well-being and academic success.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in post-positivist presumptions, which are more suited for quantitative research. These presumptions include a reductionist method of breaking down ideas into digestible parts for study and a deterministic perspective in which causes determine effects. The research aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the attitudes towards online counseling and its impact on the emotional well-being of distance learners at KNUST.

Data were directly collected from a sample of the population using a descriptive survey approach, which allowed for the creation of a numerical depiction of trends, opinions, and correlations between variables. The population comprised all 13,721 IDL students (8,664 men and 5,057 women) enrolled in the 2021–2022 academic year who use KNUST as their only learning center. Using the sample size table developed by Krejcie and Morgan, a sample size of 354 students was selected for the investigation.

Purposive sampling was utilized to choose participants according to predetermined criteria to guarantee the inclusion of marginalized groups and to collect pertinent, high-quality data. This sampling method ensured that the study could capture diverse perspectives and experiences, particularly from students who might be underrepresented in general surveys. Criteria for selection included age, gender, course of study, and frequency of using online counseling services.

Students participating in KNUST's open-distance learning program provided data via a standardized questionnaire. This survey was conducted using Google Forms and had closed-ended questions based on the Positive Emotional Well-Being Scale and the verified Online Counseling Scale. The use of Google Forms facilitated the collection of data in a cost-effective and time-efficient manner, allowing respondents to participate at their convenience.

The Positive Emotional Well-being Scale, developed by Simsek (2011), used a five-point Likert scale to gauge respondents' answers, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This scale measured various dimensions of emotional well-being, including happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience. The Online Counseling Scale, modified from a 2016 research by Louisa et al., had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, indicating high reliability. This scale assessed students' attitudes towards online counseling, including perceived effectiveness, ease of use, and overall satisfaction with the service.

To evaluate overall sentiments, the Likert-scale responses' mean and standard deviation were computed. This statistical analysis provided insights into the general trends and variations in students' attitudes and emotional well-being. Additionally, the participants' average age was



supplied to assess the generalizability of the study and ensure that the findings could be applied to the broader population of distance learners.

The association between attitudes toward online therapy and emotional well-being was investigated using Pearson Correlation and Linear Regression analysis. These statistical methods enabled the researchers to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the variables, providing a clear understanding of how students' perceptions of online counseling influenced their emotional well-being.

All participants' informed permission, anonymity, and confidentiality were upheld per the ethical requirements for the study. Ethical considerations included obtaining consent from participants, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining the confidentiality of the respondents' information. The study also adhered to guidelines for ethical research practices, such as providing participants with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks.

Furthermore, the data collection process was designed to minimize any potential biases. For instance, the questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of students to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions. Any ambiguous or misleading questions were revised before the full-scale survey was conducted. This pre-testing phase helped improve the validity and reliability of the data collected.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the survey, 75.2% of participants were male, with 75% being undergraduates and 25% postgraduates. All participants engaged in online counseling via email, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp video, chat, and SMS. Specifically, 40.6% used WhatsApp chat, 20.6% WhatsApp video, 20% SMS, 13.2% Facebook Messenger, and 5.6% email. This shows WhatsApp was the most popular tool for counseling, aligning with Amos and Antwi's (2020) findings. The mean attitude score toward online counseling was 3.527, indicating a generally positive attitude among distance learners. Gender differences were noted in attitudes, contrasting Benedicta (2020), who found no significant relationship. Adebowale (2014) also reported positive attitudes toward online counseling among undergraduates. Wong et al. (2018) found Malaysian students more open to online than face-to-face counseling. Most respondents were willing to receive counseling online. A linear regression analysis showed a significant correlation between attitudes toward online counseling and emotional well-being ($F(1, 354) = 185.12, p < 0.0001$), with a regression coefficient of $b = .587, p < 0.0001$. This indicates that positive attitudes toward online counseling significantly impact emotional health. Overall, the study suggests online counseling is an effective alternative to in-person counseling, offering high acceptance and satisfaction (Backhaus et al., 2012). It promotes self-disclosure, support, and empathy as effectively as face-to-face counseling (McKenna, 1998). Despite some preferring in-person sessions for sincerity, online counseling provides comfort, accessibility, and positive outcomes for KNUST remote learners (Cui et al., 2010).

