

CLIENT PERSPECTIVES ON SINGLE SESSION CHAT-BASED INDIVIDUAL ONLINE COUNSELING AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT:

Background: With the increasing availability of the internet as a counseling resource, there is a growing amount of literature related to both synchronous and asynchronous online interventions. This study aimed to examine perspectives of undergraduate students who personally experienced a single session of synchronous chat-based online counseling.

Methods: There were 71 undergraduate students in psychology participating in a single-session chat-based individual online counseling based on the Existential-Humanistic approach which emphasises clients' self-awareness and personal growth. The students' self-reflection journal on their experience with some quotations from the session were collected. Data was analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis.

Results: Findings revealed four main themes. The first theme examined the advantageous and disadvantageous characteristics of online counseling. The second theme related to the factors that interfere with the counseling process. The third theme was about the effectiveness of online counselors. The final theme related to the outcomes of what students got from the service.

Conclusion: This study suggests that with appropriate conditions in place, a single session chat-based online counseling service may show promise for providing a practical and therapeutic alternative or adjunctive resource to face-to-face counseling for undergraduates that have some adjustment difficulties. Further research could explore how these technological advancements can be used to reach and empower potential clients with diverse psychological concerns and needs.

Keywords: Chat-based online counseling; Undergraduate student; Qualitative study

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INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, there have been the increasing number of studies on online counseling, especially among adolescents who are familiar with the online world [1-5]. This can be explained by the fact that via this channel enables easier access to the young, who may not be ready for face-to-face service, possibly due to uneasiness to reveal their personal problems with a stranger, the feeling that their problems are to be shamed, or the

need to protect their images [3, 6, 7]. Especially, the group of teenagers prone to suicide or despair, who tend to keep things to or isolate from the society to themselves [8], usually prefer types of services that require no face-to-face encounter and allow their anonymity, such as online services. Hence, it is likely that online counseling services can become a helping source that increasing more adolescents would recognize and turn to in the future and that will receive more attention.

Such advantages of online counseling service appeal to many academic institutions, such as some high schools in Australia [9], United States, and

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South Korea [10]. These institutions have begun to conduct research on online counseling service as a means to take care of their students' psychological health so as to reach out more thoroughly and enable students to access the helping services more easily.

In Thailand, so far there hasn't been empirical research about online counseling service within the context of academic institutions. As a result, the researchers have developed an online psychological counseling, "Youth Online Counseling and Psychological Services" (www.youthonlinecps.com), as a pilot study on chat-based online counseling service for undergraduates. The single-session chat-based online counseling services were provided to 71 undergraduate students who had psychological concerns to explore post-online-counseling experience of these students. The findings were expected to suggest possibilities of introducing this service into academic institutes in the future.

METHODS

The main research question of this study was "What are undergraduates' experiences of receiving a chat-based individual online counseling?" Since this study investigated the perspectives of undergraduates about their experiences, descriptive phenomenology framed and guided the research inquiry [11]. Details of research method are as below.

Key informants

They were 71 out of 80 undergraduate students in psychology (17 males and 54 females) who registered in a psychology course in the academic year of 2013. They were all junior who met inclusive criteria: (1) Willing to have a single-session, around-60-minute talk about personal troubling topics in their academic or daily living with the counseling psychologist (first author) via online chat, (2) Willing to allow their information for the study.

Instruments

There were a single-session chat-based online counseling service and self-reflection journal form.

1. The single-session chat-based online counseling service developed by the researcher and the second author (the first author dissertation advisor) namely the online counseling website, "Youth Online Counseling and Psychological Services." Counselor theoretical approach in this study is an Existential-Humanistic Counseling. This approach emphasis on clients' self-awareness and personal growth by focusing current concerns and helping a person realize his or her potential. The

counseling session consisted of the following standard procedure: (1) Introduction and building a rapport (2) Addressing the issue that needed to be counseled (3) Exploring the background to gain insight into the problem (4) Showing empathy towards the clients (5) Facilitating the clients to understand themselves and their problems, which would enable the clients themselves to find a solution to the problems and (6) Closing the counseling session. Students receiving the counseling service would spend around 60-90 minutes conversing with the counseling psychologist about their problems in study or daily lives.

2. Self-reflection journal was an open-ended report the client students wrote to reflect their experiences from chat-based online counseling service 1-2 pages long.

