

How Saudi Arabian Counselors Think about Online Counseling?

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The study aimed to reveal the counselors' perceptions towards Online Counseling OC in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, and both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used. A questionnaire prepared by researchers was applied to (441) counselors, a semi-structured interview was used with (8) of them to monitor their perceptions and practices. The psychometric properties of the study tools were evaluated, the data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, and the quantitative results showed that the OC has pros and cons according to the perceptions of the counselors, the qualitative analysis results are consistent with the results of the quantitative analysis, as the qualitative data by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) showed four themes about the counselors' perceptions of OC namely: the reality of the OC, the satisfaction of the counselors with the OC, the clients of the OC, and the future of the OC. The study recommended increasing interest in OC and investing in its pros, without neglecting its ethical challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

The counselor has an important role in promoting students' mental health, especially in times of crisis, and the world is currently experiencing a crisis that resulted from concern about the spread of COVID-19, and its precautionary measures, so that education suddenly turned into distance learning, and the counselor was obligated to work in the same way.

The need for online counseling (henceforth OC) has increased after the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 has become a pandemic and issued several protocols to support well-being (WHO, 2020) due to high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, and many counselors provided counseling through WhatsApp, Zoom and other apps (Ifdil et al., 2020; Rajkumar, 2020). Where the counselor's performance is based on his belief in OC's pros, determining its cons and facing it through

continuous evaluation of his experiences. This study, therefore, aims to reveal the perceptions of counselors toward OC in Saudi Arabia.

OC has received increased attention due to the rapid development of Internet technologies (Bengtsson et al., 2015); It also use is common around the world (van der Vaart et al., 2014). It appeared in many countries early on, but it began to be applied in Saudi Arabia in 2013 with some researchers' efforts, e.g a program to reduce symptoms of social anxiety for university students by e-mail (Al-Shaalan, 2013).

Despite the prevalence of psychological interventions through the Internet, there are no agreed terms to describe this, including internet, electronic or cyber counseling (Richards & Viganó, 2013; Dowling, 2015), and it is defined as the process of providing psychological support by a professional counselor to the client using electronic modalities (Yan, 2012; Li, Lau et al., 2013).

The counselor's success in undertaking this role depends on his perceptions of the pros and cons of OC and on continuously evaluating his experiences to face the challenges that face, so the study aims to answer the following questions: What are the pros and cons of OC from the counselors' point of view? How do counselors describe their experience in OC?

2. Literature Review

Studies were concerned a long time ago with investigating counselors' perceptions and attitudes about OC, and they differed between proponent and opponents (Wangberg et al., 2007), while some argued that it ensures emotional safety due to the low emotional proximity of the client to the counselor, Internet problems and the consequent poor communication and difficulty in accurately assessing client concerns are a source of concern among counselors (Bambling et al., 2008; Callahan & Inckle, 2012). Even counselors who were satisfied with their OC practices required formal training, professional development, and OC practice supervision to be effective. They also indicate that it is only a complementary practice that does not substitute for face to face (henceforth f2f) counseling (Ahmad et al., 2010; Anthony, 2015; Finn & Barak, 2010; Foon et al., 2020), they demonstrated an intention to implement OC when the necessary facilities are provided. However, they indicated a lack of competency in the technical skills necessary for the OC, and they also found that keeping pace with technical knowledge by learning new programs, operational procedures, and managing administrative issues poses challenges to them (Fang et al., 2018; Foon et al., 2020).

In Australia, high school principals support the OC and have recommended providing sufficient numbers of counselors to achieve that (Glasheen et al., 2018), and in Italy Cipolletta & Mocellin (2018) found that few counselors have previous experience with OC, and the majority of them have reservations about the diagnostic potential and therapeutic interventions, and they see a lack of clarity about the ethical issues involved during the OC.



One of the pros of OC is that it enables access to clients who cannot afford the costs (Haack et al., 2005; Mallen et al., 2005), and helps to transcend geographical boundaries (Yan, 2012; Young, 2005) and transportation difficulties. It also addresses the difficulty of not having time to receive counseling in-clinic during official working hours (Zamani, Nasir & Yusooff, 2010), meets the needs of young people significantly (Chan, 2020), and gives them a sense of comfort and independence (Young, 2005), and provides a greater ability to self-disclosure, low level of stigma, and anonymity (Amanvermez, 2015).

