

EFFECTIVENESS OF VIRTUAL COUNSELLING AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF IGNATIUS AJURU UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, RIVERS STATE.

ENOCK, EBIKETONE DIEMA (Dr.)

Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling.

University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State – Nigeria.

dariusebi@yahoo.com

08168521231

ABSTRACT

The work investigated Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling Among Undergraduate Students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State. The research design that was used is the descriptive survey design. Three research questions and three hypotheses were stated to guide the study. The population comprised all the undergraduate students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. A sample of 365 students was selected using stratified random sampling technique. The researcher developed an instrument titled “Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling Scale” (EVCS) was used to collect data. EVCS is made up of two sections, section A comprises the personal data, while section B consists of 30 items designed for the data collection. The reliability of the instrument was established through test-retest method, using Pearson product moment correlation where the reliability coefficient (r) = 0.73. Mean scores was used to answer the research questions while z-test and ANOVA was used to analyze the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The answers to the research questions indicated a difference between the mean scores of male and female students, younger and older students in the effectiveness of virtual counselling also, Social science students had a high mean score of 13.01 in effectiveness of virtual counselling. Results of the analyses of the hypotheses indicated that there is no significant difference in the mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services based on gender, the mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services does not differ significantly based on age, there is a significant difference in the mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students in various faculties. Based on the findings, the researcher made some recommendations, some of which are; School based counsellors should inculcate the use of websites as sources of information and direct students to these online resources, online counseling should be encouraged to reduce the stigma associated with people seeking professional help and stakeholders should

make available functional counselling unit or online platform where students can go to get professional help concerning their various challenges.

Key Words: Effectiveness, Counselling, Virtual, Undergraduate, Students.

Introduction

In recent years, the use of virtual counseling has seen a steady rise in many developed countries. The emergence of the internet in the early 1970s opened up new avenues for delivering mental health and behavioral services through digital platforms. Virtual counseling refers to a professional exchange of counseling services and information between a counselor and a client, who may be in different locations but interact via internet-enabled communication (National Board of Certified Counselors, 2007).

Young people today are not only proficient with digital technology but also depend on it to enhance their face-to-face social interactions. Their strong engagement with social media reveals a deeper need for computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is now a core part of their social development. Given how embedded virtual communication is in their daily lives, it is not surprising that negative behaviors such as bullying and abuse also occur through these platforms (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009).

Nevertheless, the virtual environment plays a significant role in youth development and can offer positive support. Young people frequently use digital tools for more than just casual communication they form and end relationships virtually and actively seek information to expand their understanding of the world. They often turn to the internet as their primary source of guidance and solutions. Virtual counseling also known by terms such as cyber therapy, e-therapy, web counseling, or internet counseling can take several forms, including email, live chat, secure messaging systems, videoconferencing, and Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP). These methods fall into two categories: asynchronous (e.g., email), where communication occurs with time delays, and synchronous (e.g., chat or video calls), which allow for real-time interaction (Manhal-Baugus, 2001).

The internet is becoming a vital tool for delivering mental health support to young people, overcoming barriers such as distance, accessibility, and anonymity. Many young individuals may prefer receiving support virtually, as it offers a more comfortable and familiar medium. Some organizations, like Kids Help Line, have responded by providing real-time virtual counseling services (King et al., 2006).

Among the notable advantages of virtual counseling for youth are its accessibility from any location, the potential to reach those who might otherwise lack support, and the opportunity for early intervention. Additionally, counselors benefit from the ability to review detailed session transcripts, which can enhance reflective practice. While school counselors often refer students to virtual resources, they have traditionally favored face-to-face methods (Urbis, 2003).

Currently, only a small portion of psychologists offer services virtually. Among professionals affiliated with the American Psychological Association (APA), virtual individual psychotherapy is used by just 2%, while 13–15% utilizes tools like email and fax for psychological assessments and family therapy. Despite the technological capacity to provide virtual mental health support, clear guidelines and standardized practices are still lacking, making this mode of counseling both complex and contentious (VandenBos & Williams, 2000).

There has been limited research into how students engage with virtual counseling. However, community-based platforms that cater to young people suggest that such services are particularly valuable for individuals who may find traditional counseling intimidating. The current underutilization of virtual counseling in educational settings raises important questions. This study investigates the Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling Among Undergraduate Students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education to explore how effective such services are.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, virtual counselling has emerged as a modern approach to addressing the psychological, emotional, and academic needs of students, especially in the wake of technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its increasing adoption in various educational institutions, the effectiveness of virtual counselling services remains a subject of debate, particularly in the context of Nigerian universities.

At Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State, virtual counselling services have been introduced as an alternative or complement to traditional face-to-face counselling. However, there is limited empirical evidence on how effective these services are in meeting the diverse needs of undergraduate students. Questions remain regarding students' accessibility to these services, their level of engagement, the quality of support received, and the overall impact on their academic performance, emotional well-being, and decision-making processes.

Moreover, cultural perceptions, technological limitations, privacy concerns, and lack of awareness may affect the utilization and perceived effectiveness of virtual counselling among students. Without a clear understanding of these factors, efforts to improve student support services through virtual platforms may be hindered.

Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of virtual counselling among undergraduate students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, with the aim of identifying the strengths, limitations, and areas for improvement in the delivery of virtual mental health and academic support services.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling Among Undergraduate Students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State..

Specifically, other objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the difference that exists in the mean response of male and female students on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.
2. To find out the difference that exists in the mean response of younger and older students on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.
3. To find out the difference that exists in the mean response of students in various faculties on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does difference exist in the mean response of male and female students on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education?
2. To what extent does difference exist in the mean response of younger and older students on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education?
3. To what extent does difference exist in the mean response of students in various faculties on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

1. The mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by male and female students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly.
2. The mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by younger and older students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly.
3. The mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students in various faculties of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly.

Methodology

This research design used for this study was the descriptive survey design. Descriptive survey design is best for this study because it helps the researcher depict the Adoption Online Counselling in an accurate way. Osuala (1987), noted survey research studies both large and small population to discover the relative incidence, distribution and inter-relations of sociological and psychological variables. It is used to describe the characteristics of a population or phenomenon being studied. The main idea behind using this type of research design is to better define an opinion or behaviour held by a group of people on a given subject.

The population of the study consisted of all undergraduate students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education in Port-Harcourt, River State numbered 7,200 undergraduates as at the year 2018/2019 which was gotten from the office of academic planning of the school. The stratified random sampling technique was used for this study. This technique helped in representing all the variables of the study; gender, age and various faculties.

The sample comprised 365 students in Ignatius Ajuru University of Education in Port-Harcourt, Rivers State. The sample was made up of both male and female students from the various faculties of the University. The sample size was calculated using fluid online calculator with confidence level of 95% at 0.05 level of significance.

The researcher developed an instrument “Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling Scale” (EVCS). EVCS is divided into two sections. Section A is made up of personal data such as sex, age and faculty. The second section sought to find out the Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling. EVCS comprised 15 items and will be responded to as follows; SA- Strongly Agree (4), A - Agree (3), D - Disagree (2), SD- Strongly Disagree (1). The questionnaire was vetted by the researcher’s supervisor and two other lecturers in the Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port-Harcourt. All the corrections they made were affected.

The reliability of the instrument (EVCS) was established through test- retest method. The questionnaire was administered to 30 students in Rivers State University (RSU). The administration was done in two instances after a period of two weeks. The scores generated from the two administrations were used in computing the reliability coefficient using Pearson Product moment correlation. A reliability co-efficient of 0.73 was obtained. Wali (2002) noted that a reliability coefficient of 0.60 and above in a test with Pearson Product moment correlation is reliable. Hence, the instrument is reliable for the study.

The researcher personally administered the questionnaires with some research assistants. The researcher explained the purpose of the research to the respondents and waited to collect the filled questionnaires on the spot and the whole 365 questionnaires were administered. For data analysis, mean scores was used to answer the research questions while z-test and ANOVA were used to analyze the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Data Analysis

Research Questions 1: To what extent does difference exist in the mean response of male and female students on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education?

HO₁: The mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by male and female students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly.

Table 1: Z-Test Analysis on Difference between the Mean Response on the Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling Services by Male and Female Students

	VARIABLE N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	Z-cal	Zcrit	Level Sig.	ofDecision	
EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE COUNSELLING SERVICES	MALE	161	2.62	1.08	363	1.184	1.960	0.05	H04 Accepted
	FEMALE	204	2.43	1.11					

Table 1 indicates that the calculated z-value (1.184) for group is less than z-critical (1.960) at 0.05 level of significance, so null hypothesis four is accepted. Therefore, the mean response on the

effectiveness of virtual counselling services by male and female students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly.

