

Virtual Care: Counseling Experiences Of Guidance Counselors And Clients In The New Normal

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 07 January 2023

Revised 18 January 2023

Accepted 31 January 2023

ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the online counseling experiences of guidance counselors and clients in the new normal. Using purposeful sampling, ten participants, precisely five guidance counselors and five clients, actively participated in the semi-structured interviews. Results revealed eleven themes to answer the central question of the study. Three emergent themes described the challenges faced by guidance counselors in online counseling. They were (1) means of delivery, (2) counseling engagement, and (3) conduciveness of counseling sessions. In addition, three emergent themes described their insights upon facing the challenges. They were (1) online impediments, (2) online convenience, and (3) avenue for self-guided improvement. On the other hand, three emergent themes described clients' reasons for seeking online counseling. They were (1) psychological and academic related concerns, (2) express emotions and private issues, and (3) personal and referral drives. Lastly, two emergent themes described their views towards online counseling. They were (1) presence of virtual care and (2) acknowledgment of online counseling existence.

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ISSN: 2722-2365 (Online) 2722-2357 (Print)

Introduction

Online counseling is an essential therapeutic intervention carried out by guidance counselors to ease the worries and concerns of clients in the new normal. The significant change in the accustomed delivery system of counseling services brought by the COVID-19 pandemic where physical interactions are limited, the use of this virtual service has become more apparent globally (Arrieta & Valeria, 2021; Chan & Litam 2021; Mejah & Amat, 2019; Pattison et al., 2021; Savarese et al., 2020; Sweeney, 2020; Zilcha-Mano & Ramseyer, 2020). Online counseling has been a trend in providing virtual care and continues to rise in the counseling field as guidance counselors help their clients cope with distressing concerns.

Moreover, behind the curtain of these circumstances are the counseling experiences of guidance counselors as they face to adapt to the various current challenges in counseling

sessions. Several studies have revealed these issues in the new normal such as the readiness of guidance counselors (Karaman & Aliyev, 2021), the effectiveness (Navarro et al., 2020), the ethical and legal implications (Shchedrinskaya & Bebachuk, 2020), and the use of technology (Wootton et al., 2020). These experiences are undeniable as they could compromise and limit the counseling performance and capacity of guidance counselors in providing the virtual care that clients need, especially in this challenging time.

However, guidance counselors could acquire more knowledge and a more profound understanding of the significance and implications of online counseling. According to Wootton et al. (2020), the situation becomes an avenue for guidance counselors to overcome technological barriers as they deal with clients' concerns online. In addition, Joshi et al. (2021) described that counselors' engagement in online counseling impacted their professional and personal selves, necessitating the need for structured and continuous training, supervision, and support. Most importantly, Arrieta and Valeria (2021) found challenges in online counseling as a springboard to further improve the quality of guidance programs and services, especially in the new normal. The insights obtained by guidance counselors move them to adapt and innovate counseling approaches and improve current guidance practices.

Meanwhile, the counseling experiences of the clients are also an important feature to be explored in the new normal. One of the leading reasons why clients seek online counseling is because they have been psychologically distressed by the phenomenon, and various studies have documented the usefulness of online counseling in dealing with this prevailing concern (Chirikov et al., 2020; Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020; Thakur, 2020; Thome et al., 2020; Pincus et al., 2020; Sifat, 2020; Son, 2020; Yuniarti & Asrowi, 2021). Clients' views in online counseling find it accessible, convenient, private, and mobile; on the contrary, loss of non-verbal cues, mistrust, and poor internet connectivity was their major impediments, as found by Amos et al. (2020). Nonetheless, clients felt the virtual care being extended by the guidance counselors as they implemented online counseling in mitigating their concerns in the new normal.

As a response to the call of the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association to extend mental health assistance to the community from their Facebook post: "Interim Guidelines on the Conduct and Delivery of Guidance and Counseling and Mental Health Services During the COVID-19 Crisis", the guidance counselors of Notre Dame of Dadiangas University has actively implemented online counseling to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic toward students' mental health, whereby students and teachers can book appointments or make referrals online. Despite this effort in helping students cope with their situations, the guidance counselors still find implementing online counseling challenging. The effectiveness, stability of internet connection, and conducive counseling environment are the essential considerations in conducting a counseling session that concerns guidance counselors and clients in the new normal.

As the study embarks its purpose, it is essential to explore the experiences of guidance counselors and clients as online counseling becomes an accessible tool in providing mental health assistance in the new normal. This study would enlighten the emerging ideas of past and newfound related discoveries, which help widen the research topic gaps. It hopes to add more knowledge in the counseling field as it sheds light on the present status quo of the guidance counselors, precisely their challenges and insights in online counseling. It also seeks to navigate the counseling experiences of clients, mainly their reasons as to why they seek counseling in the new normal and their views towards online counseling. The study explored the counseling experiences of guidance counselors and clients in the new normal. Specifically,

it answered the central question: “What are the online counseling experiences of guidance counselors and clients in the new normal?”

Method

This chapter presents the components of the method used in this study. It describes the research design, locale of the study, participants, sampling, data source, data gathering procedure, data analysis and interpretation, ethical considerations, and the rigors of qualitative research. The current study used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. It sought to investigate a particular phenomenon directly experienced by a collaborative group (Creswell, 2012). The investigated phenomena in the study are the online counseling experiences in the new normal; meanwhile, the collaborative groups who experienced the phenomena were the guidance counselors and the clients. It is the most appropriate research design because it allows the researcher to answer the study's objective. It is the nature of the study to explore the experiences of the participants deeply. The use of this design allows the researcher to know the participants' in-depth experiences in online counseling. The design also allows the researcher to conduct semi-structured interviews, which is a primary method to gather the participants' narrative experiences. Thus, the design guided the current study to navigate its purpose.

