

Perception and Attitude of Professional Counsellors Towards E-Counselling Services Delivery in Kwara State, Nigeria

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Keywords

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Abstract

The impact of ICT in counselling cannot be undermined, especially, in developed nations. However, there seems to be a low level of ICT adoption in counselling services delivery among professional counsellors in Nigeria particularly, in Kwara state. The study examines the perception and attitude of professional counsellors towards e-counselling services delivery in Kwara State, Nigeria and determines the influence of gender and length of practice on the respondents' perception and attitude towards e-counselling. The survey research design was adopted in this study and the convenient sampling technique was used to select 400 respondents from an unknown population of professional counsellors in Kwara State. The self-structured "Perception and Attitude Towards E-counselling Questionnaire" was validated by experts. The findings revealed that professional counsellors in Kwara State perceived both the benefits and challenges embedded in e-counselling services delivery and exhibited positive attitudes towards them. Gender disparity was found in the respondents' attitude towards e-counselling but not in their perception; while length of practice influenced both the respondents' perception and attitude towards e-counselling. It was concluded that professional counsellors in Kwara State perceived both the benefits and challenges embedded in e-counselling services delivery and exhibited positive attitudes towards them. It was recommended among others that government and counselling stakeholders should design e-counselling templates to strengthen the ethical codes and conduct towards e-counselling service delivery.

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology are used in collecting, storing, processing and passing on information in various forms. It is used in collecting, storing, processing, editing and passing on information to computer and telecommunication systems. Bolaji and Adeoye (2022) viewed ICT as a set of technological tools and resources used to communicate and create, disseminate, store and manage information. It also involves the collection, analysis, manipulation, retrieval, transmission and communication of data in different forms which may include audio, visual and audio-visual formats. This involves being able to seek out and use information stored in safe-lite, radio, television, telephone, video, tape-recorders compact discs, computers and the internet (Tinio, 2018). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has come to stay in every facet of life. People, organizations, governments and businesses can now transact regardless without time and distance limits. ICT has rapidly changed the mode of operations in every sector and profession; including counselling services delivery. Just as ICT has changed the education system, counselling services have also witnessed a tremendous change in the delivery of its services. Obi et al. (2012) revealed that e-counselling has been explored by students to enhance their career decision-making and aspirations. The teachers also used this channel to guide students to make an appropriate subject choice that matches their career interests and helps them with their career challenges and plans.

Online counselling is distinguished to have some special characteristics like appropriateness, lack of social communication, unknown parties, distances and time frames (Jeffrey, 2015). The pre-mentioned features are associated with some positive and negative issues. Mostly, they were dealt with by providing appropriate guidelines to handle ethical and practical points (Holmes, 2014). Simpson and Reid (2014) indicated that patients and psychotherapists who use e-counselling via videoconferencing generally develop a good therapeutic alliance and that these online sessions do not differ from in-person sessions in effectiveness. Amos et al. (2020) reported that accessibility, convenience, privacy, and mobility were some significant benefits of online counselling. On the contrary, loss of non-verbal cues, mistrust, and poor internet connectivity were their major obstacles to online counselling. Nevertheless, their issues were resolved with the use of online counselling. Barak and Grohol (2011) revealed that the use of ICT has offered opportunities for communication. Online counselling has assisted counsellors in providing support for clients through Zoom sessions, text messaging, online chats, e-mailing, and phone calls (telephoning), thereby providing mental wellness support for clients. This is because; clients have the opportunity to discuss issues with counselors at their own private and convenient places without having to physically see the counselor. The use of computers and online counselling, therefore, has eased the work of some counsellors who always have to make appointments with clients to meet them face-to-face and also eased the load of clients who have to travel to see the counsellor. This has enriched the counselling profession and upgraded performance (Barak & Grohol, 2011). The orthodox form of counselling, that is, face-to-face mode of counselling is currently known to be extensively expedient, accessible, and vigorous.

