A Comparison of a Client's Satisfaction between Online and Face-to-face Counselling in a School Setting

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ABSTRACT

During the current Covid-19 pandemic, the social relationship between humans has changed. As noticed, lockdowns and social distancing have become new norms. Unavoidably, counselling services were also affected with social distancing rules, especially in the school setting. Thus, online counselling or e-counselling has begun to gain in popularity, allowing counsellors to offer their services in an alternative way. In order to evaluate the suitability of e-counselling during the current pandemic, a client's satisfaction towards e-counselling and face-to-face counselling needs to be investigated. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of these two counselling approaches using the level of the client's satisfaction and its implication towards counselling practises during the outbreak. Quantitative data were obtained using the Client's Satisfaction Inventory Short-Form (CSI-SF) questionnaire. The experimental design consisted of a total of 60 study subjects in two groups, namely the control group using the face-to-face Counselling method and the experimental group using the e-Counselling method. Based on the results, the difference in mean score showed that the mean difference in the experimental group was slightly higher than the control group. This finding indicates that e-counselling clients have a higher satisfaction compared to the face-to-face approach. The implications of this data are discussed on the role of school, school counsellor, and the government in enhancing the service of e-counselling during the current pandemic.

Keywords: Counselling, client satisfaction, e-counselling, secondary school, students

INTRODUCTION

The advancements of technology in computers and the internet have brought upon the introduction of e-counselling decades ago, thus is not a new concept in the field of counselling. E-counselling started early in the 1960s in countries in the western region such as United states, with the development of the computer softwares, ELIZA and PLATO, where clients respond to a computer instead of real, virtual counsellors (Lunt, 2004; Zainudin & Yusop, 2018a). Sometime later, the "Ask Uncle Ezra" website was introduced but was still a computer-programmed interaction. Following this, the establishment of e-counselling between real clients and real counsellors in a virtual setting began around the 1990s (Lunt, 2004; Zainudin & Yusop, 2018a). In Malaysia, the use of e-counselling services was established in the 1990s as well, to cater to the demands in the academic setting and the worrisome social issues rising among teenagers (Zainudin et al., 2019). By definition, according to Bloom (1998), e-counselling, or cyber-counselling, is "the practice of professional counselling that occurs when client and counsellor are in different or remote locations with the medium of technology to assist communication with each other".

The internet allows different types of e-counselling modalities to be performed. Modalities of e-counselling can be divided into synchronous chat and asynchronous mail. E-counselling provided via synchronous chat can be defined as the counselling session conducted synchronously where the counsellor and their client are meeting and interacting online at the same time (Glasheen et al., 2017). This modality is appealing as it makes use of social networking services and instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, that act as a communication tool. In this modal, clients can schedule the counselling session at their convenience, and it would be considered as less formal session compared to the other e-counselling modalities. To overcome one of the challenges of e-counselling in picking up non-verbal communication, e-counselling services by synchronous chat can also be delivered via video conferencing using a web camera (Glasheen et al., 2017). The asynchronous mail mode of e-counselling refers to a counselling session mediated by the exchange of electronic mails, and the client may experience a time delay in getting a feedback or response (Glasheen et al., 2017). However, with electronic mail, both the counsellor and client can take time and put more consideration into translating their thoughts into words. Nevertheless, both modalities reduce a client's need for commuting to counselling sessions and are able to assist clients under quarantine.

The demand of using e-counselling is increasing yearly due to ease in internet accessibility (Paterson et al., 2017), which did not only happen during the pandemic. Moreover, the current generation prefers virtual communication compared to a face-to-face one. A research done by Dowling and Rickwood (2015) in Australia reported that 16% of age 15 to 19-year-old young

people prefered to seek help online than face-to-face. In addition, the report stated that 30% of the young people in Australia would search information online regarding mental health rather than seeking help from a professional such as a counsellor (Dowling & Rickwood, 2015).

