

e-Counselling, COVID-19 and Counselling in Ondo state, Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examined the influence of e-counselling, COVID-19 and counselling in Ondo State, Nigeria during COVID-19. It adopted a descriptive survey design, and used simple random sampling technique to select 100 respondents, who were counsellors in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Ondo state, Nigeria. The samples were from all the eighteen Local Government Areas of Ondo State. Two research questions were raised to guide the study. The instrument for data collection was self-constructed questionnaire titled “COVID-19 and e-counselling among Counsellors in Nigeria” using a four point likert scale. The face and content validity of the instrument was ascertained by the researcher. Test-retest technique was used by the researcher, Pearson product Moment correlation was used to determine the correlation coefficient which was 0.62. The generated data was analysed using frequency count and mean statistics. The result indicated that COVID-19 had influence on counselling in Ondo state, while challenges to adoption of e-counselling were also identified. It was suggested that the counsellors should prepare themselves and get knowledge about e-counselling and any other available online platform that will enhance their duties in time of natural emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: influence, counsellors, COVID-19, e-counselling, challenges

Introduction

Counselling in the first place is the relationship between two persons; one is the trained counsellor saddled with the responsibility of helping the second person who is in need of help to overcome their educational, personal-social and career problems, and to function optimally in all areas of their lives. The need to close schools during the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has called on educational stakeholders to find an alternative means of keeping the schools functioning, even without physical contact due to the nature of the virus; so also the need for guidance and counselling services to be given using modern technology to help client, since the virus spread from person to person.

The availability of Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, previous use of ICT, as well as the attitude of the counselling practitioners and clients towards digital delivery of counselling services play a major role. For all countries who closed their schools, this meant that guidance and counselling could only be provided using digital technologies and other tools and channels that can be used for communication at a distance. Only that in exceptional cases, some contact support can be provided for students with a special support decision. Besides personal issues, students are also provided with support concerning curricular difficulties, study difficulties, queries related to choice of subjects, changes in the post-secondary course requirements due to COVID-19, queries related to exams, concerns related to transition to post-secondary education (Cedefop, 2019).

e-counselling seems to be a phenomenon within the counselling parlance. It is a modern means of communication between counsellor(s) and client(s) in sessions via internet within a stipulated period of at least once a week in a year or six months with a singular purpose of assisting clients in discovering themselves and making useful choices in relation to their educational, vocational and personal-social needs. e-counselling or tele-counselling is an extension of information and communication technology which Ivowi (2005) described as generic term employed in describing the generation, storage, dissemination and eliciting of relevant information for therapeutic encounter. It seems many counsellors are regressive in relation to familiarization and use of information technology. Their lack of competency in the use of electronic services could deter them from relating effectively with clients who are not within their immediate reach. Electronic communication involves the use of e-mails, internet and communication aided strategies in counselling clients (Adika, 2011). Adika further added that counsellors are not left out in this all-important phenomenon which has potential to transform not only counselling practices but education as well. Counsellors who lack basic skills in electronic services may not be able to email and make internet contact with distant clients that need such help. This may have been caused by lack of access to the electronic gadgets or lack of training in their usage (Grosshandler, 2012). Taking into consideration that not all career counsellors have a digital background, there is an immediate need for training counsellors on how to provide basic digital psychological support and/or partner with professional psychologists to address the need of their clients through the digital medium. The digital gap among practitioners in Nigeria, in many regions, implies that there is the need to train the practitioners in order to provide career guidance services remotely.

By implication, the lockdown therefore, points to an increased risk that those who greatly need tailored guidance and support will suffer the most from adverse consequences of the lockdown, thus deepening social inequality. Again, experiences in the countries during the crisis period need investigation, also in terms of the

potential for tailored support using digital technologies. Even if online services and education have been expanded, access to WIFI, particularly in rural areas, may be a barrier to accessing these provisions.

Sanders and Rosenfield (1998) define e-counselling as a counselling method through the medium of telecommunication technologies such as telephone, internet and teleconferencing. Digital counselling game is gradually emerging as an effective tool to leverage students into holistic self-management and development (Bada, 2013).

Following the closure of schools and other educational settings due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, school counsellors working at the centres of educational resources and assistance are delivering remote/online counselling and guidance for students and distant psycho-pedagogical assistance services for parents/guardians and teachers. For example, they offer free resources on bullying and cyber-bullying, well-being activities, stress prevention, how to spend your time at home – tips for children, etc (Wang et al., 2010).