Also, it may be beneficial for clients with rape and abuse accompanied by shame (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018), it allows clients to reveal important information compared to f2f counseling (Young, 2005), and it has also been shown to be effective in dealing a wide range of mental disorders (Australian Psychological Society, 2018).

One of the cons of OC is that it may not be appropriate for all contexts (Chan, 2020). It isn't appropriate for complex mental disorders (van der Vaart et al., 2014), depends on the technical skills of the users, and lacks non-verbal communication (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018); its absence may lead to misunderstanding and lack of effective communication (Young, 2005), OC was associated with reduced self-concealment (Bathje et al., 2014). Obstacles to OC include fear of hacking into personal accounts, legal and ethical issues, and a lack of counselors training (Foon et al., 2020).

The pros and cons of OC depend on its modalities, each of which has its pros and cons. Email, SMS, and forums allow written expression (Suler, 2000) and allow thinking and modifying content before sending, reviewing records, and are available to the client at any time of the day (Chan, 2020) It also allows counselors time to read, think, and prepare drafts (Salleh et al., 2015), in addition to being effective in improving well-being and empowering young people (Sindahl et al., 2020). While it lacks non-verbal communication and it has a delayed response, the client may deny receiving messages for not fulfilling the assignments (Haberstroh et al., 2007; Suler, 2000). As well as clients' worries that counselors do not understand their emotions and feelings (King et al., 2006).

Video conferencing enables voice and video transmission and synchronous communication (Suler, 2000), and is useful from a counselor's point of view. Because it allows verbal and non-verbal communication, as opposed to email and SMS (Tsan & Day 2007). WhatsApp allows synchronous and asynchronous communication by sending messages and voice recordings and making calls (Dowling & Rickwood, 2013). Also, it is characterized by its lower cost compared to text messaging (Amos et al., 2020).

The diversity of OC modalities helped counselors to allow clients to discuss their issues in comfortable and private places, and available of OC at any time of the day, resulting in clients satisfaction towards OC (Amos et al., 2020; Mallen et al, 2005; Tirel et al. 2020;

Zainuddin & Yosup, 2018), While it placed burdens on counselors to meet the needs of their clients, which raises questions about the counselors' perceptions of OC.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used the quantitative approach to examine counselors' perceptions toward OC in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the qualitative and phenomenal approach to examine the counselors' experience. Because it is particularly effective with issues that have not been sufficiently studied or if there are variables that are difficult to quantify or have yet to be determined (Morrow, 2007). Consequently, a qualitative approach focuses on analyzing words and texts rather than numbers to describe phenomena and usually includes an extensive study of a small number of cases (King et al. 2006).

3.1. Participants

In this study, five hundred and seventy-five (575) counselors in schools and universities in the city of Dammam participated, the first group included 134 (73 males, 61 females) to estimate the psychometric properties of the questionnaire, and with a mean age of 36.82 years and a standard deviation of 6.37 years, and the responses of the second group which included 441 (145 Males, 296 females) with a mean age of 39.40 years and a standard deviation of 5.93 years were used to answer the study questions. For the qualitative study, part of the basic sample of 8 counselors (3 males and 5 females) were selected from OC providers in schools and universities, their average age is 40.13 years with a standard deviation of 3.87 years, and the sample inclusion criteria were that they practiced OC for a minimum of 3 years using at least two modalities since it was important to have a group with a clear understanding of that experience. The information about the participants is shown in Table (1).

Table 1: Participant's information

Participants	Gender	Age	Educational level	Years of experience	Number of OC modalities
R1	Female	42	PhD	3	2
R2	Female	41	PhD	5	2
R3	Female	43	PhD	4	2
R4	Female	38	Diploma	4	5
R5	Female	47	Diploma	3	3
R6	Male	38	PhD	4	3
R7	Male	37	PhD	3	2
R8	Male	35	PhD	4	3

3.2. Study Tools

3.2.1. Counselors Perception Questionnaire for OC:

The researchers analyzed previous studies and related theoretical frameworks and built a questionnaire that fits the counselors' culture in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire consisted

of three parts, the first part for demographic data, the second part for the pros of OC, and it included 7 items, and the third part about OC cons and included 6 items.

