

Secondary School Students' Perception of Online Counselling in Lagos Mainland, Nigeria

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Abstract

Although technology is critical to the effectiveness of the Nigerian educational system, its use in counselling among secondary school students remains limited. For instance, secondary school students encounter several problems on a daily basis but are often too shy to share them with counsellors through the conventional (face-to-face) method of counselling. Inevitably, those issues end up taking a toll on their psychosocial well-being and academic performance. Thus, students frequently fail to get appropriate and efficient counselling through readily available conventional methods. In the bid to address this issue, researchers have suggested the use of electronic counselling (e-counselling) to complement the conventional method. To that end, this study investigated secondary school students' perception of online counselling in Lagos Mainland, Nigeria. The study used a descriptive survey design in capturing the views of 200 secondary students in Lagos Mainland Local Government who were randomly selected from four schools. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire developed by the researchers and validated by experts. Two hypotheses were tested at a .05 level of significance using an independent t-test. The results found no gender difference in students' perception of online counselling. Students experiencing psychosocial distress - notably from bullying, mood swings, academic pressure and sexual abuse - preferred online counselling. It is therefore suggested that online counselling should be integrated into the counselling methodology in Nigerian secondary schools, since the online medium permits more eliciting of sensitive issues compared to purely educational ones.

Keywords: Students' perception, online and face-to-face counselling, psychosocial, technology

Introduction

There is no doubt that guidance and counselling services play a key role in secondary schools. As a professional field, the programme has been designed to help adolescents in the educational sector to adjust and to overcome a number of

psychosocial problems experienced in school and outside. Gatua, Sindabi and Chepchieng (2015) concluded that physiological changes in school students, which may be erratic owing to mood swings or other psychosocial changes, could pre-empt deviant behaviour in such students.

It is in that regard that counselling services help the counsellee to learn to deal more effectively with himself or herself, as well as to assisting him or her to overcome issues at home, in school and in the larger society so that they may be useful to themselves and the society. Guidance and counselling services are generally aimed at developing, assessing and improving educational programmes, as well as aiding improvement in teaching and enhancing teachers' quality at a minimum cost. In recent times, the emergence of the Internet and its related web resources has been a welcome development. With students now having easy access to the Internet and the use of social media platforms being on the increase, technology has indeed become an integral part of the Nigerian educational system,.

Traditionally, the preferred method of counselling is face-to-face interaction. Nowadays, however, there has been a growing need for integrating ICT into counselling. For now, many counsellors and students appear to have minimal knowledge of online counselling practices. While counsellors certainly deserve some of the blame, there is also no doubt that certain factors beyond them are hampering the integration of ICT into counselling in Nigeria, given the existence of issues such as epileptic power supply, fluctuations in Internet service and poor exposure to the use of electronic devices, among others.

Simply put, online counselling is the transmission of therapeutic interventions on the World Wide Web via computer-mediated communication technologies. It may be provided as a stand-alone service or as an adjunct to other services. Virtual environments have been used to conduct counselling where such allows both synchronous (chats and video conferencing) and asynchronous (e-mail) communication (Bambling, King, Reid & Wegner, 2008).

Online counselling has been viewed in different ways. Although it sometimes throws up controversial issues, it has been described as a supplement to face-to-face counselling, given the place of today's communication facilities in the counselling industry (Castelvonuvo, Gaggioli, Mantovani & Riva, 2003). To be clear, online counselling does not run on a different theoretical framework from face-to-face counselling. According to Mallen and Vogel (2005), online

counselling describes any mental or behavioural health therapeutic service (but not limited to therapy) or psych education offered by a licensed practitioner to a client in a non-face-to-face setting through distance communication technologies such as the telephone, asynchronous e-mail, synchronous chat and videoconferencing.

Brown (2011) noted that the Internet and its related web resources have taken counselling services beyond the face-to-face level to electronic-based counselling services. Nevertheless, the traditional face-to-face method remains in place and remains quite relevant and applicable. Services offered in online counselling range from asynchronous support groups to synchronous groups, including video conference, couple and family counselling and individual counselling.