There are many reasons why clients prefer to join e-counselling to solve their issues which can be sensitive, and two of which are the sense of inhibition and anonymity. These reasons will motivate some clients to seek online counselling in the first attempt (Fang et al., 2017). E-counselling has made counselling sessions more convenient to communicate with clients without the impact of distance or location. It has thus become a medium for the mental health service.

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic is affecting the world. The virus has an incubation period of about 2 to 14 days (Luca & Calabro, 2020) and can be fatal. Fatality occurs mostly in individuals aged 60 and above and with underlying conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, kidney, heart and other diseases (Bernama, 2020). As a result of mitigation and prevention measures to control the spread of the virus, including lockdowns, social distancing and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) the social relationship between humans has changed.

The SOP for the school setting has included virtual classes and partial or stage-based return of students to schools. This protocol had additionally affected the relationship between counsellors and their clients. Due to the possible spread of the virus through saliva droplets, contact with an infected person and surfaces (Luca & Calabro, 2020), both counsellors and clients are faced with psychological distress to having face-to-face counselling sessions. The counselling departments of schools are also applying SOP and guidelines set by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors. A student who wishes to seek assistance from a counsellor needs to make an appointment and complete a declaration form before starting the session. A safe social distance must be maintained in the counselling session with a limited number of clients per session (Malaysian Board of Counsellors, 2020). This SOP has caused some schools with space limitations unable to conduct group counselling. Thus, there are increased challenges with having counselling sessions with students during the pandemic.

Generally, the pandemic has triggered a drastic change in counselling and mental health care services due to the preventive measures such as social distancing and lockdowns (Feijt, et. al., 2020). In a very short time, counsellors had to transfer their services to an online platform. E-counselling has thus become a popular approach used by counsellors and therapists to maintain a healthy relationship with their clients and in providing necessary services to support the community with psychological issues during the Covid-19 pandemic (Luca & Calabro, 2020). The school counsellors are also applying e-counselling through phone calls or video calls to help their clients in maintaining a healthy psychological well-

being (Malaysian Board of Counsellors, 2020). Face-to-face counselling sessions remain to be provided in schools but only with students who attend school physically and are suffering from high stress or depression during the pandemic. The remaining students who have milder conditions or suffering from issues caused by the act of quarantine will be counselled using e-counselling by the school counsellor.

Despite the integration of the internet into almost everyone's daily activities, the number of Malaysian school students participating in e-counselling is surprisingly low, even with the increasing interests in the importance of good mental health. This study focuses on gauging the effectiveness of both face-to-face counselling and e-counselling services provided to school students and to also compare the level of the clients' satisfaction between the two approaches. This is to help provide an overview of the suitability of using the e-counselling approach during this pandemic. There are studies which determined the student cum clients' satisfaction towards face-to-face counselling and e-counselling methods in the past (Barak et al., 2008; Gallant & Zhao, 2011; King et al., 2006; Zeren, 2015; Zainudin & Yusop, 2018b; 2018c), which are discussed further in the next section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Satisfaction towards Both Counselling Approaches

To gain knowledge on client satisfaction towards counselling services provided in schools, past studies on opinions and perceptions towards the service from a variety of perspectives were conducted and the data had been gathered. Findings from a study by Gallant and Zhao (2010) demonstrated that at least 59% of their clients reported satisfaction towards the face-to-face counselling approach, mainly for academic purposes and college preparation, followed by for personal, social, and emotional problems. The satisfaction level of HIV/AIDS patients involved in a study by Papanna et al. (2012) was also found to be about 60%. Here, the majority of the respondents felt contented with the counselling services and that the information gained during the session would be beneficial to them in some ways. According to a comparison study by Zeren (2015), clients are satisfied that they received appropriate solutions to their problems, and are most likely those who received face-to-face counselling. By the end of the counselling sessions, client responses implied that their self-awareness had increased and they were able to take initiatives to solve their problems (Zeren, 2015). The finding of a study done by Glasheen et al. (2017) indicated that the school principals felt that the school's face-to-face counselling played a role in empowering students in articulating their thoughts better, and was necessary for the development of soft skills that could be beneficial for their future and career. In regards to the functionality of the counselling services provided by the school, this finding was inconsistent with a study by Arfasa (2018), in which both teachers and students of the South West Ethiopia

Secondary Schools had expressed concerns regarding the inefficiency of the services on handling students' issues, such as academic-career development, personal problems, student empowerment and decision-making skills, but necessity wise, they did agree that the counselling and guidance services in schools were obligatory.

