

## Online Counselling Services: University Students' Perception

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**ABSTRACT:** Online counselling is no longer something new. It offers faster, safer and more practical in getting counselling services. This study aims to examine the perceptions of university students toward online counselling services which include aspects of attitude, knowledge and readiness at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. This quantitative study has a total of 263 respondents from two different studies; social sciences and technology sciences. The Perceptions Toward Online Counseling Questionnaire is used as the instrument. The collected data were analysed using quantitative method. The data obtained were analysed with the help of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 23.0 for Windows. t-test analysis was used to analyse the data. The results showed that there was no significant difference in perceptions of attitude and readiness toward online counselling services based on the field of study. However, there is a significant difference in the perception of knowledge toward online counselling services based on the field of study. Therefore, the implications and recommendations for future research also discussed.

**Keywords:** online counselling, counselling, perception.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Mohd Nor Mamat (2000), the present of the information era and digital has become common as a package (part and partial) in our daily life. Malaysia also involved in this technological revolution. Based on the statistics of Digital Report 2018 released by Hootsuite and We Are Social (2018), Internet users have increased to 25.08 million users, which represents 79 per cent of the population in Malaysia. It is nine per cent higher compared to the year 2017. It made Malaysia became the 9th most active country in the world on social media. According to Mastura, Zaida, Ramlan (2001), there are several platforms offered online counselling services in Malaysia. Among them are Befrienders, Pink Triangle, Teledera, Cancer On-Line, AIDS On-line, and others.

The technology and the Internet had transform counselling services which no longer limited to face-to-face sessions, but online service has become another option. In addition, online counselling service is already available and been widely used when people are access to the internet (Tannous, 2017). According to Bloom (1998), counselling practitioners should not view modernity as a barrier but rather see the Internet as an effective facility. The use of computers seen as a catalyst in offering counselling services (Amla et al., 2015).

Online counselling has documented having the same benefits as face-to-face counselling (Barak, 2001). According to Derrig-Palumbo and Zeine (2005), some clients are comfortable with face-to-face therapy, while for some clients, online counselling is a bonus point for traditional therapy. However, some clients would only benefit from online therapy.

According to Kraus and Zack (2004); Larsen (1998), the objective of online counselling is providing consultancy services for those in need. It helps to identify and understand characteristics of capabilities and tendencies such as individual preparation skills. Offering e-counselling has opened up space and opportunities for those clients who stay in remote areas (Chester, A & Glass, C, 2006; Hall, 2004; Robson & Robson, 2000), clients who with disabilities in moving (Chester, A & Glass, C, 2006; Robson & Robson, 2000), clients with responsibilities at home for young children or parents (Chaudron 1998; Robson & Robson, 2000), clients who are constantly moving on task and work factors (Lawrence, 1998; Murphy, 1998) as well as clients who need anonymity or do not want to identify by others (Hall, 2004; Robson & Robson, 2000).

Hence, the counselling process is less limiting the freedom of the clients. The clients no longer need to be present in front of the counsellor, in the same room, and at the same time (Zainudin & Mastura, 2006). In facts, according to Glueckauf (2002), clients can maintain their privacy by having therapy at home. Besides, it reduces the time for clients to rearrange their thoughts. The session can be continued as long as the client requires, it can be postponed or cancelled easily and clients can choose their preference counsellor (van de Luitgaarden, 2016).

According to literature studies, the perceptions involving aspects of attitude, knowledge, and readiness toward online counselling services are still lacking in Malaysia. Based on the research conducted by Mastura, Zainudin dan Ramlan (2001), almost 50% of the respondents are not aware of the existence of online

counselling services in Malaysia. However, it is more than 50% of the respondents are willing to accept and participate in the online counselling session.

Thus, this study focuses on the perceptions of university students toward online counselling based on aspects of attitude, knowledge, and readiness. The field of study of the respondents will take into consideration to see how far it will affect the respondent's perception based on the aspects of attitude, knowledge, and readiness for online counselling services.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many past studies to make comparison of the effectiveness between online counseling sessions and face-to-face counseling sessions. Zainudin, Z.N, Yusop, Y.M, Hassan, S.A, Alias B.S. (2019) have showed that no relationship on personality traits towards cybertherapy approach. Liebert et al. (2006) have studied a group of 81 female clients who use online services to find out the therapeutic relationship and satisfaction variables reported by the client themselves. This study compared its findings with the findings with researches by McMurtry and Hudson (2000) and Busseri and Tyler (2003).