The locale of the study was in Notre Dame of Dadiangas University, located at the City of General Santos. It is Marist school that offers primary education, college, and graduate degree programs. Specifically, the locales include the guidance and testing center and the zoom platforms. The school's guidance and testing center were chosen as a locale because it the location of the guidance counselors where they render their counseling services. The office offers various guidance programs and services that cater to the needs of the students, such as information, counseling, and testing. Zoom platform was the locale of data collection. It is an online platform that allows virtual meetings. The researcher scheduled the Zoom meetings among the participants of the study at their most convenient time. The present study used virtual interviews to observe health and safety protocols during the pandemic.

The participants of the study were the guidance counselors of Notre Dame of Dadiangas University who were implementing online counseling and the clients who underwent online counseling. The criteria used in the selection of guidance counselors were the following: female, licensed or non-licensed, novice or seasoned, and must-have experiences in conducting online counseling in the new normal. As for the clients' inclusive criteria were the following: regardless of sex, age, course, year level, nature of concerns, and the number of times they underwent online counseling. The sampling used in the study was purposeful. According to Creswell (2012), a qualitative phenomenological research design would require at least three to ten participants. Thus, the purposeful sampling to select the participants who meet the criteria would be the most appropriate for this study. A total of ten participants: five guidance counselors and five clients participated in the study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. It was the most appropriate tool used since the participants represented the people concerning the phenomena (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The interview guide was designed to extract the in-depth experiences of the participants. There was a total of twelve interview questions: three interview questions intended to explore the challenges of guidance counselors in conducting online counseling and another three interview questions intended to describe their insights from facing the challenges.

Another three questions described the reasons as to why clients seek counseling in the new normal, and three questions to know their views towards online counseling.

Several steps were employed in the conduct of this study. As suggested by Creswell (2012), these were identifying the participants who will meet the criteria, the conduct of semi-structured interviews, data analysis and interpretation, and data storage. A pre-survey was done to identify possible participants from the research locales. After gathering necessary information about the participants, the criteria and other protocols were established. An interview guide was created to exhaust the participants' experiences based on the objectives of the study. The interview guide underwent a validation process. Three research experts evaluated it to ensure that the interview questions aligned with the study's objectives. After the validation, pilot interviews with selected random individuals were conducted to ensure that the questions in the interview guide were understandable and accurate. After gathering all the data, Colaizzi's method was utilized in data analysis and interpretation, discussed in the preceding sections. The ethical considerations and rigors in qualitative research were strictly observed along with the conduct of this study. The gathered responses underwent a series of steps, just like in any qualitative analysis. The three common steps employed include data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing, and verification (Creswell, 2012). In analyzing the data, the Colaizzi (1978) method was used. Specifically, this study followed the seven steps: transcripts were carefully read to have a general sense of the whole content, significant statements were extracted and recorded on a separate file noting the pages and line numbers, formulated meanings were derived in each significant statement, clustered themes were sorted out from the meanings, the findings were integrated into exhaustive description under the phenomena that were studied, the thematic maps were drawn out to describe its fundamental structure and lastly validation of findings from the participants which were sought after.

According to Sanjari et al. (2014), various ethical issues may arise in writing qualitative research, including anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. Hence, standard protocols were established in this study to safeguard both the researcher and the participants.

Anonymity. Keeping the identities of the participants was one of the priorities of this research. Saunders et al. (2015) identified anonymity as an important part of data gathering in qualitative research. It protects the participants from any potentially identifying issues that may narrow their identifying information. In the conduct of this study, aliases were given to the participants to prevent any revelation of identities.

Just like with anonymity, the goal of confidentiality was to protect the identities of the participants. According to Tudy, R. & Tudy, I. (2016), this was considered in line with anonymity and should be sustained to the greatest extent. Hence, utmost confidentiality for the participants' identifying information was strictly observed along with the conduct of the study.

Informed Consent. As part of the informed consent process in qualitative research, communicating risks and benefits to research participants was important (Nusbaum et al., 2017). With this, informed consent forms containing the study's objective, possible benefits and risks, and rights to withdraw from the study were given to the participants and discussed carefully before the conduct of the interviews. It served as a form of agreement between the participants and the researcher that they have agreed willingly to participate in the study actively.

To guarantee that this study was trustworthy, the following rigors in qualitative research were observed: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and validity. Credibility means the truthiness of the data coming from the participants' perspectives which were interpreted and represented thoroughly by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2008). In this study, careful data translation was done to make sure that they were accurate. Then, the interpreted data were verified by the participants for their congruence.

The data must represent the participants' responses and not the viewpoints of the researcher, which confirmability is all about (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012; Tobin & Begley, 2004). In line with the method used in the study, all essential data coming from the participants underwent careful analysis to derive emergent themes. It preserved the rawness and richness of the data coming from the experiences of the participants. Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions, which can be achieved when other researchers and or similar studies to be conducted concurs with the decision trails at each stage of the research process (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). The exact methods used in the conduct of this study were described thoroughly in the methodology. It could give objective information as to how this study was made possible. So, any replication of this research can be done.

Transferability according to Houghton et al. (2013), it refers to the applicability of the research findings to other settings. To do this, drawing out the best conclusions from the participants' data and deriving generalizations that apply to other settings were made. Validity. As part of the research protocol, three research experts validated the study's interview guide. Two validation tools were given to the validators to check the appropriateness of the interview guide thoroughly. The first validation tool examined the alignment of the interview questions to the objectives of the study. The other validation tool evaluated the general component of the interview guide, such as the language used, the presentation of the questions, purpose, and intention of the questions.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Based on the central research question, this study has come up with eleven emergent themes. These include discussions on the challenges faced by guidance counselors in conducting online counseling, their insights upon facing the challenges; reasons as to why clients seek help, and their views toward online counseling.

Challenges faced by Guidance Counselors in Conducting Online Counseling

This study has three emergent themes referring to the challenges faced by guidance counselors, as presented in the thematic map on the next page. They are means of delivery, counseling engagement, and the conduciveness of counseling sessions.