Despite the potential benefits of online psychotherapy via teleconferencing, many psychotherapists are worried about being less able to communicate their empathy, build therapeutic alliances (Roesler, 2017) or worry about the impact of technical glitches, insufficient Internet literacy, and confidentiality issues (Titzler et al., 2018). Most professional counsellors have little training and experience in providing online psychotherapy, and many have the incorrect belief that online therapies are less effective than sessions conducted face-to-face (Topooco et al., 2017). Glasheen and Campbell (2019) have shown that computer technologies are not used sufficiently in the development of school counselling. Some school counsellors do not believe that ICT use will enhance the quality of services, that computers play an important role in school counselling services delivery or that e-counselling can

work as an in-person counselling process; therefore, the investigation of the perception and attitude of professional counsellors towards e-counselling services delivery in Kwara State, Nigeria.

METHODS

The research design employed for this study was the descriptive survey. This is because the research focused on obtaining information on a representative sample of counsellors in Kwara State regarding their perception and attitude towards e-counselling using a questionnaire. Thus, the descriptive survey design was considered appropriate for a study of this nature. The population for the study comprises all professional counsellors with at least a first degree in Guidance and Counselling in Kwara State. Statistical data is lacking for this population; thus, the study's population is considered infinite. Adeoye (2023) suggested a sample size for an infinite population using a convenient sampling technique to select 400 professional counsellors from different secondary schools, tertiary institutions and ministries across the three senatorial districts in the state. The instrument for data collection was a self-designed questionnaire on "Perception and Attitude towards E-Counselling". The questionnaire has three parts; Section 1 elicited the demographic characteristics of the respondents, which comprises gender, age, educational attainment and length of practice. Sections B and C addressed the "Perception and Attitude towards E-Counselling" with 15 items per section. The items were positively worded and the scoring format of a five-point Likert-type format of; SA (Strongly Agree) 5; A (Agree) = 4; N (Neutral) = 3; D (Disagree) = 2; and SD (Strongly Disagree) = 1 was adopted. The instrument was validated by experts in counselling, educational psychology and measurement and evaluation experts. The Split-Half reliability method was adopted to determine the consistency of the questionnaire results over a given period. The scores obtained were analysed using Cronbach Alpha statistics, which yielded 0.89 and 0.93 indices for the "Perception and Attitude towards E-Counselling" questionnaire respectively. In the course of questionnaire administration, 400 respondents were reached but 382 response rates were retrieved. While coding the data for analysis, 373 responses on the items were valid for data analysis. Therefore, 373 responses were the final data upon which the analysis and reports of this study were based. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyse the data obtained for the study. The research questions were analysed using the descriptive statistic of frequency and percentage; while the hypotheses formulated were tested using the inferential statistic of 2-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The null hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 23 software.

RESULT

The results of this study focus on demographic characteristics of respondents, the research questions and the hypotheses tested. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were presented using frequency and percentage as follows:

Table 1
Demographic Data of Respondents

N	Variables	Frequency	Percentage %
1	Gender	Male	202
		Female	171
		Total	373
2	Length of Practice	0-5 years	159
		6-10 years	137
		11 years & above	77
		Total	373

Table 1 shows that out of the 373 respondents in the study, 202 (54.2%) were males; while 171 (45.8%) were females. This indicates that male counsellors were more represented in this study than their female folks. In regards to the length of practice, 159 (42.6%) of the respondents have been practising for 0-5 years, 137 (36.7%) have spent between 6-10 years as practising counsellors; while 77 (20.6%) have been practising for 11 years and above. Thus, counsellors between 0-5 years of practice were more in this study.

Research Question 1: What is the perception of professional counsellors towards e-counselling in Kwara State?