Procedures

The researcher publicized the project through announcement in a psychology class, 2013, in a university, to ask students for participation in the study by bringing the troubling issues they had in their academic and daily lives to the single-session chat-based online counseling with the psychologist. They could choose to receive the service from 3 time slots: 7-8 p.m., 8-9 p.m., and 9-10 p.m. The chat-based online counseling project was active from 9th November, 2013 – 5th March, 2014. At the end of each session, the student, client, would be assigned to freely write the 1-2 page self-reflection journal on their experience of attending the chat-based online counseling with some quotations from the session that were useful. Consent forms were to be delivered by each participant to profess the permission to use the online counseling content in the study. Only the information from the participants allowing the use for the research would be analyzed, as shown in Figure 1.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis as guided by Colaizzi [12]. Initially, the first author carefully read the scripts (self-reflection reports) of students' experiences following online chat based counseling. The important contents and meaning of experiences were extracted and assigned a theme. Finally, the second author conducted peer reviews of the scripts, individual themes, and the final synthesis of the common themes. Participant checks of the individual themes served to inform a trustworthy description of the online chat based counseling

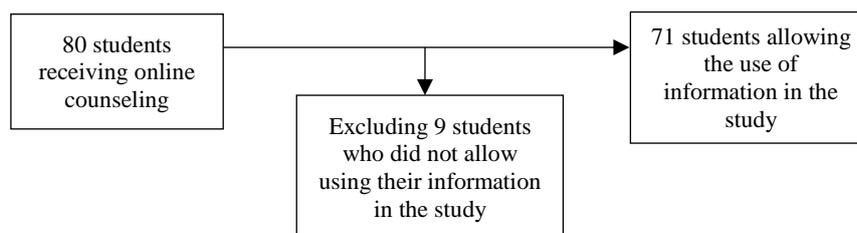


Figure 1 The number of students allowing the use of their information in the study

experience of students.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of the information from chat-based online counseling sessions and self-reflection journals of the students yielded 4 major themes, as follows.

Theme 1: Unique characteristics of chat-based online counseling service

This type of counseling service was found to contain the following strengths and setbacks as domain categories and illustrative quotes below.

1.1 Privacy from anonymity brought the sense of safety

The nature of chat-based online counseling enables communications without vis-à-vis encounter made the students feel safe and at ease. This sense of safety elicited courage in students, making it easier for them to express their personal lives and feelings than it was otherwise. The students reported that anonymity and, thus, privacy enabled them to be daring and revealed their personal problems comfortably and honestly. Mostly, the problems brought to the sessions had never been revealed to their friends or families for the fear that they would be judged or chastised.

“It helped us dare to tell our stories, more like we shared our experience than counseled as usual. I felt less tense, less self-conscious, so I had more gut to talk about some issues. The initial awkwardness was also less. In ordinary counseling session, I will feel tense because I have never know the other, so I dare not speak much. Quite a long time is needed for adjustment.” (Case 10)

1.2 Typing messages allowed more time to reflect on things that troubled their minds

The students found that typing could be a means for them to reflect on and explore themselves, allowing them to organize their stories in a clear,

orderly, and concrete way. Rereading what they typed on the computer screen invited them to further contemplate and gain more insight into themselves, leading their ideas to crystallize.

“While I was typing, I read my messages and felt like I were looking at them with the eyes of another person. That was different from face-to-face counseling as mere talking didn’t allow me to reflect so thoroughly like this. What I got from re-thinking and re-reading all my words was disentanglement of my seemingly messy thought. In fact it was just the lack of organization. So, when I typed my thought out, I had a chance to re-organize it.” (Case 66)

1.3 Greater convenience and accessibility

According to the students’ journals, the chat-based online counseling service was much more convenient as they didn’t need to travel in person to receive the service at the university. It also helped a lot to save time as their hectic schedule may not allow them to be present at the counseling center. With chat-based online service, they could make an appointment with the counselor outside official hours.

“There’s no need to waste time traveling or setting aside time even the schedule is full. It also feels more comfortable than visiting the center in person, especially when the place is not private with many passers-by as students who waits for the service might fear to be judged from others in the society as the abnormal or psychotic.” (Case 49)

1.4 Typing slowed down communication

Typing communication has certain limitations: a slow flow of messages if the communicators are lacking in the typing skill or if the topic under discussions is too detailed.