Means of Delivery. Guidance counselors are having difficulty in delivering online counseling. Internet connectivity issues and effective communication are their primary concerns. These were evident in the succeeding responses of the participants.

Black, a newbie in the counseling field, expressed her counseling experience with internet disturbance. She stated:

siguro number one issues sir that I ahh... I notice is yung connectivity po talaga... there was an instance na uhm... patuloy yung conversation between me and the student and then suddenly naputol yung... ahhh yung usapan because yung internet ni student is ahhh bumagal ang internet or naputulan sila. (Transcript 9, Page 30, Lines 677-680).

(One of the issues I noticed is the connectivity. There was an instance that our conversation was interrupted. The student's internet connection got slow or cut.)

In addition, Violet, who has been counseling for three years, added her counseling experience with unstable internet:

isa din sa mga difficulties is because of the internet connection problem so isa din siya mga reason kung bakit hindi sila nag turn on ng cameras or videos. Transcript 7, Page 21, Lines 466-467).

(One of the difficulties is because of the internet connection problem. It is one of the reasons why clients do not want to turn on their cameras.)

Pink, a guidance facilitator in senior high school, shared her counseling experience with slow internet bandwidth:

then sometimes po uhm... medyo mahina din po yung... yung internet and i guess that's beyond of our control naman po... na minsan nawawala. (Transcript 8, Page 25, Lines 560-562)

(then sometimes ... there is a slow internet connection and I guess that's beyond of our control that there might disconnection)

Aside from internet connectivity issues, delivering effective communication also challenges guidance counselors. Indigo, a college guidance facilitator, described her challenge in extending the counseling conversation:

Ano man ireply ko nito. Yun lang yun Sir hindi ko na alam paano siya iextend gud ang convo. (Transcript 6, Page 19, Lines 426-427)

(What should I reply? I do not know how to extend the conversation)

Black, also added her challenging experience in maintain the flow of counseling conversation:

nawala sa momentum yung conversation or and pagbalik ulit medyo may buffer po sa ano... sa previous na conversation so parang yun ang pina challenge. (Transcript 9, Page 30, Lines 681-68)

(The momentum of our conversation is disturbed, or when I go back, there is a buffer to our past discussion, and that is a challenge)

Most guidance counselors experienced a significant challenge in delivering online counseling due to internet connectivity issues and effective delivery of communication.

Counseling Engagement. Another challenge faced by guidance counselors is the counseling engagement of the clients. It includes inactive participation, which is composed of counselors' difficulty in reaching out to their clients and their nonattendance.

Pink, a senior high school guidance facilitator, described her difficulty in reaching out to her clients:

isang challenge po doon is how we will... ahh kumbaga... how we will reach out to the student. (Transcript 8, Page 25, Lines 555-556)

(One of the challenges is how we will reach out to the students.)

White, a seasoned college guidance counselor, shared her challenging experience in this way:

in my case if I am going to... to ask student to... uhm... to... to have a session I am not very sure... if uhm... he is willing to... to... to attend the sessions especially if... if it's a referral type of... uhm... counseling. (Transcript 10, Page 33, Lines 737-739)

Moreover, the inadequate responses of the clients concern guidance counselors. Black, a college guidance facilitator, stated her counseling experience with her client that is incapable of sharing their concerns:

feeling ko po mas nahihirapan po sila mag open up online. (Transcript 9, Page 30, Lines 671-673)

(I feel that they are having a hard time opening up online.)

Violet added her online counseling experience with clients who could not fully express:

the barrier itself... the virtual counseling itself.. Yung sa... usually hindi rin masyadong nakaka express si student unlike nung face to face pa. (Transcript 7, Page 21, Lines 471-471)

(The barrier itself, the virtual counseling itself and usually the students could not express unlike face to face.)

Guidance counselors find it challenging to conduct online counseling primarily when clients cannot engage fully in the counseling sessions.

Conduciveness of Counseling Sessions. It is also a challenge among guidance counselors to secure the conduciveness of counseling sessions. Guidance counselors expressed their challenging experience as regards proximal assessments. White, a college guidance counselor, finds it hard to conduct online counseling because there is no physical interaction. She stated:

it is difficult because... in the first place I feel like uhm... there is no... ahh personal touch ahh... between... the student and me... I think that makes me worry about it. (Transcript 10, Page 33, Lines 734-736)

In addition, Violet shared her struggles in assessing the non-verbal cues of her clients:

... we cannot assess the students' nonverbal cues... diba as we do our assessment or intake interviews or counseling... aside from sa mga sinasabi ng mga students, we should also look into their nonverbal cues yun po yung talagang mahirap kasi you cannot assess the nonverbal cues of the student properly. (Transcript 7, Page 21, Lines 461-464)

(We cannot assess the student's nonverbal cues as we do our assessments, intake interviews, or counseling. Aside from the verbal statements, we should also investigate their nonverbal cues, and that is not easy because you cannot assess the nonverbal cues of the student properly.)

Building rapport with clients is also a challenge for Black. She described her counseling experience in this way:

pinaka challenging po is really uhm... the interaction between me and the student or the counselee kasi parang on my end po it's harder to build... rapport... uhm... with them kasi its either they don't want to turn on cameras or sometimes their hesitant po to... talk online. (Transcript 9, Page 30, Lines 666-669)

(The most challenging is the interaction between the student and me or the counselee because it is harder to build rapport with them because it is either they do not want to turn on their cameras, or sometimes they are hesitant to talk online.)

In maintaining the conduciveness of the sessions, guidance counselors find it difficult as regards its operative output. Indigo, a college guidance facilitator, shared her challenging experience in addressing the concerns of her clients and the delayed responses directly:

pinaka problem talaga na ma encounter ko is yung hindi gud agad ma address kung ano yung need talaga ng student. (Transcript 6, Page 18, Lines 391-393)

(The problem I encountered the most was that I could not address the needs of the student.)

late ang mga reply so kung ngayong gabi... kunwari mga 5pm ka magreply minsan ang student magreply kinabukasan na so yung problem is imbis na solve kaagad... yang mas ma prolong na lang gud siya. (Transcript 6, Page 18, Lines 393-395)

(The replies are late like this evening, at 5 pm you will reply then sometimes the student will reply by tomorrow so instead of addressing the problem on that day, it gets prolonged.)