Liebert et al.(2006) found that the more respondents who spend time online, the more likely they are to use online counseling services. Researchers conclude that online clients are satisfied with online relationships and treatments, but that level of satisfaction is still low when compared to clients who have undergone traditional face-to-face counseling.

A study entitled Perceptions of online counseling among counselors in Malaysia (Zainah, Rohany & Fatimah, 2010) is a preliminary research to explore the perception of counselors on the need for online counseling sessions or e-counseling. A total of 20 respondents were selected as subjects and data were collected using a questionnaire to study the use of e-counseling among counselors. The results of this study show that although respondents are seen as positive towards e-counseling, but they prefer face-to-face counseling to deliver their services to customers. However, researchers point out that it is important to note that more and more people will continue to see the internet as a source to deal with their mental health problems. Therefore, ongoing research in the use and application of online counseling will help shape the future of professional counseling.

Studies conducted by Wong, Bonn, Tam, & Wong, (2018) show that overall, university students in Malaysia are less likely to give face-to-face counseling than online counseling, although both types of counseling are seen as positive. This feedback indicates that on average respondents are relatively open to receiving counseling services either online or in person.

According to Adel Tannous (2017), technology and the use of the internet have taken over the face-to-face counseling services and transformed them into online counseling. In a study that examined perceptions of online counseling among University of Jordan students found that respondents had a positive attitude and preferred online counseling as the best way to deal with problems in daily life. The results of this study also show that social media is the most effective medium in helping respondents to get counseling online and it has a huge impact on the lives of respondents.

Exploratory Studies on Client Perceptions of Internet Counseling and Therapeutic Relationships (Liebert, Archer, Munson and York, 2006) are among the studies of perceptions of online counseling that look at it from a demographic factor perspective. Sociodemography consists of 81 clients who use online counseling. The therapeutic relationship and satisfaction of online counseling therapy has been evaluated for comparison with previous studies involving traditional face counseling. Online clients are mostly women who are used to using the Internet and they enjoy the convenience and "anonymity" of this service.

Awabil and Akosah (2018) in their study which studied the attitude of university students in Ghana towards online counseling services stated that students show a positive attitude towards online counseling because their study specializes in attitude aspects. In fact, their current results are in line with the findings of Leibert, Archer, Munson and York (2006) who revealed that their clients provide good online counseling. Similarly, current findings agree with the results obtained by Finn and Bruce (2008) that clients have a generally positive attitude towards online counseling.

Lily Mastura, Zaida Nor and Ramlan (2001), conducted a study on the readiness of computer-savvy respondents to participate in e-counseling sessions. Their study, E-Counseling: Willingness to Participate, found that 50 (52%) respondents were willing to accept or participate in e-counseling sessions. There are 39 (41.9%) respondents who are not sure whether they can participate in the process or not while 5 (5.4%) respondents rejected completely.

So this article is intended to see the perception of students in one of universities in Malaysia to get clearer view.

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

The research objectives for this research are:

3.1 Is there any significant difference in perception of attitude between students in the social sciences and technology sciences at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu towards online counseling services?

3.2 Is there any significant difference in perception of knowledge between students in the social sciences and technology sciences at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu towards online counseling services?

3.3 Is there any significant difference in perception of readiness between students in the social sciences and technology sciences at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu towards online counseling services?

### 4.0 METHODOLOGY

Quantitative approach was used to conduct this study. The researcher wishes to make a descriptive and inferential analysis. The independent variables for this study are two fields of studies in Universiti Malaysia Terengganu which are social science studies and technology science studies. While, the dependent variable for this study is the perception of attitude, knowledge, and readiness towards online counselling services among university students.

The instrument used in this study is Perceptions Toward Online Counseling Questionnaire. This questionnaire is built by the researcher based on the empirical research conducted by Zainah, Rohany dan Fatimah (2010), and Tannous (2017). The questionnaire is divided into three parts which are Section A: Respondent's biodata, Section B: experiences using online counselling, and Section C, D, and E are perception towards online counselling.

Respondents of this study are the final year students who study in the field of social science and field of technology science in Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. The students of social sciences studies selected from the program of Bachelor of Counselling and Bachelor of Management (Policy Studies). For the field of technology science studies, final year students of the program Bachelor of Computer Science (Software Engineering) and Bachelor of Computer Science with Maritime Informatics are selected as the respondents in this study.