A five-point rating response format was selected with categories: from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items were revised by the researchers through a series of meetings to ensure that every item is essential, simple, and clear. The content validity ratio estimation (CVR) proposed by Lawshe (Ayre & Scally, 2014) was used to quantify content validity where a committee of nine assistant and Associate Professors of the Psychology Department at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University revised the items individually to indicate if the item is essential or not, and the CVR (content validity ratio) was (1) for all items.

Investigation of Cronbach's alpha (α) and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was carried out using SPSS software, version 25. To do the exploratory factor analysis, sampling was measured with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's, (KMO= .818). Principal components method and rotation with the varimax method EFA extraction was applied.

The results of the factor analysis showed the presence of two independent factors that explained 50.73% of the total variance, in the first dimension ranged from .620 to .783, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .852, and factor loadings of the items in the second dimension ranged from 0.620 to .783, the alpha Cronbach coefficient was 0.723.

3.2.2. Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview was built after reviewing the literature review and some other interviews such as (Haberstroh et al., 2007; Kit et al., 2017) in addition to the practical experience of researchers in the field of OC for university students. Semi-structured interviews are a common method of data collection in the qualitative study (Kallio et al., 2016). Also, a pilot study was conducted on 3 counselors to ensure the clarity of the interview questions and estimate the time required. The interview consisted of some demographic data and 10 open-ended questions that focused on the counselors' perceptions and practices of the OC. The interview also began with a preliminary question, "What is your experience with the OC so far?" To break the impasse in the interview.

3.3. Data analysis and procedures

Initially, the link of the questionnaire was sent to school and university counselors in Dammam by official mail to (527) counselors, 134 counselors responded to the questionnaire, the data of this group was used to estimate the psychometric characteristics of the questionnaire, then the final version of the questionnaire was sent in the same way to 1372 counselors after excluding those who were used to estimate the psychometric characteristics of the questionnaire, 441 counselors have responded to the questionnaire.



The qualitative analysis sample was selected from the basic sample of those who met the sample inclusion criteria, and then a preliminary contact was conducted through the phone to find out their willingness to participate and to coordinate the appropriate dates and methods of communication. After the participants showed interest in the study, they were asked to sign the consent form. The interviews were conducted individually by phone, and the duration ranged between 20-25 minutes. Alternative codes were also put in place for the names of the participants to protect their privacy, and at the end of the interview, the participants were asked if they had additional suggestions.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze qualitative data, as Smith and Osborn (2003) explained that it is an appropriate approach to examine how individuals understand their personal and social worlds. Therefore, IPA was used as a method for analyzing counselors' experiences and perceptions in the field of OC to understand their personal and practical experiences about it, by generating a dialogue that is transformed into phrases and texts, and then analyzed, according to the steps described by Osborn and Smith (1998), and each text was read with exploratory notes made about the meanings and interpretations described by the participants, then rereading the text and intensifying notes to place super-ordinate themes, these themes were then grouped based on specific connections between them, as well as similarities in counselors' perceptions and practices. The sub-ordinate themes associated with each super-ordinate theme were identified.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Quantitative Analysis Results

As shown in Table 2, almost two-fifths of the respondents believe that OC doesn't replace f2f counseling, and the same as them take a neutral position, while the remaining fifth believe that OC substitute the f2f counseling, and more than half of respondents indicated that OC is keeping pace with the digital transformation that we are experiencing these days and that it suits clients who feel stigmatized from receiving mental health services, while nearly three-quarters of the respondents agreed that OC spares clients the burden of traveling to meet the counselors, provides the clients with greater freedom in expressing their problems, facilitates the provision of counseling services in times of crises and emergencies, and facilitates access to the counseling service. It turned out that the percentage of informants who took a neutral position was large, ranging from one-fifth to two-fifths.