To sum up, the challenges experienced by guidance counselors in conducting online counseling in the new normal are the means of delivery, counseling engagement, and the conduciveness of the counseling sessions.

Insights gained by Guidance Counselors upon facing the Challenges

With the challenges experienced by guidance counselors, they have gained insights as presented in the thematic map on the next page. This study has three emergent themes. They were online impediments, online convenience, and avenues for self-guided improvement.

Online Impediments. In online impediments, guidance counselors experienced unfavorable replies. Black, a college guidance facilitator, shared the possibility of having misunderstanding in the relayed messages:

if yung student uhm... is nakuha niya how you wanted to relay the message that you want kasi parang sometimes may ahh... ano through messaging lang hindi talaga siya nakausap through audio... ahh like audio call or video call so

sometimes uhm... how you wanted the message to be relayed might be misunderstood on the end of the student. (Transcript 9, Page 31, Lines 698-701)

(If the student will get how you wanted to relay the message that you want, sometimes through messaging and you could not talk via audio call or video call so sometimes how you wanted the message to be relayed might be misunderstood on the end of the student.)

Further, Violet experienced getting aloof responses from her clients. She stated her experience in this way:

isa din sa disadvantage is yung sa student mismo kapag ahhh... parang nawawalan kasi sila ng gana Sir... kumbaga... minsan ah hindi naman lahat pero may isang case po kasi na parang wala siyang gana sumagot. (Transcript 7, Page 22, Lines 497-499).

(One of the disadvantages is the student if they are losing interest. Sometimes there are cases that they do not like to answer or respond to.)

In addition to getting unfavorable replies, guidance counselors also experienced meeting clients who were unwilling to be helped. It was evident with Violet's experience. She said:

isa din yun siya sa mahirap na narealize ko rin na parang mahirap... mahirap sila to help out kung hindi rin naman sila willing or kung hindi sila... ahhh ano Sir... hindi sila willing... hindi sila open sa kung ano yung ahhh... dapat gawin... (Transcript 7, Page 24, Lines 534-536)

(One of the hardest things that I realized is that it is pretty challenging to help them if they are not willing to be helped or if they are not willing ... not ready to open to whatever needs to do.)

Guidance counselors also realized that it is challenging to address the concerns of the clients directly. Pink, a college guidance facilitator, shared her counseling experience:

medyo nahihirapan kami or medyo delayed kumbaga ma address yung concern kasi kailangan pa namin ma contact yung student and wait for his or her reply so yun po yung disadvantages medyo matatagalan po. (Transcript 8, Page 27, Lines 601-603)

(It is hard, or there is a delay in addressing the concerns because we need to contact the student and wait for their reply, so that is one of the disadvantages.)

Online Convenience. Guidance counselors found implementing online counseling convenient. Violet, a senior high school guidance facilitator, described the flexibility of scheduling counseling sessions. She said:

you can... you can schedule the... the counseling... anytime parang ganon... pwede siyang anytime kasi uhm... hindi ano Sir... hindi na compromised yung schedule ng bata. (Transcript 7, Page 21-22, Lines 478-479)

(You can schedule the counseling anytime. It is anytime because it will not compromise the schedule of the student.)

Also, Pink, who has been in the counseling field for three years, shared another advantage of online counseling. She stated that:

advantage is hindi po masasagasaan yung klase nila kasi po pang morning ko po sine-set yung counseling kasi morning available naman po sila. (Transcript 8, Page 26, Lines 583-584)

(The advantage is that it will not compromise their class because I usually set the counseling in the morning since they are available by that time.)

Aside from the timetable adaptability where flexible schedule and availability of clients were included, guidance counselors also realized that it is easy to invite clients for a session in online counseling. Black, a college guidance facilitator, shared her insight in this way:

for this time parang anytime na may vaccant si student kasi parang online lahat ang set up mas maraming uhm... way na maka attend siya sa schedule na session po. (Transcript 9, Page 31, Lines 686-688)

(For this time, if the student is vacant anytime since everything is online, there are many ways to attend the scheduled session.)

White, a seasoned college guidance counselor, added her insight:

one of the advantages is that ahh... you really able to... to reach out to your student... in the best way you can because this is the only means that you could... ahh communicate and you know help them in their concerns. (Transcript 10, Page 34, Lines 760-763)

(One of the advantages is that you can reach out to your student in the best way you can because this is the only means that you could communicate and help them with their concerns.)

Avenue for Self-guided Improvement. The challenges brought by online counseling become an avenue for guidance counselors to improve their counseling skills. They learned the use of perceptive counseling skills. White, a seasoned college guidance counselor, described the importance of showing empathy. She stated:

as a counselor you let them sure whether the... the student have... really understood or feel or saw that... uhm... that you really emphasized... with him or with her on the... on the current situation... uhm he or she is experiencing (Transcript 10, Page 34, Lines 771-773)

Black, a college guidance facilitator, added the need to lengthen the patience:

delivering of counseling services sa ating mga based dapat mas karang mas patient ka ata mas may patience ka to... to interact with the student mas parang mas... bigyan mo ng uhm... konting time that the student would make him or her comfortable talking to you. (Transcript 9, Page 31-32, Line # 707-710)

(In delivering counseling services, you must be patient to interact with the student to give more time to make them feel comfortable with you.)

Pink, a senior high school guidance facilitator, learned the significance of extending the effort to provide help.

we need to understand talaga the situation of the student no... we need to extend effort pa talaga Sir.. na para po ma... matulungan natin sila. (Transcript 8, Page 27, Lines 610-611)

(We need to understand the situation of the students. We need to extend the effort to help them.)