### 5.0 FINDINGS

*The perception of attitude between students in the social sciences and technology sciences at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu towards online counseling services*

Referring to the findings of the first research question shows that there is no significant difference in the perception of attitudes towards online counseling services between students in the field of social science studies and the field of technology science studies at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. However, based on the mean obtained, it is found that respondents from the field of social science studies have a more positive perception of attitude towards online counseling services compared to respondents from the technology science studies, although the differences are small.

The T-test analysis was used in this study to determine the differences between the two fields of study in perceptions of online counselling. The T-test is one of the statistical tests used to determine whether there is a significant difference in the mean value for two groups or two sets of data to be tested.

**Table 1: T-test analysis of attitudes towards online counselling services based on field of study**

Field of Study	N	Min	SD	t	df	Sig.
Social Science	132	3.411	.528	.498	261	.619
Technology Science	131	3.372	.745			

Table 1 showed the result of the T-test used to see the difference in perception of attitude between the students of social science (M=3.411, SD=.528) and students of technology science (M=3.372, SD=.745) toward online counselling services. Based on the result showed in the T-test, there is no significant difference in the perception of attitudes towards online counselling services between students in the field of social science studies and the field of technology science studies ( $t(261) = .498, p > 0.5$ ).

This findings supported Tannous (2017), which explores perceptions of online counseling among University of Jordan students and found that students have a positive attitude and high level of priority to use online counseling . The current results of this study are in line with the findings of Leibert, Archer, Munson and York (2006) who revealed that their clients receive online counseling well. Similarly, current findings agree with the results obtained by Finn and Bruce (2008) who stated that clients have a generally positive attitude towards online counseling.

Furthermore, the results of the study (Wong, Bonn, Tam, & Wong, 2018) show that overall, university students in Malaysia have less face-to-face counseling than online counseling, although both types of counseling are seen as positive. This feedback indicates that on average respondents are relatively open to receiving counseling services either online or in person. Teh (2014) also stated that attitudes towards online counseling (compared to face-to-face counseling) are generally considered positive and the sample in his study showed openness to conduct counseling online. However, they still consider face-to-face counseling to be more effective than online counseling.

In conclusion, the results of this study are in line with the study of Tannous (2017), who stated that the most interesting finding in his study was that most samples showed positive attitudes and remarkable effects in their lives by using online counseling. The results of this study are also similar to the results of a study conducted by Zamani et.al. (2010) Bato & Marcial, (2016). Thus, based on this study, the researcher can conclude that almost all respondents consisting of students from different fields of study at UMT show a positive attitude perception of online counseling services.

*The perception of knowledge between students in the social sciences and technology sciences at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu towards online counseling services*

The finding shows that there is a significant difference in the perception of knowledge towards online counseling services between students in social science studies and technology science studies at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. Based on the mean obtained, it was found that there is a slight difference where respondents from technology science studies have a more positive perception of knowledge of online counseling services compared to respondents from the field of social science studies.

**Table 2: T-test analysis of perceptions of knowledge towards online counselling services based on field of study**

Field of Study	N	Min	SD	t	df	Sig.
Social Science	132	3.342	.556	-2.072	261	.039
Technology Science	131	3.530	.878			

Table 2 showed the results of T-test used to determine the difference in perception of knowledge between the students of social science (M=3.342, SD=.556) and students of Technology science (M=3.530, SD=.878) on online counselling services. Based on the result showed in the table, there is a significant difference in the perception of knowledge towards online counselling services between students in the field of social science studies and the field of technology science studies ( $t(261) = -2.072, p < .05$ ).

The differences between these two fields of study indicates that university students have a good perception of knowledge of online counseling services despite different fields of study. The results of this study support the study (Tannous, 2017) which claims that students at the University of Jordan have a good knowledge of online counseling and respondents believe that online counseling is important because it is part of their way of dealing with everyday life problems. The findings of this study also indicate that the majority of respondents prefer to use online counseling to solve their personal and emotional problems. This is in line with the findings of Tannous (2017) study which explains that most respondents claim that not all problems can be solved by using online counseling which they consider that online counseling is more appropriate to solve time management issues, increase awareness, self-control and addiction. Almost all respondents also believe that online counseling is not suitable for severe problems such as mood or psychiatric disorders.