Table 2: Frequencies of counselors' responses to OC pros

Item	SA or A	SD or D	UD	M	Sd
Substitute for direct counseling (f2f).	20.8	40.4	38.8	2.74	1.082
Keeps pace with digital transformation in the life of the counselor and the client.	55.6	11.3	33.1	3.62	.967
It suits clients who feel stigmatized from receiving mental health services.	55.3	8.6	36.1	3.64	.932
Clients avoid the burden of transportation to meet the counselor.	76.6	5.3	18.1	4.04	.876
It provides the client with more freedom to express his problem.	73.9	4.3	21.8	4.00	.874
It facilitates the possibility of providing counseling services in crisis times.	73.9	3.9	22.2	4.00	.763
It facilitates access to the counseling service.	77.5	2.9	19.6	4.00	.874

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree; UD=Undecided

As shown in table 3, most of the respondents agreed that technical problems are facing OC, and nearly three-quarters of the respondents agreed that OC lacks body language, does not protect the client from insecure sites and that clients drop out of sessions, and almost two-thirds of the counselors agreed that there is a threat to the professional relationship between counselor and client, and difficulty of providing a safe environment for counseling, and the percentage of counselors who took a neutral position ranged between 10% to approximately 25%, which is less than that of the pros of OC, meaning that counselors have a clearer attitude towards OC cons.

Table 3: Frequencies of counselors' responses to OC cons in percentages

Item	SA or A	SD or D	UD	M	Sd
Technical problems (such as internet inefficiency, lack of clarity of sound and images, or interruption of session ... etc.).	88.2	1.4	10.4	4.33	.735
Absence of body language compared to f2f counseling.	74.4	5.4	20.2	4.11	.941
The difficulty of protecting clients from insecure sites.	74.6	4.7	20.7	4.03	.894
Clients drop out of the OC sessions.	71.9	4.3	23.8	3.97	.869
Threatening professional relationships.	68.7	5	26.3	3.97	3.97
The difficulty of providing an appropriate environment for OC compared to f2f counseling.	66.9	9.1	24	3.86	.982

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree; UD=Undecided

4.2. Qualitative Analysis Results

The results of the qualitative analysis using IPA which were presented in Table (4) resulted in four super-ordinate themes that described the participants' experiences and perceptions of OC (1- OC Reality, 2- Counselor Satisfaction with OC, 3- OC Clients 4- OC Future) and Some of their sub-ordinate themes, some quotations from the interviewees of the sub-ordinate themes were presented for their explanation and interpretation. Very slight modifications have been made to the counselors' interview quotations so that they can be understood and read without affecting the intended meaning. Some minor repetitions of words and expressions have also been removed. The unimportant words have also been deleted and indicated with (...).

Table (4) illustrates super-ordinate themes and sub-ordinate themes

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes	Quotes from Interviews
1. Reality of OC	1.1. OC Pros	"It fits with the current situation of COVID-19 pandemic due to the necessity of social distancing ..." "It is easy to access the counselor anytime and anywhere, and it has contributed to the reduction of stigma ..." "I can't read the client's body language ..."
	1.2. OC Cons	"The lack of clarity of the sound or the picture due to ..." "Not appropriate for low-income clients because they don't have electronic devices or ..."
2. Counselors' satisfaction with the OC	2.1. Preference for OC methods (synchronous/asynchronous and written / verbal/nonverbal communication)	"I never welcome nor encourage written and asynchronous communication ..." "I don't allow having eye contact for the session, even if the client requests that ..."
	2.2. Preference for OC modalities	"I see that each application makes a different contribution to the success of OC ..."
	2.3. Counseling techniques and skills	"I prefer to use applications that allow visual communication, such as Skype and ZOOM in particular ..." "The use of the techniques of cognitive theory is the most appropriate ..." "I use most of the direct counseling skills at OC ..."
3. Clients of OC	1.1 Clients satisfaction	"... client satisfaction in the f2f counseling was not different from that of OC" "... and some clients mentioned that If it weren't the OC, I would never have received counseling services. "
	1.2 Clients commitment and seriousness	"client commitment to OC sessions is about 60% at most." "... more than 30% of clients are non-compliant at the time of the session and its assignments."
	1.3 Age groups of clients	"... In the following order, adults, then youth, and finally teenagers, and I don't think it is appropriate for children." "Teenagers are especially easy to engage with during OC because they are free from the awkwardness of the interview ..."
4. The future of OC	4.1 Prospects and opportunities	"I expect the spread of OC in all centers ..." "... would be an appropriate alternative to f2f counseling but not a substitute ..."
	4.2 Ethical Risks and Challenges	"I see that the professional relationship will be threatened with OC ..." "It is up to the counselor as he can address some ethical issues such as confidentiality, privacy, and"