Guidance counselors also used the challenges they have experienced as a tool for professional development. Indigo, a newbie in counseling, shared her insight:

mag seek din ng help sa mga colleague, sa mga counselors or sa mga may experiences na gud Sir para at least ma guide lang din ako kahit papaano. (Transcript 6, Page 20, Lines 450-451)

(To seek help from colleagues to other counselors with experiences so that at least they will guide you on what to do.)

Violet also stated the need for guidance counselors to undergo intensive training in conducting online counseling. She stated:

personally I po to undergo siguro intensive na... uhmm... seminar/workshop or training po on online counseling or telegram counseling po... para at least ma apply na... ma apply namin yun, ma apply ko po yun especially no new normal naman talaga ngayon Sir so we have to adapt as well so yun po Sir. (Transcript 7, Page 24, Lines 543-546)

(I need to undergo intensive seminars/workshops or training in online counseling or telegram counseling to apply the experience. Since the new normal, we have to adapt as well.)

Black found from her experiences the need to explore other ways in reaching out to her clients. She said:

I needed to explore more ways... more effective ways on how to reach out to them parang how to tell them online na I am inviting you to this. (Transcript 9, Page 31-32, Lines 715-717).

(I need to explore more effective ways to reach out to them and invite them online.)

Guidance counselors have realizations from challenges they are facing in online counseling. They have gained insights, particularly the impediments of implementing online counseling, its convenience, and most of all, it becomes an avenue for self-guided improvement.

Reasons why Clients seek Online Counseling

There are several reasons why clients seek online counseling in the new normal as presented in the thematic map in the next page. This study found three emergent themes:

psychological and academic concerns, express concealed emotions, and private issues, and lastly, the personal and referral drives.

Psychological and academic concerns. In this theme, clients shared that the anxieties they are experiencing lead them to seek help. Red shared her experience:

naga overthink na gud ako nung time then... hindi na.. hindi na ako maka focus talaga sa ano ba sa online class. (Transcript 1, Page 1, Lines 3-5)

(I tend to overthink that time. I could no longer focus on my online class.)

Yellow also added her experience of being emotionally unstable:

I am not emotionally stable siguro that time Sir kaya siguro... parang nag ahh... parang nag trigger siguro.. or parang ano Sir uhm... ahhh parang nag seek ako ng help with the professionals siguro Sir kaya ang first come up with my mind Sir kay ang ano talaga... ang guidance. (Transcript 3, Page 8, Lines 168-171)

(I am not emotionally stable at that time. That is why it triggers me to seek help from professionals. The first thing that came to my mind was guidance.

Another prevailing reason is the academic stress. Blue expressed her stress as she jumbles her academic and personal concerns:

parang nag halo halo na yung stress ko sa acads, yung stress ko sa within myself personally and then yung stress din sa responsibilities. (Transcript 5, Page 15, Lines 337-338)

(The stress in academics, stress within myself personally, and stress to my responsibility jumbles.)

In addition, Red is worried about having too much academic workloads:

yung senior high parang kaya ko pa manhandle parang yung one-week na hellweek namin parang ngayon sa college everyday na parang... mag spend ng time para magsagot gud Sir parang wala na akong time para maka rest and wala na akong time na maka sabay gud sa fam family ko. (Transcript 1, Page 2, Lines 36-40)

(During senior high, I could handle the one-week hell week, but now in college, I have to spend most of my time answering almost every day. I do not have time to rest and be with my family.)

The clients' experiences, particularly the psychological and academic concerns, moved them to seek help from guidance counselors.

Express Emotions and Private Issues. Clients underwent online counseling to express their concealed emotions and private issues.

Opening up to someone is the reason why Orange seek counseling:

yang... wala ka po gud makausap sa lahat lahat Sir... tapos parang need mo po talaga ng... some someone po gud Sir na ma open mo po yun lahat yun po yung ano ko po sa counseling po Sir. (Transcript 2: Orange, Page 5, Lines 99-101)

(You do not have someone to talk with about everything. It would be best if you had someone to open, which counseling is all about.)

Green also shared her experience of wanting to reveal her feelings and emotions:

feel ko feel ko din Sir kay ano hindi ako masyado naga share sa iba. Parang gi keep ko gud lahat so... the more ko siya na gina ano gina keep yung mga or gina express yung feelings ko yang emotion ko. (Transcript 4, Page 13, Lines 276-278)

(I feel that I do not usually share with others. I kept everything to myself. The more I keep it or the feelings or emotions that need to express.)

Further, clients need someone to share their personal concerns. Orange stated that she would like to convey her family problems to someone who can listen to her:

family problem yang... an.. I think po as a panganay Sir need po ng kausap gud Sir kay... kasi po ano every... parang everyday po naga away yung parents namin. (Transcript 2, Page 5, Lines 110-112)

(Family problem ... as the eldest, I need to talk about it. My parents always fight.)

Blue shared her experience that she needs someone to clear out her disorganized thoughts:

mag abot na ako sa point na ano... yang hindi ko na mahandle yung stress... stress ko kasi... hindi ko na din siya ma organize yung thoughts ko parang parang I need someone na mag organize nung thoughts ko for me parang ganon Sir. (Transcript 5, Page 15, Lines 334-337)

(It comes to the point that I could not handle my stress. I could not organize my thoughts. I need someone to organize them for me.)

Clients found the importance of expressing their concealed emotions and their private issues. These experiences lead them to seek online counseling.

Personal and Referral Drives. Another reason found is the clients' personal and referral drives. Red stated that her friend suggested she undergo counseling:

gi advise niya sa akin Sir na magpa counsel po ako... kay baka makahelp sa akin so ayon gi try ko din yun Sir gitry ko kay baka makahelp talaga siya. (Transcript 1, Page 1, Lines 9-11)

(She advised me to have counseling, which might help me. That is why I tried if it could help me.)