Table 2
Mean Ranking of Respondents' Perception of E-Counselling

N	As far as I am concerned, e-counselling:	Mean	Rank
3	positively changes the counselling atmosphere while with the client	3.42	1 st
1	enhances my role as a practising counsellor	3.39	2 nd
13	may create mistrust for loss of physical contact	3.36	3 rd
7	enhances the engagement/attention of both the counsellor and the client	3.32	4 th
12	prevents client expression through writing	3.32	4 th
8	encourages clients' self-disclosure of their concern	3.19	6 th
10	like digital game integration into counselling would help students to understand and develop rapidly	3.16	7 th
11	integration will help deal with a large student population effectively and efficiently	3.15	8 th
5	facilitates clients' clear and detailed presentation of problems at hand	3.12	9 th
14	devoid the counsellor of observing clients' non-verbal cues	3.09	10 th
9	helps manage problems without recourse to physical contact	3.04	11 th
2	makes me feel more professional as a counsellor	3.03	12 th
6	enhances the showing of numerous and complex examples to clients	3.00	13 th
4	positively shapes the relationship between the counsellor and clients	2.29	14 th
15	demand more time and cost to be incorporated into counselling services	1.98	15 th

Table 2 the mean ranking of respondents' perception of e-counselling. The table shows that 13 out of the 15 items have mean scores that are above the average mean value of 3.00 (benchmark) for determining the respondents' positive or negative perceptions. However, items 3, 1, 13, 7 and 12 with mean values of 3.42, 3.39, 3.36, 3.32 and 3.32 preceded others and were ranked between 1st and 5th respectively. The items indicated that professional counsellors in Kwara State have both positive and negative perceptions of e-counselling; as they believe that e-counselling positively changes the counselling atmosphere with the client; and enhances their role as a practising counsellor; it may create mistrust for loss of physical contact; enhances the engagement/attention of both the counsellor and the client; and prevents client expression through writing.

Research Question 2: What is the attitude of professional counsellors towards e-counselling in Kwara State?

Table 3

The attitude of Professional Counsellors towards E-Counselling

Response Range	Frequency	Percentage %	Remark
46-75	164	43.9	Positive attitude
31-45	135	36.1	Neutral attitude
1-30	74	20.0	Negative attitude

Table 3 depicts the attitude of professional counsellors towards e-counselling. The table shows that out of the 373 respondents, 164 (43.9%) fell within the 46-75 response range, 135 (36.1%) were within the 31-45 response range; while 74 (20.0%) the response was between 1-30 on the "Attitude towards E-counselling Questionnaire". It can be deduced that many of the professional counsellors who participated in this study have positive attitudes towards e-counselling.

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the perception of professional counsellors towards e-counselling in Kwara State based on gender and length of practice.

Table 4

Two-Way ANOVA Comparing Respondents' Perception of E-Counselling Based on Gender and Length of Practice

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1373.389 ^a	5	274.678	2.598	.025
Intercept	557795.135	1	557795.135	5275.239	.000
Gender	77.600	1	77.600	.734	.392
LOP	1157.340	2	578.670	5.473	.005
Gender * LOP	162.698	2	81.349	.769	.464
Error	38805.978	367	105.738		
Total	649848.000	373			
Corrected Total	40179.367	372			

Table 4 shows the F-ratios of gender and length of practice about the respondents' perception of e-counselling. The table shows that $F(1, 367) = .734$; $p < .05$ for gender; while $F(2, 367) = 5.473$; $p < .05$ for length of practice. This indicates that there is no significant difference in the perception of professional counsellors towards e-counselling in Kwara State based on gender; while a significant difference exists based on length of practice. Hence, the hypothesis is retained based on gender; while

it was rejected based on length of practice. There was no statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and length of practice on respondents' perception, $F(2, 373) = .769$, $p = .464$. The Duncan Multiple Range Test (DMRT) in 5 was performed to reveal the group of length of practice that contributes to the difference in respondents' perception.