“What matters is communication skills and typing speed of clients. Some may be slow at this, they can’t get as much counseling within 50 minutes as those who can type faster. Typing slowly also leads to succinctly describe of the problems, which might preclude the psychologist from better understanding of the issue.” (Case 67)

1.5 Difficulties in exchanging non-verbal communication

To the students, this chat-based online counseling made it difficult to convey their feelings and emotions, and sometimes even led to distorted perception.

“It is difficult to explain some feelings and emotions that I might not be able to find the right words to explain what I am feeling vividly, accurately.” (Case 19)

The students also reported that they couldn’t know of the empathetic reactions from the psychologist: whether he sincerely understood them or not.

“Not seeing facial countenance or reactions from the psychologist makes me doubt whether he actually understand my problem or help me seriously.” (Case 63)

Typing slowed down a smooth flow of correspondence. Waiting for the other’s reaction was due to happen. The slow responses from the psychologist made the students uneasy and anxious as they were afraid that the other would be out of the conversation.

“When the psychologist delayed in his response, sometimes I doubted whether he was gone to do other things. It’s like he did not respond to me right away. I know that he might need to think or to interpret, but sometimes I couldn’t help feeling that he was out of the conversation.” (Case 3)

Theme 2: Environmental factors hindering the effectiveness of counseling process

The analysis revealed some environmental factors that hindered the counseling process as domain categories and illustrative quotes of this domain as below.

2.1 Strength of internet signals

The quality of internet matters a lot to a smooth communication. With unstable signals, the counseling process would be interrupted and discontinued.

“At first, there were some glitches in internet signals, interrupting and blurring the communication.” (Case 10)

2.2 Types of devices used for communication

The study showed that some clients used smart phones as the communicative device for the online counseling session. This device was found to be uncondutive to the counseling process as it was harder to type and some models were poor at catching the signals or didn’t show that the other was typing or not.

“Because of the system that was not good enough in my mobile phone, the psychologist could not see that I was typing, so he sometimes started a new topic despite the old one hadn’t been completed.” (Case 6)

2.3 Attention of the clients

The students reported that they were using other programs or visiting other websites while receiving the chat-based online counseling service, so they couldn’t fully focus on the counseling process.

“I felt less involved with chat-based online than the face-to-face communication as there were more distractions. For example, while chatting, I sometimes checked my Facebook.” (Case 57)

Some of the students also reported that, when the ambience or atmosphere was not conducive to concentrate, i.e. having others around them, someone starting a conversation with them, they could not focus on the counseling they were having.

“When someone started a conversation with me, I couldn’t concentrate on my counseling chat.” (Case 18)

2.4 Duration of each session

Some issues raised by the student clients were too complicated to be settled resolved within the an-hour frame, which was quite limited. This made

some clients afraid to take too much time of the psychologist and tried to cut down their details.

“Possibly the duration was too short, so we needed to rush and cut down some details. When I saw that it passed my assigned duration, I was anxious and tried to rush to the conclusion. In fact, it was so good, but the time was too short.” (Case 43)

Theme 3: Characteristics of the counselor that expedited the effectiveness of the counseling process

The analysis revealed that the students also viewed the characteristics of the online counselor as important. They reported of some positive characteristics that facilitated the counseling process. The domain categories and illustrative quotes of this domain are details as below.

3.1 Building a rapport and instigating a relaxed atmosphere

The students reported that, as they were not accustomed to online chat-based counseling, they were quite tense, worried, nervous, and uneasy at the beginning of the session. These feelings gradually reduced when the counselor developed a rapport with them and created a relaxing mood.

“The psychologist used emoticons, like :D to show his smiles, enabled me to capture his moods and emotions, making me more relaxed. (Case 16)

3.2 Encouraging the clients to explore and gain insight into their problems

The students reported they were aware of counseling techniques applied in the session, including restatement, reflection, clarifying questions, and summarizing, all of which facilitated their exploration of themselves and reflection on their problems, leading to their insights and discovery of solution. The students also expressed their surprise at how effective the online chat-based counseling could be despite the fact that no face-to-face interaction occurred.