Also, Blue said that her friend gave her information about online counseling:

*nadiscover ko yung online Sir na online na pala siya na hindi na pala pwede yung face to face po is meron kasi akong ahh... kabatch Sir which is friend ko rin si uhm... ahhh ano ba yung name niya... si ***... bale nag ah under siya sa guidance na ata ngayon like naga work sa dame po and then yan nag open up po ako sa kanya regarding counseling tapos sa... namention niya na virtual nga lang daw po pala Sir. (Transcript 5, Page 15, Lines 325-330)*

(I discovered that online counseling replaced face-to-face counseling because of my batchmate who works in the guidance. I opened to her, and she mentioned that it is through virtual.)

Moreover, clients discovered online counseling through the online advertisements they saw. Yellow shared that she discovered online counseling through the Guidance Facebook page:

na discover ko siya Sir is ano... yung nag post ahhh... wait ano yun.. ah wait yung nagpost ang NDDU Guidance sa facebook po doon ko siya nalaman then... sa online... ay sa ano ko sa pag counseling ko sa guidance po. (Transcript 3, Page 8, Lines 162-165)

(I discovered it through the post on NDDU Guidance facebook. It is where I got the information about this online counseling in the guidance.)

Orange added her experience:

yun po na time Sir is nag ask po ako ... tas may gi refer ... po sa akin na page po na nagahandle po ng online counseling sa school po. (Transcript 2, Page 5, Lines 94-95)

(During that time, I asked, and he referred to a page that handles online counseling in the school.)

Through self-sufficiency and other-directed, clients come across online counseling.

Views of Clients in Online Counseling

This study has found two emergent themes referring to the views of the clients in online counseling as presented in the thematic map below. They were the presence of virtual care and acknowledgment of online counseling existence.

Presence of Virtual Care. Clients felt the presence of virtual care. They viewed online counseling to assist them. Red shared that online counseling helps improve her decision-making. She said:

Big help talaga siya Sir kay parang... kay yun na time naga always man ako naga ask sa mga friends ko pero parang hindi pa gud enough na... na ma convince ako kung ano ba talaga ang... ang... final decision ko ganon gud Sir then... yun na time naisip ko na... parang eto tama na siguro talaga tong decision ko kay nakahelp talaga siya. (Transcript 1, Page 3, Lines 46-49)

(It is a big help. I always ask my friends during that time, but I feel that it is not enough to convince me about my final decision. Then at that time, I thought that this decision helped me.)

Orange also expressed her view in online counseling. It guide her in her actions:

nakatulong siya Sir in a way na yun po may nakausap ako and parang... parang... may older po gud na naga guide sa akin kung ano po gagawin, ga comfort ganon po Sir. (Transcript 2, Page 6, Lines 128-130)

(It helped me in a way that the counselor I talked to is like an older person who can guide me on what to do and comfort me.)

Green found online counseling helpful:

Online counseling Sir is very helpful... syempre kay ano... like everything is online naman ngayon because of pandemic... so like may way pa rin gud Sir na maka reach out... ang mga tao sa mga people na naga... need ng help... and to make them feel na ano may naga care pa din sa kanila. (Transcript 4, Page 14, Lines 313-316)

(Online counseling is very helpful. Like everything is online because of the pandemic. So there is still a way to reach out to people who need help and make them feel that there is care.)

Further, clients viewed online counseling as an avenue to express their personal issues. Yellow shared her counseling experience. It helped her unwrap her piled up emotions:

talaga kelangan ko ng professional talaga so ayon okay naman Sir... ahhh nalabas ko naman ahh... parang magaan naman yung feeling that time and... may trust naman ako... parang may trust naman kahit siya online siya yun Sir. (Transcript 3, Page 10, Lines 207-209)

(I need professional help. I was able to release my feelings that time. I have trust, even if it is online.)

Also, green found online counseling assert her unexpressed emotions:

for me nakahelp sa akin yung counseling... kay... like meron gud... meron gud mga ano Sir mga emotions or mga feelings na di ko gud ma name before tapos nag make sense sa akin nung counseling na nalaman ko na ganon pala yung... situation ko. (Transcript 4, Page 13, Lines 287-289)

(Counseling helped me. Like I have emotions or feelings that I could not name before, but right after counseling, those feelings make sense, I was able to recognize them and understand my situation.)

Another view by clients in online counseling is it helps them deal with their psychological concerns. Red stated that it helps her lessen uneasiness:

na lessen gud yung pag overthink ko before... medyo nagbalik na din yung gana ko magkain ganon... na hindi pa... after mag iyak ako like pag mag tulala lang ako bigla tas mag iyak ganon. (Transcript 1, Page 3, Lines 50-52)

(It lessens my overthinking and brings back my liveliness that, unlike before, after crying, I got spaced out and then cried again.)

In addition, Blue said that online counseling helped her clarify her confusions:

actually nakatulong talaga siya sa akin parang... yung... yung... yung ano ko... yung thoughts ko parang alam ko na ano yung gawin, ano yung unahain ganito gud Sir parang tapos yung mood ko.. yung mood ko din talaga Sir na ano...ahhh nag... na uplift din gud talaga siya Sir tapos parang naging positive din yung way of thinking ko. (Transcript 5, Page 16, Lines 352-356)

(Actually it helped me organized my thoughts on what to do first. Also, it regulates my mood. It uplifts me and helps me to have positive thinking.)

Clients also described their views in relation to the life-long learning they got after undergoing online counseling. Blue shared her counseling experience which helped her cope from her problems:

Actually it helped me Sir parang after non nagka progress ako Sir tapos naging okay yung ano pag cope up ko then yung mood ko actually is naging okay din. (Transcript 5, Page 16, Lines 343-344)

(Actually, it helped me. After that, I was able to progress, and the way I coped improved, and my mood became okay.)

Red also said that she got enlightened after availing counseling:

yung nag... nag salita ay nag usap na talaga ako sa nag counsel sa akin Sir mas na enlighten ako Sir kung ano ba dapat gawin ko. (Transcript 1, Page 4, Lines 74-75)

(The one who counseled enlightened me on what to do.)