Research Question 2: To what extent does difference exist in the mean response of younger and older students on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education?

HO₂: The mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by younger and older students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly.

Table 2: Z-Test Analysis on Difference between the Mean Response of Younger and Older Students on the Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling Services

	VARIABLE N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	Z-cal	Zcrit	Level of Sig.	Decision
EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUNGER	251	2.81	1.06	363	-1.064	1.960	0.05	H ₀₅ Accepted
ONLINE COUNSELLING SERVICES OLDER	114	2.96	0.96					

Result in Table 2 reveals that the mean score of younger and older students are 2.81 and 2.96. And that the standard deviations of their scores are 1.06 and 0.96 respectively. However, when this means difference was subjected to an independent z-test statistics, it was observed that the calculated z-value is less than z-critical at 0.05 level of significance, so null hypothesis five is accepted. Hence the mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by younger and older students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly.

Research Question 3: To what extent does difference exist in the mean response of students in various faculties on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education?

HO₃: The mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students in various faculties of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly.

Table 3: ANOVA Analysis on the Mean Response on the Effectiveness of Virtual Counselling Services by Students in Various Faculties

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.905	2	1.453	9.695	.000
Within Groups	71.917	362	.150		
Total	74.823	364			

Table 3 shows that the calculated f-value is 9.695 and the critical f-value is 4.66 obtained at 2 and 362 degrees of freedom at 0.05 alpha level. Since calculated f-value is greater than the critical f-value, the null hypothesis was rejected. Therefore it is conclude that the mean response on the effectiveness of virtual counselling services by students in various faculties of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education differ significantly.

Discussion of Findings

Gender and the Effectiveness of Online Counselling

From the study, the mean response on the effectiveness of online counselling services by male and female students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education does not differ significantly. This is in concordance with Griffiths and Christensen (2006) on their study, found that the majority of online interventions programs were reported to be effective in reducing risk factors or improving symptoms, particularly in regards to depression and anxiety and found no significant influence of gender on the mean response on effectiveness of online counselling. On the contrary, Richards (2009) in his study on Features and benefits of online counselling found out there is significant

influence of gender on the effective use of online counselling at Trinity College in which females reported online counselling to be more effective than males.

Younger and Older Students and the Effectiveness of Online Counselling

The finding affirms there is a great difference between mean scores of younger and older students on the effectiveness of online counselling services by students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. This is evidence in Newman et al. (2011) in his study on help-seeking behaviour and the internet found out that there is increasing evidence to suggest that some psychological services provided online are as effective, or almost as effective as face-to-face counselling among young Australians, than older ones Australians. They found that there is significance influence of age and effectiveness of online counselling. Also, in a study published by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2001) it was found that individuals aged 15-24 who access the Internet retrieved health information online. Almost three quarters of adolescents (73%) ages 12-17 have used online counselling and saw it as effective, the number increases to 95% for adolescents' ages 15-17 compared to older adults.

Students in various Faculties and the Effectiveness of Online Counselling

The research indicated that the mean response on the effectiveness of online counselling services by students in various faculties of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education differ significantly. It is in disparity with Cohen and Kerr's (1998) which reported significant reductions in anxiety as rated by the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). However, no effect size was reported. No significant differences were found between the students from various faculties and effectiveness of online counselling. Also, Feldman, Rand and Kahle-wroblewski (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of Testing the efficacy of a single-session goal-pursuit intervention for college students, shows that university students from various faculties demonstrated higher levels of hope and higher levels of self-reported goal attainment as a result of the effectiveness of online counselling. No significant influence exists between students from various faculties and the effectiveness of online counselling.

Conclusion

Sequel to the findings and discussions based on this work, the following conclusions were drawn, it is apparent that age and faculty significantly influenced virtual counselling service, while gender does not. However, virtual counselling has been acknowledged as the enhanced access that allows for early and preventative intervention. It also gives counsellors greater opportunity to reflect on their virtual practice by accessing the full text records of sessions.

Recommendations

Consequent upon the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. School based counsellors should inculcate the use of websites as sources of information and direct students to these online resources.
2. Online counseling should be encouraged to reduce the stigma associated with people seeking professional help.
3. The stakeholders should make available functional counselling unit or online platform where students can go to get professional help concerning their various challenges.

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