“At first when I agreed to participate in the online chat counseling, I didn’t believe that the psychologist would be able to convey as much feelings, involvement, attention, understanding as he actually did. He did a great job in questions and reflections. I had

never thought that ordinary chatting could become counseling chatting.” (Case 71)

3.3 Responses that showed attentive listening, empathy, acceptance, and willingness to help

Some of the students reported their awareness of the psychologist’s responses that showed the great extent of attentive listening and empathy to their problems. This made them more willing to share their stories. The expressions of willingness to help and acceptance on the counselor’s part evoked the warm welcoming feeling in the students that they were unconditionally accepted, making them more eager to cooperate within this counseling session.

“While typing about what happened to me, the psychologist kept reflecting or respond to my typing, making me felt that he cared, although I could not see his face during the whole conversation.” (Case 10)

3.4 Motivating the application of lessons from the counseling session into practice and encouragement

The students reported that they were urged by the psychologist to apply the lessons they received from the chat-based counseling to practice in their daily lives. The psychologist also offered the words of encouragement and confidence in the clients, making them more assured and confident in what they were about to do.

“I think this was important as it encouraged and strengthened me to cope with the problem. Being supported, I felt the problem was lighter and had more confidence in my ability to overcome the hindrance smoothly.” (Case 12)

3.5 Exchange of experience brought up novel useful perspectives

During the counseling session, the psychologist possibly shared his own experience, something he had encountered or his own different viewpoints and wisdom toward something. This makes the clients felt they gained some new useful perspectives for their insights and solutions to their problems. Sharing of the similar experience also alleviated loneliness and alienation the student clients felt.

“I like the story that the psychologist shared with me about the time in his senior year. It’s

like I was seeing the life path of another person who also felt dazed and nothingness. And he had his own way to overcome it, so will I. Listening to other people's stories make me think more thoroughly." (case 13)

Theme 4: The outcomes the students received from this single-session chat-based online counseling

The students receiving the counseling service reported the outcomes of their single-session chat-based online counseling. The domain categories and illustrative quotes of this domain are details as below.

4.1 Feeling at ease and relieved from tension

The students could let out things that burdened their mind or speak their heart out about things that upset them to the psychologists, making them lighter, more relieved from pressure, tension, and anxiety.

"Speaking out, organizing my thoughts, at first I was bombarded with all my thoughts, but now I don't know where they are all gone. So strange, but it works for me. It helped clear my head when I could burst out all that bottled up." (Case 3)

4.2 Knowing and understanding oneself better and seeing the bigger picture clearer

According to the students, online counseling service helped them understand themselves better about what they were thinking, feeling, and being. The students said that they knew themselves more and gained clearer insight into the problematic conditions they were facing. This led to their decisions to solve the problems with suitable well-directed solutions that were proper to the students themselves with the hope to successfully resolve the troubles.

"It helped me to better observe myself, observe the real cause of the problem, which I had never done so far. I was also observing myself while talking with the psychologist, making me understand myself and the problem better and revise things in the past." (Case 10)

4.3 Lessons or after-thoughts gained to remind oneself the next encounter with problems

During the counseling process, the counselors took some chances to share some ideas or life

philosophy with the clients, depending on issues at hand. The students reported they gained some benefits from that sharing, using those words to remind or guide themselves in their lives.

"There was a sentence that touched me and made me realize, 'Man has time in life, but not so much to amend things. Sometimes no time at all for amendment because things have passed, left only guilt and grief in our hearts.' This made me realize that I should reap the most out of my life." (Case 9)

4.4 Empowerment and confidence to cope with the existing problems

The students pointed to words of support that show the psychologist's willingness to help them. This empowered the students to cope with their problems, making them feel no longer lonely and confident that they would go through the obstacles.

"The last thing I felt so good about talking with the psychologist was the feeling that there was someone supporting us in the matter that distressed us. That person was ready to help us. To me, this was important because it empowered me to continue coping with my problems. And when we are encouraged, facing the problems is easier as we are more confident that we can pass through smoothly." (case 12)

The students admitted making sense of their lives in the past, discovering ways to cope with their problems, and being able to resolve their unfinished business. This partly made the students more encouraged, stronger, and hopeful in living their lives.