Thus, the findings of this study have proven that the average student at UMT has excellent knowledge related to online counseling services. Even the respondents also know and are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of online counseling.

*The perception of readiness between students in the social sciences and technology sciences at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu towards online counseling services*

The finding shows that there is no significant difference in the perception of readiness for online counseling services between students in social science studies and technology science studies at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. However, based on the mean obtained, it is found that there are some differences where respondents from the field of social science studies have a more positive perception of readiness for online counseling services compared to respondents from the field of technology science studies.

**Table 3: T-test analysis of perceptions of readiness towards online counselling services based on the field of study**

Field of Study	N	Min	SD	t	df	Sig.
Social Science	132	3.568	.912	1.872	261	.062
Technology Science	131	3.351	.968			

Table 3 Showed the results of T-test used to determine the difference in perception of readiness between the students of social science (M=3.568, SD=.912) and students of technology science (M=3.351, SD=.968) toward online counselling services. Based on the T-test result showed that there is no significant difference in the perception of readiness towards online counselling services between students in the field of social science studies and the field of technology science studies at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. (t(261)=1.872, p>.05).

The difference in perception of readiness between these two areas of study clearly shows that UMT students are willing and interested in using online counseling services. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of the study of Zainah Ahmad Zaman, et al. (2010), who stated that more than 50 percent of their respondents are interested in using online counseling and 85 percent are willing to accept and engage in online counseling. Furthermore, Awabil and Akosah (2018) in their study which examined the attitude of university students in Ghana towards online counseling services stated that the relatively busy and busy daily schedule of students does not allow students to undergo face-to-face counseling sessions. Students are more interested in using the internet in dormitories to get online counseling services because it saves more time.

Accordingly, in Jordan, online counseling has become a more popular and viable form of counseling with the advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Thus, Jordan's available and convenient internet access through mobile and wireless networks makes it easy for clients to access counseling services online more quickly and at any time. (Tannous, 2017). In conclusion, the respondents are really interested and willing to use counseling services online because they are aware of the advantages of this service that may not be available in face-to-face counseling services.

## 6.0 DISCUSSION

In this study, T-test was the only analysis method used by the researcher to analyze the data. T-test is to determine differences in the perception of attitude, knowledge, and readiness on online counselling between the students in the field of social science studies and technology science studies at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 was the application used to analyze T-test.

Referring to the results of the finding showed that there is no significant difference in the perception of attitudes towards online counselling services between students in the field of social science studies and the field of technology science studies at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. However, based on the mean score obtained, it can conclude as the students from the social science field have a more positive perception of attitude toward online counselling compare to the students from the field of technology science, although the differences are small.

The findings of the study showed that there is a significant difference in the perception of knowledge toward online counselling services between students in the field of social science studies and the field of technology science studies at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. Based on the mean score obtained, it showed that

there is a slight difference in the mean score between the variables. The students from the field of technology science studies have a better perception of knowledge toward online counselling services compare to the students in the field of social science studies (Rosnee et al., 2021).

The differences between the two study fields were insignificant. This showing the university students from different fields of study have a good perception of knowledge towards online counselling services. The result of this study has supported the empirical study done by Tannous (2017), which states that the students in the University of Jordan have good knowledge in online counselling and the respondents believe that online counselling is important because it is a part of their way to dealing with daily life issues.

Hence, the findings of this study have shown the average student in UMT has excellent knowledge related to online counselling services. Respondents knew and aware of the advantages and disadvantages of online counselling.

The next findings show that there is no significant difference in the perception of readiness towards online counselling between students in the field of social science studies and technology science studies in Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. However, according to the mean score obtained, it showed there is a small difference between the respondents from these two studies field. The results of the mean showed Social science studies respondents have more positive in the perception of readiness towards online counselling services compare to the technology science studies respondents.

In conclusion, the respondents are interested and ready to use online counselling services. This is due to they are aware of some advantages of online counselling may not be available in face-to-face counselling services.

## 7.0 CONCLUSIONS

The emergence of online counselling or known as E-counselling has provided better opportunities to the society for getting assistance through counselling services. This is because online services are more preferred by society where it less consume time and without dealing with other parties.

From the view of counselling and psychology, online counselling can be a solution for those clients who have difficulty dealing with the counsellor or who are uncomfortable sharing their problems and stories directly with counsellors. Therefore, this study is conducted to determine the perception of online counselling from the average university students who are an active internet user and always access to the internet.

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