Kids Helpline in Australia conducted several surveys every year in its effort to comprehend the satisfaction level and short-term effect by its young clients after a counselling session. It was found that 4 out of 5 clients were feeling satisfied with the service, 9 out of 10 would recommend the service to others, and 3 out of 4 believed that the counsellors were helpful in guiding them (Hawke, 2017). It seems that Kids Helpline has been improving their services, as reflected in a previous study by King et al. (2006), whereby its young clients had experienced three main difficulties of using the online platform, which were insufficient time per counselling session; long waiting queue; and insufficient hours of service availability. Additionally, Wong et al. (2018) reported that there are about 35% of their clients who are not interested to partake in a conventional counselling session but would be slightly open to the idea of online counselling. On top of the pleasantry of being able to properly write things at their own time, participants of text-based e-counselling perceived that they have a greater sense of control over the whole counselling session due to the less confrontational environment of the session, and that they are also feeling protected

from the counsellor's unexpected negative emotions (King et al., 2006).

Factors Contributing to Clients' Perception towards Both Counselling Methods

Throughout the process of gaining a better understanding and improving the satisfaction level towards both face-to-face counselling and e-counselling approaches, several contributing factors have come into light. These factors are stigmatization, counsellor's skills and roles, individual needs and convenience, the attitude of the clients themselves, the Covid-19 outbreak and benefits of e-counselling.

Relatedly, the discussion on mental health has long-time been a taboo subject in the Asian community and the negative societal labelling of persons with mental health issues has taken its roots in Malaysia and this would definitely cause students to be much more hesitant to seek help. Chen and Kok (2017) summarized their findings regarding the barriers existing towards school counselling and had found out that the predominant factor preventing school students from getting help was the self- and public stigmatization surrounding the service. Due to stigma, counsellors in a study by Jaladin (2013) felt that their young client sometimes exhibited a lack of acceptance, trust, and confidence towards the counsellors. An example of the common stigmas in Malaysia reported by Jaladin (2013) was the 'mentally-ill' label on people who sought guidance from a therapist. The strong negative emotions that arise from the negative public stigmatization

created shameful and fearful feelings, thus eventually resulting in self-concealment and unwanted self-reliance in order to cope. Self-concealment was the major challenge that deterred university students from getting help from counselling services in a study conducted by Mahfar et al. (2017). A finding also revealed that self-stigma was negatively related to the face-to-face variable, and fortunately, not related to the online variable of the study (Joyce, 2012). Opinions from an Italian licensed psychologist, revealed that e-counselling would help lower client social stigma compared to face-to-face counselling service (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2017).

Talib et al. (2019) mentioned that the clients' satisfaction from a face-to-face counselling session was greatly controlled by a counsellors' positive characteristics and skills. According to a study done by Sakiz and Sarıçalı (2019), the school and university counselling community in Turkey believe that effective counselling services entail adequate skills from experienced and professional counsellors, in order to evaluate and conceptualize the clients' needs, without neglecting an individual's personal and cultural characteristics. Unfortunately, not many counsellors were given opportunities to convert the learnt theory into practice, due to the limited number of case studies, and hence they became counsellors with no real counselling practice (Sakiz & Sarıçalı, 2019). The attitude of highly intelligent and gifted student participants in Abu Bakar's (2015) study also implied the student's lack of trust over the school counsellor's credibility. Alternatively, they would rather

confine their problems to themselves and would only seek help once the situation has deteriorated badly, but even so, school counsellors were not at the top of their priority list of people whom they would want to share the problem with.