"When knowing how to cope with the existing problem, I felt empowered and hope that this will also work in the future when I am faced with the similar problem." (case 43)

"It made me determined, motivated to return to things that I was once resolved to do. That felt really great! Really fulfilled! Many things I could glean as fodder for future thinking." (case 20)

4.5 Feeling content and mature

The last outcome the students reported they got from online chat-based single-session counseling

was the awareness of greater happiness, satisfaction in life, growth, and better feelings than before participating in the counseling session.

*“Feeling better than before the session.”
(case 39)*

*“Talking with the psychologist made me feel
I was growing.” (case 48)*

The students also reported that after the counseling session, they felt their lives changed in a more positive way, which made them more satisfied and content with their lives.

*“After participating the counseling session
and applying what I learnt to my life, I feel
happier and think that my problem has been
solved.” (case 19)*

*“After the talk that day, I have felt better with
facing the responsibilities. I feel less worry,
unlike me who usually felt tired and hopeless
with what I was doing. But when I think back
to things I discussed with the psychologist, I
realize what I am doing, why, and what I will
get back. This makes me happier to do that
thing.” (case 35)*

DISCUSSION

In this qualitative study the undergraduates who engaged in a single session chat-based online counseling reflected their experiences related to the technological barriers, connecting with their counselor, interacting without visual or verbal feedback, receiving counseling in a personal space, and some barriers of the online sessions. For instance, key informants highlighted its strengths including privacy and anonymity, ability to talk about personal problems without the need of vis-à-vis encounter with the unfamiliar psychologist were important factors, to students that evoked the feelings of comfort and safety, which encouraged them to reveal what was bothering them [13]. Typing their messages also allowed the students to reflect on their thought during the conversation, enabling them to understand themselves better and seeing what they were thinking in a concrete way [4].

Moreover, convenience of time and place – outside the official working period and no need to visit the center - was what the students reported suitable for their schedules so filled with academic

duties that they couldn't travel to receive the service at the center in the usual operation time [10, 14]. In contrast, the setbacks of this type of counseling service that obstructed the counseling dynamic include limitations of non-verbal communication and feeling expression, leading to difficulties and misinterpretation of messages. As a result, the counselor and the client needed to check with each other from time to time for the accuracy of their understanding to avoid such problems [15]. Besides, communication through typing also took more time, interrupting the flow of communications and leading to confusion and awkwardness to some clients [13].

Interestingly, undergraduate students reported that after participating in an online counseling session that they felt their lives changed in a more positive way, which made them more satisfied and content with their lives. The students also reported they got the awareness of greater happiness, satisfaction in life, growth, and better feelings than before participating in the online counseling session. With the advent of online counseling services as an innovative therapeutic medium, online therapeutic conditions can be fostered. According to the students, the therapeutic environment included creating good rapport and relaxing atmosphere, facilitating the students to explore themselves and their problems, attentive and empathetic responses, unconditional acceptance, willingness to help, support and encouragement, and sharing of useful experience, the part that the students found especially beneficial to them. These characteristics can also be expected from face-to-face counseling sessions; only they are transformed to typed messages online. As a result, online counselors should also have these characteristics together with the face-to-face counseling skills. The additional requirement is ability to transfer their counseling expertise to typed messages [7, 16-17]. The prominent results included greater comfort and less tension, better self-understanding and self-awareness, seeing their problems more clearly from the wider perspectives, lessons or afterthoughts to cope with the future problems, greater confidence and encouragement to deal with the existing troubles, and greater contentment and maturity. All of these pinpointed the potentials to introduce the chat-based online counseling service to teenaged student population [18-21].

CONCLUSION

The chat-based online counseling service can be

said, from the finding of this study, to be helpful and have potential to be used as a helping tool to students who are troubled by their academic and daily lives so that students can spend their time on their academic career within the campus wholesomely and happily. This channel of counseling was found to suit teenagers as this group of population easily shuns the idea of getting counseling service out of their embarrassment or the excuses of time constraints and travel inconvenience. However, the chat-based online counseling service showed certain limitations that need due attention from psychological counselors to reduce them to the minimum for the sake of effective counseling outcomes. In the future, researchers are recommended to study the efficiency of the chat-based online counseling service with a measurable experimental research design in order to see the actual outcomes of conducting counseling via this channel. A comparative study between this type of counseling and the conventional face-to-face one within a chosen counseling theoretical framework and with certain fixed variables would provide great insight into further development and other prospective applications of the chat-based online counseling.

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