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Guidance and counselling professionals are already organised as a network within secondary schools. They work in a complementary way with teachers in charge of classes in order to keep information on guidance procedures up to date and to support and accompany the guidance of pupils who are in a problematic situation. Continuity has been established with the teachers through telephone interviews and emails. This also seems to be the case in Nigeria, where the teaching staff of the educational unit collaborates with the school counsellors and speech Therapists. In Nigeria, counselling practitioners are actively sharing their expertise in working at a distance using their internal communication channels. The companies who are developing online learning solutions have united their forces to give free access to their materials (including career education) and help the teachers discover how new educational tools can be used or how to complement their traditional way of working. In addition, local initiatives from different NGOs appeared in this period, dedicated to online counselling. The Nigeria Career Guidance Association which is a voluntary organisation that represents career guidance practitioners is extending its services to the community where its volunteers can answer any questions through e-mail, chat or online calls.

The service includes guidance related to choice of subjects, career-related queries, employability skills, course information and adult participation in lifelong learning. This service was promoted on the Association's Facebook page and website and was shared by various members. In addition, the Association has updated its electronic mail, widely known as e-mail. This is a form of communication transmitted electronically using computers. It is tremendously faster than all previous means of communication, such as sending letters using the traditional postal system. It is therefore not surprising that email has been widely adopted by a large section of the world's population as their preferred means of communication. It is widely used in business communication because of its nearly instantaneous nature. Sending email is free, except the cost of paying for the infrastructure such as a computer and internet connection. Zamani (2009) points out that email is an ideal platform or medium for people with different time schedules, providing an opportunity for introspective responses. Nevertheless, sending email is associated with security issues which make it difficult for a counsellor to guarantee a water-tight confidentiality. Ralls (2011) worries about the confidentiality issues associated with the use of email in counselling, and cautions that email conversations are not secured without any means to protect it. However, he advocates that confidential information on the internet can be shared over a secured server; otherwise, only general information could be requested and provided. Indeed, emails can also be encrypted over the internet for secure confidential materials.

After an initial shock and discontinuance of activity, countries have necessarily built on existing tools and infrastructures, rapidly adapting their services to the new circumstances. Countries in which digital forms of guidance provision are established, as well as countries that have existing multichannel capacity (different channels to provide guidance: phone, on-line services, face-to-face) seem to have been faster and more effective in transitioning to the new reality where all support services and careers learning are provided remotely. The lockdown appears to have triggered the use of web-based interactive guidance tools and services (e.g. video-communication with counsellors, YouTube-live or webinars including a chat function and facilitation) in countries where this was previously not common, such as in Nigeria. The particular value of online platforms during the time of the coronavirus pandemic and longer periods of lockdown is becoming apparent, even if their use has not yet been fully evaluated in the context of the pandemic.

They appear to present an element of continuity, in theory, accessible for all who have the necessary technical equipment at home. Depending on their scope, these platforms can include a relatively comprehensive offer for a structured process of information and decision-making for identifying optimal choices for education and training and job searches nationally and/or across Europe, or within adult learning. According to the information collected, key ingredients include general information on learning

opportunities and job vacancies, trends in Labour and skills demand, information including videos or podcasts on occupations. Some web-platforms offer personalised tools, for example, the option to enter a personal skills and qualifications profile, self-exploration tools and tests matching interests with fields of education, training or occupations or competence-based matching of jobseeker profiles with jobs. With the temporary discontinuation of face-to-face and other guidance services, existing webpages have been the first and most obvious response to reach the public, mainly as vehicles of information provision and dissemination of example practices and to provide support for careers-related teaching and learning. Webpages have been updated and enhanced with targeted information for user groups, both for those who wish to benefit from guidance and for career guidance professionals and practitioners. Websites have also been used to host digital self-help services and information on further training of practitioners, both short-term or modular, and full degree programmes for up-skilling, but also to inform guidance counsellors of offers for their beneficiaries/users.

Ramey's (2013) study aimed to identify change in the provision on counselling services to families via technology and the internet based on analyzing 15 researches in the treatment of adolescents. The results showed that modern technology has led to positive changes in the work of service providers such as telecommunicating through social messages.

Banat, Ghaith, Mohamed and Ghaleb (2013) examined the percentage of using electronic counselling among counsellors. The study sample consisted of 166 counsellors. The results showed that the counsellors use electronic counselling at an average rate and there were no statistically significant differences in the use of electronic counselling among counsellors according to the following variables: gender, types of schools, and numbers of student. On the other hand, the study found statistically significant differences in counsellors' use of electronic counselling according to educational qualification and years of experience.

Davis and Hastings (2013) summarized research papers on the potential uses of technology in the service of psychology. They concluded that modern technology facilitates the job of service providers. However, regular training should be provided for service providers. Davis and Hastings (2013) examined the use of technology by counsellors in American School. The study sample consisted of 221 counsellors. The study showed that technology was not accepted by school counsellors and that the ability to use technology varies from person to person and there are fears of using it.