4.2.1. OC Reality

This super-ordinate theme is constructed in light of counselors' current perceptions and practices of the OC reality they have already practiced with their clients, and this has resulted in the two sub-ordinate themes, which are as follows:



4.2.1.1. Pros of OC

During the interview, many counselors indicated some pros of OC based on their experiences with it. Although most of the participants emphasized the positive aspects, they diverged between them. Some of them explained the importance of easy access, continuous availability, flexible appointments, and breaking down barriers to f2f counseling, such as stigma and shame:

It also contributed to the reduction of the stigma ... and avoiding the client waiting until the time of his session, which causes him embarrassment ... (R1). ... easier for a client to receive any service over the Internet and not just OC services instead of going and receiving them directly, and OC has addressed two very important issues shame and stigma ... (R7). Through it, counseling can be provided to both genders without embarrassment to both parties, and it is also easy to set times for sessions more flexibly (R4) ... because it is fast, saved time and facilitates communication with the client despite the distances (R5).

Based on the previous pros, OC provided a more comfortable environment for some clients that allowed them to express their problems without embarrassment:

I found that clients in OC sessions were more self-reported about their problems than their previous f2f counseling sessions (R6).

The OC was a solution to current social and academic problems:

It is commensurate with the current situation of COVID-19 pandemic due to the necessity of social distancing, ... (R2). OC contributed to reducing students' absence from their lectures to attend the counseling sessions because time became more flexible for them (R3).

4.2.1.2. Cons of OC

The negative perceptions of the OC participants were similar, while other participants were singled out for specific cons. It turned out that there is consensus on some technical problems related to the Internet, as shown in some of the participants' conversations:

Session interruption, and sound or picture clarity due to technical problems with the Internet (R1). Since my students are in a poor Low-income region (lack of electronic devices and internet networks), it is difficult to provide an OC for all students (R5).

While some of the cons concentrated on the OC's lack of nonverbal communication particularly:

I lost part of my counselor tools like live communication and personal influence during OC (R2). If I had two options between f2f and OC, I would have chosen f2f ... But the current situation left us with one choice, which is OC because when the client is in front of me, I will



be able to understand him more compared to the virtual communication (R3). I can't read a client's body language and feel what he/she is feeling (R4).

One of the counselors also encountered external influences that are difficult to control during the session:

I found that most of the synchronous sessions have external influences, whether, from the client or the counselor, that may affect the progress of the counseling process (R6).

4.2.2. Counselors' satisfaction with the OC

There was satisfaction with some forms or characteristics of OC, dissatisfaction with other aspects and characteristics, as well as identifying the factors causing this satisfaction which are represented in meeting their expectations and needs to provide the counseling session effectively.

4.2.2.1. Preference for OC Forms (Synchronous / Asynchronous, Written / Verbal / Nonverbal Communication).

There was consensus among the participants on a preference for synchronous OC, while they differed in the type of preferred communication, as shown below:

I prefer no other than synchronous verbal communication ... I do not allow having eye contact for the session even if the client requests that ... (R3). I never welcome or encourage written and asynchronous communication because writing ... lacks the emotional content that verbal and non-verbal communication and simultaneous communication may also provide (R7). I prefer synchronous counseling because it has ... a time commitment for both the client and the counselor (R8).

4.2.2.2. Preference for OC modalities

There was satisfaction with one OC modalities but not others, and zoom was the most popular app for some counselors.

I use most distance communication apps, but WhatsApp is the one most used for its ease and availability of everyone (R5). The ZOOM application is one of the most appropriate electronic applications and software in OC and it is also more widespread .. (R6). I prefer to use apps that allow visual communication like Skype and ZOOM particularly because they have features that help me as a counselor and help my clients (R7).