Despite the fact that many secondary school students experience challenges with relationships, face academic pressure and suffer mental health concerns, research suggests that many fail to seek professional help in confronting such challenges (Rickwood, Deane & Wilson, 2007; Schonert-Reichl, 2003; Sheffield, Fiorenza & Sofronoff, 2004; Smith, 2012). No doubt, students' opinion is critical to effective counselling. As Risenga and Davhana (2017) reported, citing Rickwood, Deane and Wilson (2007), client attitude to counselling is influenced by a number of factors. Reynolds, Griffiths and Christensen (2011) observed that some community agencies are already involved in providing online counselling to youngsters outside the school system. However, many schools are yet to experience this form of service, which is a major constraint to addressing and resolving the challenges being faced by secondary school students, especially those who might want to avoid the issues associated with conventional counselling. At present, there is no research to determine whether the students might want to explore online counselling, if made available at Lagos Mainland secondary schools, Lagos, Nigeria. However, online counselling may well be a productive pathway to helping reticent students to use of face-to-face counselling at school.

Schools have a responsibility to design appropriate interventions to respond to the mental health needs of their students, since students' use of technology is an integral part of how they communicate and relate to the world. It is therefore reasonable to consider deploying ICT and the Internet for mental health service delivery. Internet-delivered counselling comes with distinct advantages and challenges. Investigating students' perception about any Internet-delivered counselling intervention is therefore important in order to establish sound

evidence-based practice. Moreover, young people are likely to be more forthcoming about their issues when engaged in online counselling.

In that regard, this study seeks to determine whether the online counselling medium will attract more students who need help and whether those most distressed would indicate interest in online counselling. It is quite likely that the anonymous nature of online counselling will encourage clients and clinicians to feel they are in a private and emotionally safe environment (Bambling, King, Reid & Wegner, 2008). Adolescent online counselling clients have reported feeling more safe and less emotionally exposed when engaged in an online counselling session compared with face-to-face or even telephone services (King, Bambling et al., 2006). The authors also found that some clients felt better protected from the counsellor's negative feedback (such as boredom or criticism) owing to the invisible nature of the text environment. The online environment was also reported to reduce young people's anxiety about receiving counselling, making it easier for them to discuss problems and be assertive with counsellors.

In the present context, we should be focused on determining as follows:

- i. whether online counselling in schools would attract students over and above those that had previously sought face-to-face counselling;
- ii. whether online counselling would attract students that are already experiencing symptoms of psychological distress; and
- iii. whether the concerns that would be discussed online would differ from those discussed face-to-face.

As online counselling seems to provide an emotional safety zone for many young people (King, Bambling, Reid & Thomas, 2006), it might be expected that its introduction into the school setting would result in young people seeking counselling who otherwise would be too shy to seek face-to-face counselling. As Ryan, Shochet and Stallman (2010) found, university students with high levels of psychological distress indicated an intention to access an online mental health programme.

Indeed, there are reasons to expect that this medium may similarly attract secondary school students who are experiencing some level of psychological distress, including those who have not previously sought face-to-face counselling. As already noted, online counselling offers easy access for people who refrain from using conventional psychological services owing to issues such as distance, personal handicap, need for anonymity, shyness or just the plain fear of face-to-

face disclosure or interaction, sickness, having no free time for counselling during regular working hours and living in remote place (Young, 2005).

The Internet has become possibly the most popular medium to connect with others, especially through social networking tools like Facebook, Twitter and others. For the field of counselling, the Internet offers a new way to reach, facilitate and communicate with individuals who need help from all over the world. Little is known, however, about students' perception of online counselling in Nigeria, hence this study's investigation of secondary school students' perception of online counselling in Lagos Mainland, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

There is need to devise the best counselling strategies for engaging students on the challenges they face in life. To achieve the crucial goal of helping individual students to access self-actualisation, there is need for various counselling techniques to address the challenges of all students, whether they prefer traditional face-to-face counselling services or not and regardless of where they live. However, the use of online counselling services will largely depend on students' perceptions.