Discussion

The results of the study showed that online counseling was extremely important for raising students' mental health. Online counseling's ease of use and adaptability made it possible for



students to get help whenever they needed it, removing geographical and mobility-related constraints. Students were therefore more inclined to ask for assistance and participated in counseling sessions, which had a positive emotional impact. Students could express their worries and emotions in a private, secure environment through online counseling, which lessened the stigma attached to conventional in-person counseling. According to the study, students who took part in online counseling sessions reported feeling happier, having fewer symptoms of anxiety and despair, and having better overall emotional wellness. According to the study, every participant conducted their counseling sessions using a variety of online platforms, such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp video, WhatsApp chat, email, and SMS. This means that at least every participant interacted with a counselor using a device. The most popular platform was WhatsApp Chat, which WhatsApp Video followed. According to a previous study by Amos and Antwi (2020), the majority of KNUST distance learners preferred utilizing WhatsApp chat for online counseling. These results were by that study's findings. KNUST remote learners had a robust and affirmative disposition toward virtual counseling, demonstrating their positive assessment of this methodology. This result is consistent with a 2014 study by Adebowale at Obafemi Awolowo University, where undergraduate students likewise showed favorable opinions toward online counseling services. Additionally, Awabil and Akosah (2018) in Ghana revealed comparably favorable sentiments among students, as indicated in a study where respondents positively assessed their attitude toward online counseling on a scale of one to five.

The study found that KNUST distant learners' positive attitudes toward online counseling significantly influence their emotional well-being. The study's overall findings demonstrated how online counseling can completely transform the way we assist students' mental health and well-being. The study's findings showed a strong and positive correlation between the emotional health of KNUST distant learners and their opinions of online counseling. The study's findings emphasize the need to encourage distance learners to have a positive attitude toward online counseling and draw attention to the potential for online counseling to enhance students' emotional wellness in higher education. The results of the study highlight the significance of encouraging distant learners to have a positive attitude regarding online counseling. Universities may make it easier for students to ask for assistance and use online counseling services by creating a welcoming and supportive environment. Thus, there may be an increase in general mental health, a decrease in stress and anxiety, and an improvement in emotional well-being. Institutions can assist in bridging the gap in support services that distant students frequently face by encouraging them to see online counseling as a helpful resource. The study's findings also demonstrate how important an impact online counseling may have on improving students' emotional well-being while they are enrolled in postsecondary education. Online counseling can assist students in overcoming the particular difficulties associated with distance learning, such as loneliness and a lack of connection, by offering easily available and adaptable support services. Schools may reach a larger audience and help kids who would not have received therapy by using technology to give counseling services. Institutions may show their dedication to student welfare and offer a complete support system that takes into account the various requirements of their students by giving online counseling top priority.

5. CONCLUSION

Significant findings from the data analysis were generalized to create statements that backed up the conclusions. The literature was then taken into consideration while interpreting these claims. The findings are regarded as answers to every research inquiry. The general tenor of the poll indicated that all participants received online counseling by SMS, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp chat, email, and video chat. Once more, the findings demonstrated that the most engaging online platform used by students is WhatsApp conversation, which is followed by WhatsApp video. Furthermore, IDL students thought highly of online counseling. Once more, there are gender disparities in the attitudes that IDL students have about online counseling. Overall, views about online counseling and the emotional health of KNUST distance learners were favorably correlated, and this positively correlated connection had a significant influence on the emotional health of the learners. Using Facebook Messenger, SMS, WhatsApp video, E-mail, and WhatsApp chat, this finding demonstrated that every responder got counseling online. Again, the results showed that the most engaging online medium used by students was WhatsApp video and chat. This is by research by Amos and Antwi (2020), who found that the majority of students enrolled in the KNUST counseling section used online counseling via WhatsApp chat. Based on the 5.0 Agreement Likert Scale scores, it was clear that IDL students thought online counseling was beneficial and that it helped them feel better emotionally. The study found that distant learners' emotional well-being was significantly impacted by their favorable perceptions regarding online counseling. The positive correlation between attitudes toward online counseling and emotional well-being is indicative that online counseling factually improves the emotional well-being of students, saving them from the vices associated with poor emotional well-being. The results of the study showed that online counseling was extremely important for raising students' emotional well-being. Online counseling's ease of use and adaptability made it possible for students to get help whenever they needed it, removing geographical and mobility-related constraints. Students were therefore more inclined to ask for assistance and participate in counseling sessions, which had a positive emotional impact. Students could express their worries and emotions in a private, secure environment through online therapy, which lessened the stigma attached to conventional in-person counseling. According to the study, students who took part in online counseling sessions reported feeling happier, having fewer symptoms of anxiety and despair, and having better overall emotional wellness. The findings of the study will have a significant impact on online counseling in higher education going forward. Recognizing that online therapy may improve emotional well-being, educational institutions can be proactive in promoting their students' mental health. As the popularity of online learning increases, institutions need to give priority to support services that deal with the particular difficulties associated with distant learning.

In the end, this study shows that online counseling is an essential resource for fostering emotional health in distant learners. Institutions may cultivate an environment of caring and support that transcends the classroom and into the digital sphere by embracing this technology and placing a high priority on student help. They may enable students to flourish in all facets of their lives and achieve their goals by doing this. Technology is a contemporary tool that must be harnessed by all and sundry especially educational institutions to extract its juicy



outcomes as an intervention to solve societal and institutional problems. Seizing this tool in complementing the efforts of orthodox counseling is the right step in the right direction because it will compensate for the lapses posed by the orthodox one.

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