While one counselor outlined his preference for specialized OC programs:

The best apps specialized in OC like the Shezlong website <https://www.shezlong.com> (R1).

The preference of some participants for the OC modalities according to the pros this modality provides, and according to the objective of the counseling session and the form of counseling (synchronous versus asynchronous):

Each application makes a different contribution to the success of OC, as I have used Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp, and most recently ZOOM and WebX (R4). I prefer using WhatsApp for asynchronous counseling and ZOOM for synchronous counseling (R6).

4.2.2.3. Techniques and Counseling Skills

Counselors' satisfaction with OC increases when it does not prevent them from using specific counseling techniques and skills. Participants' experiences varied in this aspect, so cognitive behavioral therapy was the most frequent intervention, unlike interventions that require interaction between the counselor and the client.

Relaxation cannot be practically applied with the client, it is only explained, and the client has to apply it alone, but OC helps to use the techniques of ... and the modification of negative thoughts (R1). I use most direct counseling skills in OC starting with attention and listening, questions, and sometimes confrontation and ... (R4). The use of the techniques of cognitive theory is the most appropriate technique for its dependence on information reception, processing, and appropriate decision-making without requiring the counselor to observe the client (R5) ... So reality therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy were the most used counseling techniques ... (R7).

There was a rich experience for one of the participants in preparing the statistical report for the OC for the center he works for, and the report included multiple techniques.

Through the statistical report of the OC in the center where I work, it was found that refutation of ideas, reality therapy, pleasant activities, self-reinforcement, time management, problem-solving strategies, and psychological education were the most instructional techniques used in OC, while Exposure, Systematic Desensitization, imaginary relaxation, and role-playing were the least used techniques (R8).

While one of the participants saw that the use of techniques and counseling skills is due to the role of the counselor in adapting them to suit the virtual environment:

I was trying as much as possible ... to adapt all counseling techniques and activities to be used online so that the counseling session did not turn into preaching or general advice (R7).

4.2.3. OC clients

Our understanding of the counselors' experience at OC would not be complete without addressing the diversity of clients and the extent to which their needs are met, where it is represented in three aspects, namely: clients satisfaction, commitment and seriousness, and clients age groups.

4.2.3.1. Clients Satisfaction

Lots of counselors have shown that there are clear positive impressions on their clients, especially after their OC sessions are over:

If there is a client satisfaction rating from 0 to 10, then no client's satisfaction is less than 7 (R3). My clients 'satisfaction with OC was good, and in the event of regular ministerial programs and channels ... it increased my clients' confidence in it (R4).

The counselors also compared their client satisfaction with OC and f2f counseling:

There is no difference between client satisfaction in the virtual and realistic environment of counseling practice (R1) ... Client satisfaction in the f2f counseling was not different from OC (R6). Some clients mentioned to me: if it weren't the OC, I would never have received psychological counseling services (R7).

4.2.3.2. Client Commitment and Seriousness

There were shared experiences among the counselors of their clients' commitment to a session date or the assignments required in the OC. Where the percentage of client commitment ranged between 60-70%:

They did not comply ... as the percentage of the commitment of my clients to attend the sessions did not exceed 70% (R2). The clients' commitment to OC sessions is approximately 60% at most (R6). I found that more than 30% of clients were non-compliance with the time and assignments of the session, and this is one of the things that bothers me most about OC ... (R7).

Some counselors also explained that the clients' commitment is due to the therapeutic gains achieved, and to their motivation to get rid of their problems:

Clients' commitment and seriousness depend on their desire and motivation to get rid of their problem (R4). My clients did not abide by the assignments required of them, especially at the beginning of the sessions, but they committed to achieving the gains ... especially after the third session (R8).

4.2.3.3. Age Groups of Clients

Most of the counselors saw OC as appropriate for youth, adults, then teenagers, compared to children:

Fit for youth compared to children and teenagers (R1). ... in next order adults, then youth and finally teenagers, and I don't think it works for children (R6). It is appropriate for teenagers, youth and adults alike compared to children ... because they feel the existence of the problem and seek to find a solution, ... while children cannot clearly express their suffering ... (R4).