Table 5

DMRT Showing the Respondents' Length of Practice that Leads to Difference in their Perception of E-counselling

Length of Practice	N	Subset	
		1	2
6-10	137	38.28	
0-5	159		41.16
11 & above	77		42.73
Sig.		1.000	.254

Table 5 shows the DMRT Post-hoc to reveal the length of practice among respondents that contributes to the difference in their perception of e-counselling. The table shows the mean values of each length of practice under two main sub-sets. Out of the three categories, subset 1 contains the mean value of respondents with 6-10 years length of practice; while subset 2 contains mean values of respondents in the 0-5 and 11 years and above length of practice. The mean values of respondents with 11 years and above in practice ($x = 42.73$) took precedence over others; thus, counsellors with higher length of practice are stronger in their perception of e-counselling.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the attitude of professional counsellors towards e-counselling in Kwara State based on gender and length of practice.

Table 6

Two-Way ANOVA Comparing Respondents' Attitude towards E-Counselling Based on Gender and Length of Practice

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3796.046 ^a	5	759.209	5.447	.000
Intercept	572157.399	1	572157.399	4105.002	.000
Gender	1199.534	1	1199.534	8.606	.004
LOP	1795.476	2	897.738	6.441	.002
Gender * LOP	647.508	2	323.754	2.323	.099
Error	51152.662	367	139.381		
Total	705633.000	373			
Corrected Total	54948.708	372			

Table 6 shows the F-ratios of gender and length of practice about the respondents' perception of e-counselling. The table shows that $F(1, 367) = 8.606$; $p < .05$ for gender; while $F(2, 367) = 6.441$; $p < .05$ for length of practice. This indicates that there is a significant difference in the attitude of professional counsellors towards e-counselling in Kwara State based on gender and length of practice. Hence, the hypothesis is rejected based on gender and length of practice. There was no statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and length of practice on respondents' perception, $F(2, 373) = 2.323$, $p = .099$. The Duncan Multiple Range Test (DMRT) in 7 was performed to reveal the group of length of practice that contributes to the difference in respondents' attitude towards e-counselling.

Table 7

DMRT Showing the Respondents' Length of Practice that Leads to Difference in their Attitude towards E-counselling

Length of Practice	N	Subset	
		1	2
11 years & above	77	37.71	
0-5 years	159		42.43
6-10 years	137		43.27
Sig.		1.000	.595

Table 7 shows the DMRT Post-hoc to reveal the length of practice among respondents that contributed to the difference in their attitude towards e-counselling. The table shows the mean values of each length of practice under two main sub-sets. Out of the three categories, subset 1 contains the mean value of respondents with 11 years and above length of practice; while subset 2 contains mean values of respondents in the 0-5- and 6-10-years length of practice. The mean values of respondents with 6-10 years in practice ($x = 43.27$) took precedence over others; thus, counsellors with average length of practice are stronger in their attitude towards e-counselling.

DISCUSSION

The key findings revealed that professional counsellors in Kwara State are both positive and negative in their perception of e-counselling. They are of the view that e-counselling positively changes the counselling atmosphere with clients; enhances their role as a practicing counsellor; creates mistrust for loss of physical contact; enhances the engagement/attention of both the counsellor and the client; and prevents the client's expression through writing. In line with the result of this study, Beidoglu et al. (2015) reported positive and negative perceptions of ICT towards school counselling practice among the school counsellors who participated in their study. The finding by Tannaous (2017) revealed that online counselling facilitates a positive relationship between the counsellor and a client; Amos et al. (2020) reported mistrust in the e-counselling session; e-counselling upgraded counselling performance (Barak & Grohol, 2011; Owen & Korkut-Owen, 2012). In contrast, studies (Cabaniss, 2001; Savas & Hamamc, 2010) have revealed that ICT has less impact on the success of counselling services delivery. Perhaps, the development in technological know-how and varying complex problems confronting the human race in this contemporary world could have changed the face of counselling services delivery from face-to-face encounters to the e-counselling process. Thus, the counsellors' mixed perception reflects their knowledge or experience of the benefits and challenges of ICT for interaction through the use of Android phones, tabs and laptops. That is, all the benefits and problems in the use of ICT could be encountered while using it to conduct a counselling session with clients.