From the e-counsellors' perspectives in a study by Finn and Barak (2010), the majority believed that both face-to-face counselling and e-counselling are on par in terms of effectiveness, although they established that both methods seem suitable at covering a different area of problems. While e-counselling is more effective at dealing with social and sensitive issues, face-to-face counselling seems to find its strengths over issues like future career employment, mental health and physical-affiliated trauma (Finn & Barak, 2010; Glasheen et al., 2016). In a study by Parker and Ray (2017), Latino students put emphasis on the importance of joining college and career programs provided by their school counselling unit, as the Latino highly regarded education and career as crucial needs for their children. Therefore, a high level of clients' satisfaction can be achieved if the client is guided to the most suitable approach for their problems.

Scott et al. (2009) believed that there was a positive inter-related connection between the clients' attitudes towards mental health service and satisfaction. Clients who approach counselling services with a positive mindset are more likely to complete their designated programs compared to clients who are being forced. Besides being disinterested in the school counselling's

curriculum, students are in doubt about the purpose behind school counselling and deemed the counselling programs to be a boring one-sided interaction (Abu Bakar, 2015). Findings from Mahfar et al. (2017) also illustrated that a low perception level among university students could be influenced by a student's lack of effort themselves. According to Li and Leung (2020), students who have successful experience with counselling before the Covid-19 pandemic will be more willing to attend an online session during the pandemic. Also, in their findings most of the students who engaged in online counselling are associated with emotional distressed and withdrawal symptoms.

According to Glasheen et al. (2016), young people are more likely to use online counselling if it is provided in their school, while there is insignificant difference between gender in intention of using online counselling. Anonymous online counselling creates the sense of safety for students to discuss a topic that is sensitive or on sexuality with the counsellor. The availability of this form of counselling will therefore encourage more students to come forward and seek help, while providing more comfort (Glasheen et al., 2017). A report by Dowling and Rickwood (2015), which compared young people who did and did not take part in online counselling, stated that online counselling did not affect the psychological distress and life satisfaction of the client, but would increase the level of hope in young people (Dowling & Rickwood, 2015).

Coming back to the current situation, the lockdown has caused many individuals to be confined in their own homes. According to Stephen (2020), due to the temporary discontinuation of the face-to-face counselling session during the outbreak, e-counselling has become a necessary tool for the counsellors and practitioners to offer their service to the community. Moreover, e-counselling is able to benefit the community during the outbreak while many individuals seek guidance on deciding their next steps amid the current situation (Stephen, 2020). Furthermore, findings from a study by Chan et al. (2007), found that e-health promoting health and protection is important during the pandemic, and is helpful in reducing anxiety and improving knowledge on the main transitions many had to undergo, while e-counselling is also part of the e-health.

On the other hand, e-counselling holds some benefits that face-to-face counselling does not have. E-counselling is more convenient compared to face-to-face counselling. The flexibility, accessibility and immediate nature of e-counselling are very helpful features for some clients, as e-counselling can be done anytime and anywhere (Lau et al., 2013). Students mentioned that e-counselling makes the process less constrained compared to face-to-face counselling (Fang et al., 2017). This mode of counselling also benefits clients facing difficulties leaving their home (Lau et al., 2013). Besides, e-counselling is a form of asynchronous communication where the counsellor and client does not

interact at the same time such as when using email, WhatsApp or other social-based applications, which might have time-delays during a counselling session. This provides sufficient time for clients to prepare their concerns and issues (Lau et al., 2013), which might lower the level of stress faced by the clients.