Statement of the Problem

The researcher observed that many counsellors and lecturers do not use modern technology in providing counselling services. In addition, the old counsellor finds it difficult to deal with modern technology so they avoid using it and they believe that it must be face to face during the counselling interaction. However, the researcher was of the opinion that communication skills through modern technology should be developed by the counsellors. Those counsellors that would want to use e-counselling in their various schools do not have such facilities. This makes counselling not accessible during the pandemic, due to adoption of non-pharmaceutical measures like social distancing, using of Nose mask, lockdown and the likes.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the influence of COVID-19 on counselling in Nigeria?
2. What are the challenges of adopting e-Counselling during COVID-19 among counsellors in Ondo state?

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. It is a form of descriptive design that uses a representative sample to collect data for systematic description of existing situation or phenomenon. The population consisted of 1200 counsellors in Ondo State. A simple random sampling technique was used to choose the sample for the study. The sample of the study consisted of 100 counsellors across Ondo State. The instrument for data collection was a self-constructed questionnaire titled "COVID-19 and e-counselling among counsellors in Ondo State. The instrument was divided into sections; section A contains personal data of the respondents. While section B contains 20 items on a four likert scale given to respondents to answer the questions raised. The face and content validity of the instrument was ascertained by experts. Test-retest technique was used by the researcher to establish the reliability. The questionnaire was distributed to some sample of twenty Counsellors in Ekiti State; after two week interval the same instrument was re-administered to the same set of Counsellors and Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to determine the correlation co-efficient which was 0.62 which certified that the questionnaire was reliable. One hundred copies of the questionnaire were distributed and were returned. Data were analysed using frequency count, percentage and mean statistics.

Presentation of results

Research question one: What is the influence of COVID-19 on counselling in Nigeria??

Table 1: Influence of COVID-19 on counselling in Nigeria

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean
1	Counselling service providers have a clear vision in order to use technology in providing services	45	30	15	10	100	3.2
2	Students were counselled through e-counselling during COVID-19	35	45	10	10	100	3.1
3	Counselling was limited during the pandemic	40	40	10	10	100	3.2
4	Many social vices were committed during COVID-19	50	15	15	20	100	2.95

The research question analysed in table 1 showed that the respondents agreed that COVID-19 has influence on counselling in Nigeria; the findings showed that the mean score ranged from 2.95 to 3.2 for the items listed under research question one.

Research question two: What are the challenges of adopting e-Counselling in Ondo state?

Table 2: Showing the challenges of adopting e-Counselling in Ondo state

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean
1	Poor network hinders counselling during the pandemic	60	15	15	10	100	3.2
2	Financial strength of the clients also hinders e-counselling	45	30	15	10	100	3.1
3	Some counsellors ignored e-counselling because it consumes time and finance	50	30	10	10	100	3.2
4	Some counsellors cannot operate electronic gadget used for e-counselling	48	22	20	10	100	3.1

Research question two as analysed in table 2 shows that the respondents agreed that poor network, finance, time and inadequate knowledge about electronic gadget affect the level of e-Counselling in Ondo state; the findings showed that the mean score ranged from 3.1 to 3.2 for the items listed under research question two.

Discussion of the findings

Research question one showed the influence of e-counselling, COVID-19 on counselling in Ondo state. In the first place, majority of counsellors consider e-counselling as another form of counselling that will increase the burden of counselling work. The researcher found that the counsellor in schools find it difficult to provide e-counselling. In addition, the researcher finds that it is necessary to establish suitable infrastructure in schools and rehabilitate them by holding training courses. This study agrees with the study of Cedefop (2019) that the availability of Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, previous use of ICT, as well as the attitude of the counselling practitioners and clients towards digital delivery of counselling services play a major role in the use of e-counselling during COVID-19 era.

Research question two showed the challenges on adoption of e-Counselling during COVID-19 among Counsellors in Ondo state. The results of this study is consistent with the study of Adika (2011) which stated that it seems many counsellors are regressive in relation to familiarization and use of information technology. Their lack of competency in the use of electronic services could deter them from relating effectively with clients who are not within their immediate reach. Electronic communication involves the use of e-mails, internet and communication aided strategies in counselling clients. He further added that counsellors are not left out in this all-important phenomenon which has potential to transform not only counselling practices but education as well. Counsellors who lack basic skills in electronic services may not be able to email and make internet contact with distant clients that need such help. This may have been caused by lack of access to the electronic gadgets or lack of training in their usage.

Conclusion

The study concludes that e-counselling, COVID-19 affect counselling in Ondo State. The researcher found that counsellors in schools find it difficult to provide e-counselling services even in a technologically inclined environment, due to poor network service, poor electricity supply, non-availability of technology gadgets needed for e-counselling.

Recommendations

Based on the results, the researcher recommends the following:

- 1) Counsellors should prepare themselves and get knowledge about e-counselling and any other available online platform that will enhance their duties in time of natural occurrence like the COVID-19 pandemic which came abruptly.
- 2) Counsellors should be knowledgeable in the use of e-counselling for their client in time of pandemic and any other natural occurrences.

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