The findings of this study also revealed that professional counsellors who participated in this study have positive attitudes towards e-counselling. This finding contradicts the findings by Al-Nawaiseh (2016) and Mendes-Santos et al. (2020) which revealed a positive or negative attitude towards adopting technology in counselling services delivery. Bekes and Doorn (2020) on the other hand, indicated a positive attitude of counsellors towards e-counselling service delivery. Counsellors' positive attitude towards e-counselling could have been informed from their acquaintances with the use of social media on Android phones and laptops, with which they believe clients, can be easily reached regardless of the distance, nature of problem and time frame. It also implies that counsellors will be willing (if they had not been using it) to adopt ICT in delivering counselling services to clients if provided with effective facilities and a conducive environment to operate.

The two-way ANOVA result revealed that there is no significant difference in the perception of professional counsellors towards e-counselling in Kwara State based on gender; while a significant difference exists based on length of practice. Counsellors with a higher length of practice are stronger in their perception of e-counselling. The finding of this study concurs with the study of Beidoglu et al. (2015) whose finding revealed no significant difference in counsellors' perception of online counselling based on gender. This implies that male and female counsellors were similar in their view on the positive and negative relevance of ICT in counselling services delivery. In terms of length of professional practice, the result indicated that counsellors were different in their perception of e-counselling service delivery. The DMRT posthoc test conducted revealed that counsellors with a higher length of practice are stronger in their perception of the positive and negative sides of e-counselling. Perhaps, their long service period has enabled them to different channels, especially, the use of ICT, through which counselling services could be delivered. This finding is consistent with the finding of Mustapha and Muhammed (2017) which revealed that counselling counsellors were different in their perception of e-counselling service delivery. Agreement of the findings of this study with the previous studies could have resulted from the fact that they were all conducted among professional counsellors within the same age range and years of practice.

It was also revealed that there is a significant difference in the attitude of professional counsellors towards e-counselling in Kwara State based on gender and length of practice. This means that male and female respondents were different in their attitude towards e-counselling service delivery; and were also different in regards to the length of their professional practice. The DMRT post-hoc conducted revealed that counsellors with an average (6-10 years) length of practice are stronger in their attitude towards e-counselling. There is the possibility that the majority of respondents at this average length of service years are at their youthful age; so, they are more likely to be conversant with the use of ICT in counselling services delivery, which thus contributes to their attitudinal disposition compared to those in other groups. This current finding is in tandem with the result of Al-Nawaiseh (2016) which indicated no statistically significant difference in the counsellors' attitude towards technology usage for counselling based on gender and years of experience. On the other hand, the findings of Mustapha et al. (2019) showed that gender and length of practice do not influence counsellors' attitudes towards online counselling service delivery. Concurrence of this finding with the previous studies is informed by the fact that they were conducted among respondents within similar age ranges.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it was concluded that professional counsellors in Kwara State perceived both the benefits and challenges embedded in e-counselling services delivery and exhibited positive attitudes towards them. This follows that professional counsellors in Kwara State can be resourceful and deliver effective counselling services if provided with functional ICT facilities and policies; as well as, considering demographic variation in implementing e-counselling programmes. It was recommended based on the findings of this study that:

1. The government and counselling stakeholders should design e-counselling templates or guidelines concerning the ethical codes and conduct of the counselling profession to strengthen counsellors' positive perceptions and attitudes towards e-counselling service delivery. This will enable professional counsellors to spread their network of service to varying places, people and problem areas.
2. Counsellors should maintain their positive perception and attitude towards e-counselling to improve their understanding of the use of ICT for counselling service delivery and be open to

the global dynamism in the implementation of e-counselling for solving clients' varying life problems.

3. Counsellors' demographic disparities must be factorised by the counselling organisations into the programme design on e-counselling to cater for diversities among the professionals and clients that will be involved in counselling processes; thereby, keeping their positive perception and attitude towards e-counselling stronger for effective services delivery.

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