OBJECTIVE

To evaluate the suitability of e-counselling during the new norm, the client's satisfaction in using e-counselling and face-to-face counselling needs to be justified. Specifically, the study is aimed to:

1. Identify client's satisfaction level in face-to-face and e-counselling approaches.
2. Identify the differences between each item of the client's satisfaction level between face-to-face and e-counselling approaches.
3. Define the significance of the differences identified in client's satisfaction level between face-to-face and e-counselling approaches.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative experimental approach was chosen for this study to evaluate the dynamics of students' satisfaction on both face-to-face counselling and e-counselling services. Referring to the stringents experimental procedures as conducted by Kalantarkousheh et al. (2012) and Al Horany et al. (2011), the study sample consisted of 60 students aged from 13 to 18 years old in a secondary school in Malaysia. The participants were selected using a random sampling method to allocate between experimental and control groups.

The control group in this study was a group of participants engaged in a face-to-face counselling session when the school reopened during the Covid-19 pandemic, whereas the experimental group consisted of participants opting for the e-counselling approach during the period of time. Google Hangout platform was selected for conducting the e-counselling approach. The Platform is similar to Google classroom where the students had used it for the online class during the pandemic. Counsellors and students would be facing each other in Google Hangout during the counselling session.

From the total participants, 30 students (n= 30) were randomly placed in each group. Profiles of research participants such as gender, race, age, and personality trait were documented. The same counsellor conducting both approaches. This is to control the extraneous factors as suggested by a study conducted by Maryam et al. (2012).

Participants in both groups were given the Client Satisfaction Inventory – Short Form (CSI-SF) by McMurtry & Hudson (2000) in a post-test to gather knowledge about the clients' satisfaction from their counselling experiences. Data analysis was done using descriptive statistical measurements such as mean, standard deviation, and independent t-test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic

Demographic data in Table 1 showed that the female students made up the majority of participants for both the control (face-to-face approach) and experimental (e-counselling approach) groups. There were 22 (73.3%) female and 8 (26.7%) male students in the control group, while there were 27 (90.0%) female and 3 (10.0%) male students in the experimental group. Gender balance could not be controlled in order to adhere to the counselling ethics, randomized sampling procedure as well as the walk-in principle in the study procedure. The data is represented in Table 1.

Clients' Satisfaction Level

Clients' satisfaction level was measured using CSI-SF. As shown in Table 2, percentages of clients satisfaction level were specifically calculated and later categorized into four different levels of mean score range, which are highest (80 to 100%), high (60 to 79%), moderate (40 to 59%), and low (1 to 39%) (McMurtry & Hudson, 2000).

Table 1

Demographic data of research participants

Gender	Group	
	Control (Face-to-Face) n=30	**Experiment (E-Counselling) n=30**
Male	8 (26.7%)	3 (10.0%)
Female	22 (73.3%)	27 (90.0%)

Table 2

Interpretation of clients' satisfaction level mean score

Score (%)	Satisfaction Level	Interpretation
1 to 39	Low	Client is not very satisfied with the service provided
40 to 59	Moderate	Client is less satisfied with the service provided
60 to 79	High	Client is satisfied with the service provided
80 to 100	Highest	Client is very satisfied with the service provided

Out of the 30 respondents involved in the face-to-face counselling session (control group), 6 (20.0%) showed highest satisfaction level, 10 (33.4%) were of high satisfaction, 7 (23.3%) had moderate satisfaction, and the remaining 7 (23.3%) displayed low satisfaction. Meanwhile, in the experimental group, 7 (23.3%) recorded the highest satisfaction, 12 (40.0%) were of high satisfaction, 7 (23.3%) exhibited moderate satisfaction, and the remaining 4 (13.4%) demonstrated low satisfaction towards the e-counselling approach.

From the findings summarized in Table 3, the clients' satisfaction level was slightly higher in the e-counselling group as compared to the face-to-face counselling group. As found in many studies, the major attraction of e-counselling is mainly having the ability to retain autonomy over the counselling session (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Gibson et al., 2016; King et al,

2006; Richards, 2009). Students in this study may feel satisfied with the online sessions conducted due to them having freedom and a greater sense of control over themselves and the counsellor in the online setting as compared to face-to-face counselling setting. The online setting itself is less confrontational, hence as previously mentioned, may lessen students' nervousness and this may make them more genuine over the online sessions (King et al., 2006). In addition to this, students in this study may feel more comfortable to seek assistance from online counsellors in the online setting due to the absence of other students who may be judgmental, therefore reducing a form of stigmatization.