Further, according to Orange, online counseling taught her a lesson:

for me Sir okay po siya Sir kasi parang hindi lang man po kasi siya yang usap ng usap po gud sa problem mo Sir parang may makuha ka rin po na lesson. (Transcript 2, Page 6, Lines 116-117)

(For me, it is okay. It is not just casual talk. You can also get a lesson from it.)

Indeed, clients felt the presence of virtual care. Online counseling assists them, help them express their issues, deal with their psychological concerns, and nurtures their life-long learning.

Acknowledgment of Online Counseling Existence. Upon undergoing online counseling, clients acknowledged its existence. They were satisfied from the service, and they found it effective.

Red mentioned that she is satisfied from her counseling experience:

para sa akin man gud Sir like satisfied na ako sa service na nabigay sa akin... kasi comfortable man din ako mag usap sa kany... sa yung yung na assign sa akin sa call. (Transcript 1, Page 3, Lines 60-620)

(For me, I was satisfied with the service. I was comfortable talking to the counselor assigned to me.)

Yellow also shared that online counseling is a creative way to help students:

parang creative siya... ahhh creative din siya Sir kasi uhm... kahit na pandemic Sir uhmm hindi pa rin... hindi pa rin siya ano ba... hindi siya... pi pina sa... ano yang sa tagalog ba... uhm kumbaga hindi siya gi disregard kumbaga gud Sir ganon. (Transcript 3, Page 11, Lines 230-233)

(It is creative even if it is pandemic. It will not disregard you.)

Moreover, clients found online counseling effective. Blue stated that:

For me... actually Sir super effective siya. (Transcript 5, Page 16, Lines 349)

(For me, it is super effective.)

Yellow added:

effective naman ahhh... effective naman siya Sir wala naman ano... hindi naman siya yung parang dehado ka na magshare hindi naman. Okay naman. (Transcript 3, Page 10, Lines 213-214)

(It is effective. It is not like unbeneficial when you share. It is okay.)

Clients felt the presence of virtual care as guidance counselors aid, helping them express their emotions, deal with their psychological concerns, and taught them life-long learning. Also, they acknowledged the existence of online counseling as they were satisfied with the service they availed, and they find it compelling.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the online counseling experiences of guidance counselors and clients in the new normal. It sought to describe the challenges faced by guidance counselors, their insights from facing the challenges, the reasons why clients seek help, and their views toward online counseling.

One of the challenges experienced by guidance counselors is internet connectivity issues. It is hard to implement online counseling, especially if technical failures such as internet disturbance, unstable internet, or slow internet bandwidth happen. Several studies have documented how internet connection became a challenge among counseling professionals (Amos et al., 2020; Dores et al., 2020, Haberstroh et al., 2008; Navarro et al., 2020; Wootton et al., 2020). The likelihood of this circumstance to happen is unpredictable.

Another challenging experience found in this study is the counseling engagement of the clients. Their inactive participation and inadequate responses challenge guidance counselors during the online counseling sessions. Similarly, Kit et al. (2014) stated that counselors have difficulty eliciting a client response in online sessions. King et al. (2006) added that clients might find it hard to express their emotions. This context is explained by several studies indicating that the youth in the contemporary period tend to negatively appraise available support (Dowling & Rickwood, 2016; Navarro et al., 2020; Rickwood et al., 2005). As such, the likelihood of clients actively participates in the sessions stems out from their expectations and readiness to receive help (Watsford et al., 2013). A possible reason for this is the sessions' vulnerability, embarrassment, or overwhelming experiences (Navarro et al., 2020). It is indeed unfortunate that counselors' efforts are disregarded passively by some clients. The active participation and adequate responses could make the session effective as possible.

Also, the conduciveness of the counseling session is a challenge among guidance counselors. A part of the drawbacks of online counseling found in this study includes the loss of non-verbal cues, getting delayed responses, and difficulty addressing concerns. Numerous studies indicated that loss of nonverbal cues in online counseling is a significant concern among counselors (Amos et al., 2020; Bambling et al., 2008; Dores et al., 2020; Haberstroh et al., 2008; Navarro et al., 2020). It is because proximal assessments are used alongside verbal to help better understand clients' concerns. In addition, the slow-paced sessions' communication, and difficulty in accurately assessing situations are complex problems among counselors (Navarro et al., 2020). The delayed responses of the clients often worry counselors. These concerning issues could significantly affect how counselors engage effectively with their clients in the counseling sessions.

Upon facing the challenges mentioned earlier of online counseling, guidance counselors gained insights from their experiences. This study has discovered some impediments to implementing counseling online. One of these is the possibility of miscommunication. Studies have shown that counselors are afraid to get misunderstood by their clients or vice versa (Dores et al., 2020; Foon et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2020). Whenever guidance counselors send messages, they are worried about how the clients would interpret these. Another issue is the reluctance of clients to be helped. In the study conducted by Bird et al. (2020), they found that students have self-stigma in online counseling, similar to what Jaladin (2013) stated in this study. The stigma caused clients to lack acceptance towards counselors. Other studies have supported this notion (Chen & Kok, 2017; Rickwood et al., 2005). As much as guidance counselors reach out to their clients by using all online means, clients' reluctance could still waste such efforts. These barriers found in online counseling make counselors reevaluate and improve their counseling practices, in any case.

On the other hand, counseling professionals described the advantages of online counseling. In this study, guidance counselors recount their experiences regarding the flexibility of the service in scheduling the sessions. Similarly, Dores et al. (2020) stated that geographic and scheduling flexibility are the advantages in delivering psychological counseling digitally, which is supported as well by Navarro et al. (2020) who noted, that the critical aspect of telecommunication type of counseling is the flexibility of accessing the service at any time and any location. Both guidance counselors and clients could approach effortlessly. Furthermore, this study found that counselors like going online to implement counseling services. It is for accessibility purposes. Other studies also noted this finding (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014; King et al., 2006; Nolan et al., 2011). Transforming the delivery of counseling from face-to-face to online improve the availability of the counseling service. Such convenience enjoyed guidance counselors.