Despite the fact that many secondary school students face considerable challenges in the forms of academic pressure, relationships and mental health issues, they tend to find it difficult to seek professional help (Rickwood, Deane & Wilson, 2007; Schonert-Reichl, 2003; Sheffield, Fiorenza & Sofronoff, 2004; Smith, 2012), even when such issues hinder their academic progress (Kolog & Montero, 2017). This is mostly because they do not completely trust their counsellors (Awinsong, Dawson & Gidiglo, 2015). Those willing to be counselled tend to remain anonymous, hence this study's investigation of the secondary school students' perception of online counselling in Lagos Mainland, Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in secondary school students' perceptions of online counselling and face-to-face counselling.
2. There is no significant gender difference in secondary school students' perception of online counselling.

Method

Using a descriptive research design, the researchers drew respondents for the study from the population of secondary school students in Lagos Mainland,

Nigeria. The research instrument was a two-part questionnaire tagged ‘Students’ Perception of Online Counselling’. While Section A elicited the demographic data of the participants, Section B elicited their perception of online counselling. The instrument was validated by an expert who made adjustments that ensured face and content validity. The researchers administered 50 copies of the questionnaire to participants in each of the four schools selected for the study, instructing participants not to include their names in order to ensure that honest responses were supplied. On each occasion, the researcher waited to retrieve the completed instruments from the participants, thus ensuring a 100% return rate. The instruments were manually scored by the researcher and the data generated were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Independent t-test statistics was used for testing the hypotheses at a .05 level of significance.

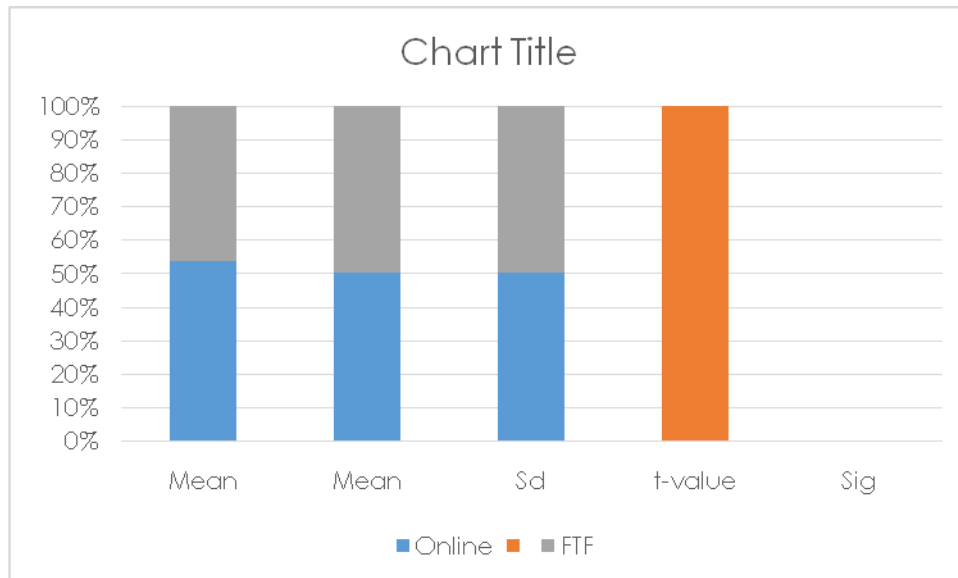
Results

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in secondary school students’ perception of online counselling and face-to-face counselling.

Table 1: Difference in secondary school students’ perception of online and face-to-face counselling

Variable	Mean	Mean	Sd	t-value	Sig
Online	5.35	200	2.05	2.69	.000
FTF	4.60	200	2.04		

The results presented on Table 1 show a significant difference in respondents’ perception of online and face-to-face counselling ($t=2.69$, $p<.05$). The respondents had a higher perception of online counselling (Mean=5.35, Sd=2.05) than they did for face-to-face counselling (Mean=4.60, Sd=2.04). Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference in secondary school students’ perception of online and face-to-face counselling was rejected. Consequently, the results indicate that the students were interested in online counselling alongside face-to-face counselling. Table 1 is graphically illustrated below:

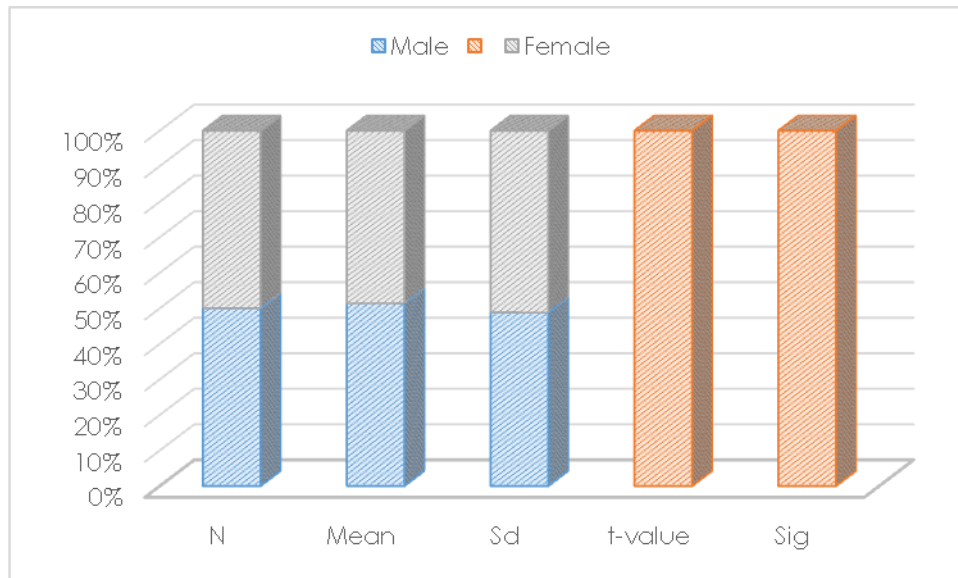


Difference in secondary school students’ perception of online and face-to-face counselling

Table 2: Gender difference in students’ perception of online counselling

Variable	N	Mean	Sd	t-value	Sig
Male	100	4.73	1.994	.90	.37
Female	100	4.47	2.091		

The results presented on Table 2 show that male and female perception of online counselling was not significantly different ($t=.90$, $p>.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant gender difference in secondary school students’ perception of online counselling in Nigeria was not rejected. This indicates that both male and female secondary school students had similar views on online counselling. Table 2 is graphically illustrated thus:



Gender difference in students' perception of online counselling

Discussion of Findings

Hypothesis 1 stated that there is no significant difference in secondary school students' perception of online and face-to-face counselling. Findings showed a positive perception of Lagos Mainland Local Government secondary school students' of online counselling. Findings also revealed that students will seek professional counsellors' help through online counselling to discuss their psychosocial problems. The study also revealed that students will prefer an online psychosocial therapy to the conventional face-to-face therapy. Since online counselling limits stigmatisation and can be easily accessed, students' mental health would be properly addressed. These findings are in agreement with those by Glasheen, Shochet and Campbell (2015), who found that adolescents would consider using online therapy if it was available at school. They also established that youngsters preferred going online to discuss delicate matters, e.g. sexuality, and preferred face-to-face support for other topics, e.g. peer conflict, bullying, and need for guidance. The authors found that adolescents regarded online counselling services as more appropriate for tackling the psychosocial problems that could bring about stigmatisation. Hypothesis 2 stated that there is no significant gender difference between the perceptions of male and female students of Lagos Mainland secondary schools on online counselling. No gender difference was found in students' perception of online counselling.

Implications for Counselling

Online counselling will aid more therapeutic interventions for young people. It will also enhance deeper appreciation of the importance of the Internet in counselling practices in an increasingly electronic world. Moreover, it will help students to better understand the relevance of the Internet in counselling practices as the world shifts towards virtual learning, given that distressed students might seek help through online psychotherapy among other means.

Recommendations

Given the above findings, it is suggested that counsellors should update their ICT skills in an increasingly globalised world. On their part, students should be helped to see the benefits of online counselling and how to access it when necessary. Thus, online counselling should be made an integral part of counselling techniques in Nigerian secondary schools, since more sensitive issues are likely to be elicited compared to educational ones in online psychosocial therapy.

Conclusion

This study is an important step towards using online counselling in Nigerian secondary schools, given the clear need for integrating effective online psychosocial interventions into the school system. Obviously, there will be need for investing in research and development tailored towards this need. As the study has shown, students will be willing to opt for online counselling if made available.

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