Looking further into the impact of positive attitude towards mental health service, and satisfaction, students may begin online sessions with a positive mind and attitude toward the school's

Table 3

Clients' satisfaction frequency distribution according to their group

Counselling Satisfaction Level	Group	
	Control (Face-to-Face) n=30	Experiment (E-Counselling) n=30
Low	7 (23.3%)	4 (13.4%)
Moderate	7 (23.3%)	7 (23.3%)
High	10 (33.4%)	12 (40.0%)
Highest	6 (20.0%)	7 (23.3%)

counselling service, which may lead to satisfaction (Scott et al., 2009). The efficacy of a counselling session is heavily affected by the proper assignment of issues to its most suitable counselling modality as both online and face-to-face sessions have their respective benefits that can attract students (Finn & Barak, 2010; Glasheen et al., 2016). In this study, students in the e-counselling session may be dealing with issues that can be effectively solved by the online counselling approach, such as family issues, friendship, and other personal matters, therefore resulting in high satisfaction towards the e-counselling method.

Comparatively, the ineffectiveness of face-to-face counselling in handling certain issues that may not be suitable for the approach could be one of the reasons face-to-face clients to feel less satisfied. The slightly low satisfaction towards face-to-face counselling approach could also be attributable to the fact that students participated in this study may already have a biased judgement against, or lack of interest towards the conventional counselling method to begin with (Wong et al., 2018). Additionally, it may be possible that due to the pandemic, clients are uncomfortable to have face-to-face counselling sessions.

The mean differences of clients' satisfaction were analyzed according to the items in CSI-SF by comparing clients' satisfaction mean score of both counselling approaches. The interpretation was done by looking at the satisfaction mean score of each group, and the clients with a higher satisfaction score than their group's

satisfaction mean score were regarded as having a high level of satisfaction. Comparisons of clients' mean satisfaction score and the mean satisfaction score differences of e-counselling and face-to-face counselling methods are tabulated in Table 4.

To sum up from the overall mean differences in Table 4, clients from the e-counselling approach had higher satisfaction score in all the items listed in the CSI-SF as compared to clients of the face-to-face counselling method. The highest positive mean difference was observed on Item 3 and Item 6 with a mean difference of .760 and .560 respectively. The high mean difference between the two counselling approaches in Item 3 indicated that the e-counselling clients believed in the quality of e-counselling service enough for them to recommend it to their acquaintances. Item 6 with the second highest mean difference elicited clients' satisfaction on the unprejudiced characteristics of the service provider as they believed the e-counsellors accepted them for who they were. On the other hand, the only two negative mean differences were spotted on Item 4 (-.070) and Item 5 (-.100). Both Item 4 and Item 5 focused on the competency of counsellors, in which the majority of respondents in both groups believed that the face-to-face counsellors were proficient and their skills were adequate to provide the best possible solution to their current condition.

The data was then analyzed using the independent t-test to determine the statistical differences between both e-counselling

Table 4

Comparison of clients' satisfaction score for e-counselling and face-to-face counselling methods