The OC was effective for teenagers with specific conditions, such as not being embarrassed about telling their problem, and self-motivation to seek OC without anyone's recommendation:

Teenagers during OC are easier to handle for those free from interview embarrassment (R2). ... I think it is more appropriate for teenagers provided they have a desire and they go to counseling themselves without obliging (R5).

4.2.4. The Future of OC

The counselors' experiences at OC were not limited to the current situation, but also extended the future vision between prospects of potential opportunities and challenges of ethical issues.

4.2.4.1. Prospects and Opportunities

Many respondents expected OC to continue and spread further:

It will be more effective in counseling in the coming years than at present (R2). It would be an appropriate alternative but not a substitute to f2f (R3). I expect the development of OC in the future and the evidence is that many electronic applications and institutions provide OC service for a fee (R4).

4.2.4.2. Ethical Risks and Challenges

Some participants also expected the expansion of OC to be accompanied by an increase in its risks:

There will be many websites and electronic applications, but they may be dangerous and expose the client to confidentiality if they are not trusted (R1). I expect that OC will be legalized and build its applications and not just with social networks (R8).



Some counselors referred to ethical issues that concerned them and their clients during OC, some had negative experiences and concerns about the challenges of maintaining client privacy and confidentiality, and some had positive experiences and expectations about it.

I am afraid of breaching privacy ... but it did not happen to me, and this can be addressed if the counselor is keen on ... deleting everything that proves the identity of the client and through the continuous updating of accounts (R4). I see that the professional relationship is threatened under the OC ..., as I remember that a client contacted me at 2 am because he needed a necessary session ... Ease of access to the counselor is a double-edged sword in my view (R7).

Some participants also explained that consideration of ethical issues depends on the role of the counselor or the center providing the service, and is not directly related to the OC:

If the entity is not trusted, the client may be exposed to recording his voice or image, which may constitute client fear (R1). It is up to the counselor as he can address some ethical issues such as confidentiality, privacy, training, and licensing as they differ from one counselor to another and not between OC and F2f counseling(R8).

4.3. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to reveal counselors' perceptions of OC using quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative results showed that the counselors have positive perceptions about it, although they don't see the OC as a substitute for f2f counseling, it keeps pace with digital transformation, suits clients who feel stigmatized from receiving psychological service spares them the burdens of traveling to meet the counselor, and provides them with greater freedom to express their problems, It provides the possibility of providing counseling services in times of crisis and emergency. This result indicates the importance of OC and is consistent with (Chan, 2020) where OC fulfilled the needs of clients, especially young people, and with (Young, 2005), where it provided a sense of comfort and independence, and with (Amanvermez, 2015), where it provided clients with greater opportunity in Self-disclosure and reduced stigma, in addition to being useful in times of crisis.

The results also showed that not a small percentage of counselors have a vague perception of the advantages of OC, and this may be due to the recent experience of counselors from the study sample with OC, in addition to their conviction in the effective role of f2f counseling; Because it allows non-verbal communication (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018), this means that it is possible to benefit from OC in conjunction with f2f counseling, and this is what (Chan, 2020) found that the effectiveness of integrated counseling combining both types was better compared to f2f or OC alone, while (Chester & Glass, 2006) concluded that

OC is not more effective than f2f counseling, and it appears that this is still a matter of debate.

While the perceptions of a large percentage of counselors were more clear about the pros of OC, as they indicate that it is difficult to provide an appropriate environment for OC compared to f2f counseling, that there is a threat to the professional relationship, and that clients drop out from counseling sessions, with the difficulty of protecting the client from insecure sites, and the absence of body language compared to f2f counseling, the main drawbacks of remote counseling were technical problems (such as insufficiency of the Internet, lack of clarity of sound and images, or interruption of the session ... etc., and this result is consistent with (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018) about the lack of Technological skills for users, lack of nonverbal communication, and with (Foon et al., 2020) about fear of hacking into personal accounts and ethical issues of OC. Despite counselors' positive perceptions of OC, the presence of common challenges among participants may lead to reluctance from OC, which places the responsibility on the professionals to find creative solutions to overcome these challenges.

