Preferences for Online and/or Face-to-Face Counseling among University Students in Malaysia

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Increasingly, online counseling is considered to be a cost-effective and highly accessible method of providing basic counseling and mental health services. To examine the potential of online delivery as a way of increasing overall usage of services, this study looked at students' attitudes toward and likelihood of using both online and/or face-to-face counseling. A survey was conducted with 409 students from six universities in Malaysia participating. Approximately 35% of participants reported that they would be likely to utilize online counseling services but would be unlikely to participate in face-to-face counseling. Based on these results, it is suggested that offering online counseling, in addition to face-to-face services, could be an effective way for many university counseling centers to increase the utilization of their services and thus better serve their communities.

Keywords: online counseling, face-to-face counseling, online therapy, e-therapy, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Although traditional face-to-face counseling is the method preferred by most professionals, a large portion of those who could benefit from counseling services do not in fact seek them out. This study looked at preferences among students for face-to-face vs. online counseling and found that a significant proportion of university students in Malaysia would prefer to receive mental health counseling online. Given the overall underutilization of counseling services, it is argued that online delivery of counseling services should be considered as an alternative means of reaching many who remain untreated.

Most people, at some point in their lives, face adjustment difficulties or other mental health challenges. Studies in Malaysia have estimated that between 9.6 and 35% of the population; around 2.8–10 million individuals, could benefit from, but are not receiving, mental health support (Crabtree and Chong, 2000; Chong et al., 2013). Similarly, the World Health Organization estimates that 14% of the global population suffers from some form of mental, neurological, or substance use disorder, and 75% of those in need do not receive any treatment (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016). Despite the availability of on-campus support at most institutions, usage of mental health services among university students appears to be comparably low. Lustig et al. (2006), for example, found that approximately 70% of university students who could benefit from mental health counseling did not utilize available services.

There are many reasons why individuals might hesitate to seek traditional face-to-face counseling (Barak et al., 2008; Gilat et al., 2011). Particularly in Asian societies, stigma associated with mental health problems appears to deter many from seeking professional help

(Eisenberg et al., 2007; Al-krenawi et al., 2009; Heflinger and Hinshaw, 2010). Studies have also found that Asians are generally not as comfortable with self-disclosure and are less likely to psychologize their problems compared to those from western societies (Kutcher et al., 2009; Youssef et al., 2014; Haroz et al., 2017). Given the strength of such cultural barriers, qualities inherent in online counseling such as relative anonymity and physical distance could make it an attractive option for many who would otherwise remain untreated (Chester and Glass, 2006; Centore and Milacci, 2008; Rodda and Dan, 2014).

Online Writing Counseling

A number of researchers have used popular online chat applications such as Whatsapp and Wechat to provide counseling services, with generally positive results (Chester and Glass, 2006; Lewis and Coursol, 2007; Barak et al., 2008). Specifically, for example, Nolan et al. (2011) conducted a longitudinal study where four therapists provided counseling via text messaging to 40 students over 3 years. Participants described the service as valuable to their adjustment and specifically noted the convenience and consistent availability of online support. Particularly relevant to Asian contexts, another study (Ching et al., 2009) found that Chinese immigrants in the United States reported a higher degree of comfort with text-based online counseling as compared to face-to-face.

Although online counseling appears to work for some, other studies show that it is often not the best solution. One study based in Singapore, for example, reported less effective client–counselor interactions in online settings (Kit et al., 2014): counselors reported difficulty guiding interactions, as well as a limited ability to elicit responses from clients during online sessions. Similarly, Im et al. (2007) reported that support services for cancer patients were more effective when delivered face-to-face as opposed to online. It was suggested that a lack of non-verbal cues such as tone of voice and body language limits the ability of online counselors to empathize and build rapport (Haberstroh et al., 2008). Such results are not universal, however. Wagner et al. (2014), for example, reported better outcomes 3 months after treatment for online, as compared face-to-face, clients.

Clearly, there is no argument being made here against face-to-face counseling services. It seems appropriate to consider, however, that online services may be able to fill some niche within an overall treatment space. Here, given that findings from outside Malaysia have indicated that some portion of those surveyed would be more inclined to pursue online, as opposed to face-to-face, counseling services (Borzekowski and Rickert, 2001; Bober and Livingstone, 2005; Buck et al., 2007), this study looked at relative preferences for, and the likelihood of utilizing, online as opposed to face-to-face counseling services among Malaysian university students. The research questions were:

1. Is there a specific sub-set of Malaysian university students who would prefer to utilize online as opposed to face-to-face counseling services?

2. What proportion of students report that they would only utilize online counseling?

METHOD

Participants

A paper and pencil survey was completed by 409 students from six universities across the Klang Valley region of Malaysia. The six universities included two international universities with local campuses, two private-local universities, and two local-government universities.

All participants were over 16 years, Malaysian, and current university students. Participation was voluntary, and completely anonymous. Participants did not receive any form of compensation. The participants ($n = 409$) were predominantly of Malaysian Chinese ethnicity (68.0%). The sample consisted of 41.6% (170) male participants and 58.4% (239) female participants. The age range of the participants was 16–35 years, with a median age of 20 years for both males and females; 15.2% (62) participants identified themselves as Malay; 68% (278) identified as Malaysian Chinese; 13.4% (55) identified as Malaysian Indian; and 3.4% (14) of participants identified themselves as from other Malaysian ethnic groups.

Materials

Upon reading and signing the informed consent form, participants completed a demographic questionnaire, the Preference for Seeking Online or Face-to Face Counseling form, the Online Counseling Attitude Scale (OCAS), and the Face-to-Face Counseling Attitude Scale (FFAS). No identifying information was collected.

Preference for Seeking Online or Face-to-Face Counseling

Participants answered two 10-point Likert scale-type questions intended to measure the degree to which they would prefer to exclusively use either online or face-to-face counseling services. The items were: "When seeking professional help services, to what degree would you prefer to use online counseling only?" and "when seeking professional help services, to what degree would you prefer to use face-to-face counseling only?" (1 = LEAST Preferred and 10 = MOST Preferred). The variable (Pref_Only_OLC) reported in the section "Results" represents responses to the first of these questions.

Online Counseling Attitude Survey (OCAS)

The OCAS is a 10-item measure using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Not at all and 5 = Very) (Rochlen et al., 2004). This survey measures participants' attitudes toward online counseling. The OCAS consists of two subscales: Discomfort with Online Counseling and Value of Online Counseling. Sample items are: "I would feel uneasy discussing emotional problems with an online counselor"; "Using online counseling would help me learn about myself". Including Asian samples, internal consistency has ranged from 0.77 to 0.90. Test–retest reliability ranged from 0.77 to 0.88 (Rochlen et al., 2004; Bathje et al., 2014).