Item	Approach	Mean	Mean difference
1. Counselor here really care about me	E-counselling	5.670	.370
	Face-to-face	5.300	
2. I am not reluctant to come back here if I need help	E-counselling	5.130	.260
	Face-to-face	4.870	
3. I will recommend the service here to acquaintances	E-counselling	5.730	.760
	Face-to-face	4.970	
4. Counselor here are skillful at their job	E-counselling	5.900	-.070
	Face-to-face	5.970	
5. I get the help I need the most here	E-counselling	5.300	-.100
	Face-to-face	5.400	
6. Counselor here accept me for who I am	E-counselling	6.230	.560
	Face-to-face	5.670	
7. Counselor here understand my real feelings	E-counselling	5.870	.100
	Face-to-face	5.770	
8. I feel that I can communicate and share my problems to the counselor here	E-counselling	5.770	.340
	Face-to-face	5.430	
9. The help that I receive here is much better than I expected	E-counselling	5.600	.400
	Face-to-face	5.200	

and face-to-face counselling methods. The clients' satisfaction mean score towards e-counselling (mean= 51.200; SD= 12.417) was marginally higher than the student satisfaction mean score towards face-to-face counselling (mean= 48.500; SD= 10.400), with mean score difference of 2.700. Although the satisfaction mean score of e-counselling was higher than the satisfaction mean score of face-to-face counselling, the result of the two-tailed t-test in Table 5 revealed no statistical significance difference between the two approaches (t-value= .920; p> 0.05). Thus both counselling methods induced a similar level of satisfaction among the secondary school students.

Table 5

Analysis of independent t test of clients' satisfaction level towards e-counselling and face-to-face counselling

Approach	N	Mean	Mean difference	SD	df	t	sig. p
Face-to-face	30	48.500	2.700	10.400	5.800	.920	.361
E-counselling	30	51.200		12.417			

*p-value <0.05 showed statistical significance

The majority of clients involved in this study was demonstrated to be Malay female students aged between 13 to 15 years old, with the personality trait of introverts. The present study's finding is consistent with a meta-analysis study conducted of over ninety-two past studies by Barak et al. (2008), in which they believed that online counselling offered as much satisfaction as face-to-face counselling as there was no statistical significance observed between the satisfaction level towards both approaches. Looking at another targeted demographics, a study by Zeren (2015) had similar outcomes with this study's findings, whereby majority of the study's participants who were university students, believed that both face-to-face counselling and e-counselling approaches generated a similar level of satisfaction.

These finding however, stand in contrast with a finding by Zainudin & Yusop (2018c) that studied a Malaysian secondary school. It concluded that clients of the e-counselling services perceived a higher level of satisfaction compared to the clients' of the face-to-face counselling. On the other hand, college students in the Rochlen et al. (2004) study that participated in the face-to-face counselling rated their sessions more favorably compared to e-counselling clients.

The similar satisfaction level towards both approaches could be factored by the client's individual interest. Ali et al. (2005) stated that clients' perception towards counselling was shaped by different needs that are unique to an individual. Students seek e-counselling to discuss personal and sensitive concerns while other students prefer face-to-face counselling to obtain advice on career development (Glasheen et al., 2016). A study by Finn and Barak (2010) also noted that while e-counselling was effective to tackle interpersonal and social issues, face-to-face counselling is more suited over issues such as mental health, abuse, and violence. The strength of face-to-face counselling approach would be that the verbal cues from the clients can be used by the counsellors to identify underlying risks, and it can also be utilized to develop the student's communication skills (Glasheen et al., 2017). On the other hand, e-counselling sessions were convenient in terms of time, cost, and also it provides anonymity protection to those who fear being exposed and stigmatized (Glasheen et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2018).

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Both face-to-face counselling method and e-counselling are effective in dealing with certain niche issues and can be used to fill-in the gaps left by each method.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The important role of schools should be to cover a variety of aspects pertaining to the overall well-being and development of students. Although the schools in Malaysia and their priority on academic achievement is oftentimes an inseparable stereotypic situation, the schools should also be a place where students can get assistance for their psychosocial development. Sawyer et al. (2012) highlighted that schools' roles were not only to focus on academic achievement, but were also to provide a social environment that was capable to cultivate peer connections, good emotional health, and mental health. During their time in school, students will begin growing not only physically and socially but also in their emotional and cognitive thinking. This will also apply during a pandemic such as theCovid-19 pandemic. It is the responsibility of educators, counsellors and law-makers to provide a stable platform that can nurture youths in all the four aspects of growth, in order for them to build a worthy future, career and a better quality of life.