The results of the qualitative analysis are consistent with the quantitative one, as the researchers came up with four themes describing the counselors' perceptions of OC.

4.2.1. First Theme: OC Reality

Participants described the reality of OC through its pros and cons, and among the most prominent pros are ease of access, the flexibility of appointments, and reduced feelings of stigma. This result is consistent with (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018) where social stigma was lower for OC users compared to f2f counseling, and the participants also reported that the OC environment is more Comfort, as agrees with the findings in (Amos et al., 2020). The defects were technical problems, lack of non-verbal communication, difficulty controlling external influences during synchronous sessions, and this result agreed with (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018) about the lack of non-verbal communication and technical skills of users, and with what was indicated in (Amos et al., 2020)) about poor internet connection during OC.

4.2.2. Second Theme: Counselors' Satisfaction With OC

Participants' satisfaction with OC depended on the form of communication and the technological modalities, the possibility of using counseling techniques and skills, and ethical issues, some of them preferred synchronous verbal counseling, while others did not welcome written or asynchronous communication, and Zoom was the most preferred modality, then Skype, WhatsApp, and Telegram programs, also, WebX and Shezlong application, and this result is consistent with (Dowling & Rickwood, 2013; Suler, 2000) in that WhatsApp and video conferencing allow synchronous and asynchronous nonverbal

communication by sending messages, audio, and video recordings. While it disagrees with (Wangberg, et al., 2007), they found that there is a difference in the preferences of the counselors for using SMS and e-mails in the OC.

Regarding the appropriate counseling techniques, the participants' opinions differed about it, but CBT was the most frequent intervention, and this is consistent with (Chester & Glass, 2006), where CBT techniques were the most used in OC, followed by eclectic.

4.2.3. Third Theme: OC Customers

The participants explained that OC contributed to meeting the needs of their clients, and this was demonstrated by their satisfaction, seriousness, and commitment in the counseling sessions, where the commitment of the clients to the sessions ranged between 60-70%, and the clients preferred OC compared to the f2f counseling. This result is consistent with the results of (Mallen et al, 2005) where client satisfaction was higher than f2f counseling, and the participants reported that OC is appropriate for youth, adults, and then adolescents more than children, and this result is consistent with the findings of (Sindahl et al. , 2020) that OC was effective with youth in improving well-being, and a sense of empowerment.

4.2.4. Fourth Theme: The Future of OC

The participants expected an increase in the use of OC in the future through an increase in websites and electronic applications, and that it would be complementary to f2f counseling, especially if safety and privacy factors were available, and this is in agreement with (Ahmad et al., 2010) where they indicated that OC is still growing well.

As for ethical issues, the counselors did not take a specific position on them, while some had positive experiences and expectations, others had negative experiences and future fears, and some stated that the consideration of ethical issues depends on the role of the counselor and the institution that provides the service and is not directly related to the OC, and this result is consistent with (Foon et al., 2020) on concerns over personal account hacking, legal and ethical issues during OC.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to reveal the counselors' perceptions of OC in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data showed participants' perceptions that OC has pros and cons, and they saw that it could be used alongside, but not a substitute for f2f counseling. Four main themes developed related to Counselors' perceptions and practices of OC, namely: OC Reality, Counselor Satisfaction with OC, OC Clients, and OC Future. In short, the qualitative data supported the quantitative statistics, as the results indicated that the majority believe that the pros of this type of counseling benefit



clients, and that their satisfaction is related to factors related to the form, the modality, the techniques, and skills used, in addition to the presence of factors that contribute to meeting the needs of the age groups, and the seriousness and commitment to the sessions. As for the future of OC, its horizons are broad and the opportunities for its continuation and development are great, especially with the exploitation of its pros and the elimination of its cons, without neglecting its moral risks and challenges. Therefore, the study recommends that concerned institutions should increase interest in OC and choose secure official platforms. The limitations of the current study should also be noted: first, the data were collected in light of the COVID 19 pandemic and the various pressures associated with it, second: the guides described their experiences with OC according to what they presented as a result of the precautionary measures, it is suggested to examine the counselors' perceptions of OC in natural conditions.



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