Along with the impediments and convenience of online counseling, the challenging experiences helped counselors improve their counseling practices. In this study, guidance counselors found the use of perceptive skills in counseling beneficial to the clients. Person-centered techniques keep clients engaged with the online counseling service (Dowling & Rickwood, 2014; Navarro et al., 2020). These techniques include empathizing with clients, listening attentively to their concerns, understanding what they are going through, and lengthening patience. Also, guidance counselors must use other alternatives to reach out to clients effectively, such as using different online platforms and collaborating with clients'

significant others (Arrieta & Valeria, 2021; Supriyanto et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, counselors realized the importance of undergoing intensive training in implementing online counseling services to help them deliver the service more effectively (Fernandez, 2021; Foon et al., 2020; Joshi et al., 2021). These insights gained by guidance counselors contributed to their career growth in the helping field. It helped them appreciate online counseling.

In another perspective, clients shared their reasons as to why they seek online counseling. In this study, most clients shared their experiences of having anxiety. According to Chirikov et al. (2020), anxiety disorders are prevalent among undergraduate students, and the pandemic increases the likelihood of developing such conditions. Clients sought online counseling to deal with the anxiousness they were experiencing. Numerous studies found the effectiveness of online counseling in dealing with such concerns (Chan, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2010; Spek et al., 2007). Also, the clients expressed that the academic stress they have experienced leads them to seek help. At present, Karaman et al. (2021) found that most students had difficulties in their education. That is why schools, particularly the guidance centers, implement services to help students cope with their academic issues. Astuti (2021) emphasized the importance of implementing individual counseling to help students cope with their career studies. Indeed, these psychological and educational concerns are prevailing among students. Fortunately, students have the autonomy to ask for help from counseling professionals. Guidance counselors and mental health advocates sincerely appreciate the efforts of the clients to seek such help.

Another reason is for clients to express their concealed emotions. In the study conducted by Navarro et al. (2020), clients went through counseling to feel that someone listened to them and understood their concerns. With the help of guidance counselors, they can easily express their expressions and organize their thoughts. Mejah (2019) added that clients could express their emotions without getting embarrassed, making online counseling the new alternative way of helping millennials. These unexpressed feelings and emotions distressed clients the most. Hence, one way for them to release such is through availing of online counseling services. The ability of guidance counselors to help them express their hidden emotions and make them understand what they are going through is what they sought.

Further, clients discovered online counseling through self and other-directed referrals. Most of them said that they referred themselves for online counseling. According to Choi (2016), college students usually come to counseling through self-referrals to uplift their

psychological burdens. Aside from self-referrals, Kalkbrenner (2020) said that most students utilize peer-to-peer referrals to advocate mental health support services. Levin et al. (2018) also indicated that the highest intentions of informal supports come from significant others. With the help of digital information, precisely, the online referral form created by the NDDU guidance and testing center, clients and their significant others can book counseling sessions and refer easily.

In describing the clients' views toward online counseling, this study found that clients felt the presence of virtual care in the new normal. The implementation of online counseling allows guidance counselors and clients to reach out to each other (Bian & Miller, 2020; Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). It helps to address their academic and personal issues (Yuniarti & Asrowi 2021) and expresses their emotions (Mejah, 2019). Also, it allows them to deal with their psychological concerns (Toscos, 2018; Dunbar, 2018, Nguyen-Feng, 2017). Most of all, it teaches them life-long learning, such as coping strategies and valuable lessons (Fang et al., 2018; Zeren, 2015). These counseling experiences of the clients justified the objectives of implementing online counseling services. It esteemed guidance counselors to continue implementing such services despite its predicaments.

Lastly, the clients acknowledge the existence of online counseling. They were satisfied with the service and found it effective in helping them. Several studies have shown that online counseling is effective in dealing with most of the concerns of the students. Hanley and Wyatt (2021) highlighted from their research that students view online therapy positively. Also, Zeren et al. (2020) said that students found online counseling as effective as face-to-face counseling. Amos et al. (2020) added that the accessibility and convenience make online counseling appealing to students. Also, Zainudin et al. (2021) found that students have higher satisfaction with online counseling. These aspects implied that the clients appreciate the efforts extended to them by their guidance counselors amidst the challenges brought by implementing counseling online.

Conclusion

In this section, there are four conclusive remarks based on the explored research question referring to the online counseling experiences of guidance counselors and clients in the new normal.

1. Online counseling is challenging to implement, especially when unforeseen circumstances arise, such as internet connectivity issues, counseling engagement of the

clients, and the conduciveness of the counseling sessions. Guidance counselors need to exhaust bounteous efforts to face these challenges.

2. As a result of the challenges that guidance counselors confront in online counseling, the insights they gained helped them reevaluate their counseling approaches. This notion is in line with the cited concepts of resilience by Rutter (2006) and Luthar et al. (2000). Guidance counselors realized that conducting online counseling has its advantages and disadvantages. The valuable learning, they got from these challenging experiences paved their career growth in the helping field.

3. The autonomy of clients to seek help has intensified further with the use of online implementation of counseling services. This situation attests to the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2008) which explains clients' willingness to seek help from others to help themselves. Clients can reach out to counselors easily as they find it accessible and convenient. They can address their concerns online with the help of guidance counselors. Thus, online counseling becomes a concrete helping tool in the new normal.

4. Clients viewed online counseling as effective in dealing with their psychological and academic concerns. They felt the presence of virtual care in the new normal. They found the service satisfying and creative in dealing with their situations. Indeed, their appreciation towards the implemented online counseling by the guidance counselors is marked chiefly by their counseling experiences.

Acknowledgment

This section displays authors appreciation to sponsors, fund donors, resource persons, or parties who have an important role in conducting research.

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