E-counselling should be implemented side-by-side with face-to-face counselling in Malaysia's secondary school during this pandemic. However, before this implementation, proper guidelines must be drawn to make sure no additional workload after working hours are incurred for the school counsellors. This is mainly due to that counsellors and therapists are not exempted from the effect of the pandemic. Furthermore, e-counselling can be used as a tool to encourage students who are not seeking help or under quarantine, to come forward. E-counselling helps reduce the risk of exposure to the virus during the counselling session. Counselling services should be made easily accessible and not limited to only face-to-face counselling where the risk of experiencing psychological stress is higher during this pandemic.

Moreover, the school counsellor is a main person to help students to process problems related to emotional, academic, and social. Goal planning is also included in the tasks of a school counsellor. During this pandemic, the quality of the services provided by a school counsellor may differ from the pre-Covid times. E-counselling is leading the service to provide guidance and counselling to students due to the quarantine issues. According to Stephen (2020), the sudden change in the way of providing counselling sessions has put a pressure to the guidance expert. Therefore, the mindset of the counsellors needs to also change to adapt to the new way of working which will help them ensure the quality of their service. In addition, nevertheless, the flexibility to adapt to a new way of working needs training and experience. Counsellors should take this pandemic as an opportunity to update their skills to suit the advancements of modern technology. This proactive and adaptable attitude will help counsellors to reduce their challenges when

using e-counselling for their sessions. When the skill and knowledge of the counsellor has increased, the limitations associated with e-counselling will lessen.

Apart from the counsellors, the Government has an important role in the development and maintenance of the functions of e-counselling. During this pandemic, e-counselling is becoming the main form of counselling and guidance services provided by professional counsellors. To provide good services online, the quality of the internet and the devices available in schools across the country must be upgraded. The increase in the quality of the internet will increase the support of using e-counselling by the counsellors. Improvements to the facilities and online systems for e-counselling might encourage students to use the service. Also, training opportunities and guidelines should be provided by the government to support school counsellors to help them in developing skills for this new technique and reduce their work-related stress during this pandemic. The government can also promote e-counselling more aggressively to the public. This outreach would help to reduce the stigma around the service. When e-counselling becomes common, the stigmatization will reduce within the national community.

Currently, there are insufficient studies surrounding the assessment of the satisfaction levels achieved from face-to-face counselling and e-counselling sessions among school students. This study is important in gaining a better understanding of the effectiveness of counselling and guidance services provided in Malaysia's secondary schools for students during this pandemic, and it can serve as an indicator for future researchers on the effectiveness of both counselling modalities at schools. The rising cases of mental health problems during the pandemic in Malaysia require a periodic comparison to examine the quality of counselling services provided.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

As a conclusion, clients in this study believed that both face-to-face and e-counselling services are equally effective. Such finding was due to little statistical difference observed with the independent t-test. Clients also showed a slightly higher level of satisfaction with the e-counselling method as compared to face-to-face counselling. Therefore, the implications of e-counselling during the pandemic should be applicable to schools. However, both counselling methods should be approached with the highest level of ethical professionalism, as the truth of the issue's clients share in an e-counselling platform is of the same value to the client as the face-to-face counselling. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations that need to be taken into account. Firstly, the small sample size in this study cannot be used as the representation of the student clients' satisfaction in Malaysia. The result of the present study may not be replicated in other secondary schools in Malaysia. Comparison studies on the effectiveness of face-to-face and e-counselling in the future should include a bigger sample size, preferably

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from several different schools and with more diverse groups of clients. Notably, the sample was taken from a school located in an urbanized area where the online facilities fared much better compared to the rural parts of the country. Therefore, the convenient access to the internet may affect the satisfaction level achieved from the e-counselling approach in this school. Moreover, this study lacks information on previous counselling experiences of the clients, which may or may not affect their current level of satisfaction.

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