

UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA



**ONLINE COUNSELLING EXPERIENCE: THE PROVISION OF
SYNCHRONOUS COUNSELLING SESSIONS AMONG COLLEGE
STUDENTS**



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STUDENTS**



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fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
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**Department of Counselling Psychology
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DECLARATION

Student's Declaration

I, Charles Obeng, declare that this thesis, with the exception of quotations and references contained in published works which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my own original works, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere.

Signature:

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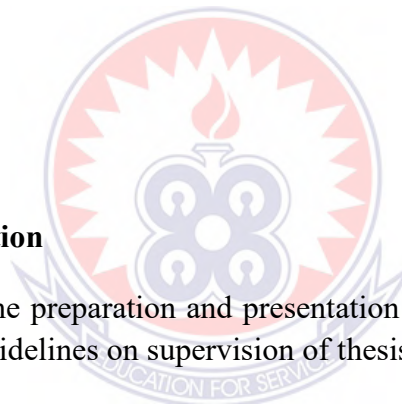
Supervisor's Declaration

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this work was supervised in accordance with the guidelines on supervision of thesis laid down by the University of Education, Winneba.

Prof. Mrs Patricia Mawusi Amos, PhD (Supervisor)

Signature:

Date:



DEDICATION

To my lovely family, Mrs Esther Ansong Obeng, Nhyira Adwoa Akyiaa Obeng and Nana Yaa Akyedie Obeng.



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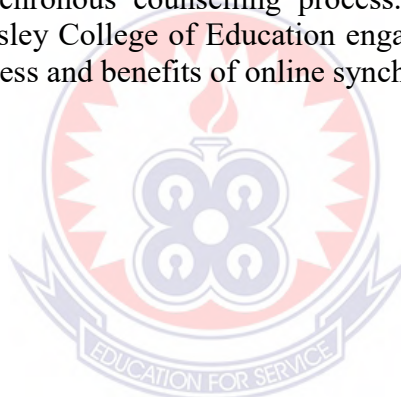
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ABSTRACT

The study explored the experience of students at Wesley College of Education in Ghana regarding online synchronous counselling. This study adopted a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design. Data was gathered from 15 students at Wesley College of Education of Ghana through a semi-structured interview and analysed thematically. The findings indicated that Wesley College of Education students experienced online synchronous counselling, particularly via Zoom as convenient, cost-effective, and time-effective. Further, the study discovered that clients found online synchronous counselling to be as effective as in-person sessions. However, network instability and lack of nonverbal cues were challenges faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling. Empathy, attentive listening and creative communication were opportunities used by counsellors to establish a therapeutic alliance with clients through Zoom. To overcome the challenges and enhance online synchronous counselling in Wesley College of Education, continuous education and awareness-building among clients and counsellors, creating virtual waiting rooms, and pre-testing of gadgets are avenues. The study recommended that counsellors should seek continual professional development and training on Zoom use and integration in the synchronous counselling process. It is also recommended that counselling unit at Wesley College of Education engages in awareness campaigns to highlight the effectiveness and benefits of online synchronous counselling.



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Counselling has been around since the beginning of time, and its main objective has always been to help individuals or groups make wise decisions in life. For centuries, people have understood the value of a beneficial relationship. People come together to talk about their goals, aspirations, and experiences during the trial phase; family members offer guidance; parents offer advice to their children and grandparents; and other family elders share their years of experience (Bedu-Addo, 2019; Chiboola, 2019). People usually ascribe their success and personal growth to the resulting intimacy and connection (Bedi et al., 2012). According to Chiboola (2019) counselling has existed since the dawn of time and is defined as a casual yet intentional interaction and contact between people. Bedu-Addo (2019) asserts that the main goal of counselling is to help a person analyse himself by connecting to his interests, accomplishments, and strengths and adjusting to new choices.

Before the advent of technology, counsellors helped people in need using the traditional face-to-face method. Traditional in-person counselling employs indigenous techniques to assist individuals in a range of troublesome circumstances, as well as those who wish to make a transitional commitment, like puberty or marriage, or who have experienced loss as a result of physical illness, psychosomatic dysfunction, cardiac failure, injury, or accident (Chiboola, 2019). To be more specific, traditional conventional therapy has improved relationship and communication skills, preserved positive interpersonal relationships, and raised self-awareness (Buku & Agordzo, 2021).

By using verbal and nonverbal cues, the traditional method of face-to-face therapy gave many therapists actual insight into their clients' concerns. Furthermore, Buku and Agordzo Edoh-Torgah (2021), claimed that the advantage of face-to-face counselling is that it helps clients and therapists build more solid and constructive therapeutic relationships by using all verbal and non-verbal cues and meeting all the basic conditions of counselling during the determined procedures throughout the consultation.

In recent times, a new kind of counselling has emerged as a result of technological advancements and increased internet accessibility (Awabil & Akosah, 2018). As stated by Amos et al. (2020), the technological explosion of the twenty-first century has opened up new avenues for counselling, enabling clients and therapists to communicate virtually instead of in person. Internet therapy has therefore proven to be very helpful in providing psychological support to clients who live far from their therapist. According to Harris Interactive (2002), more than 100 million people use the internet each month to research health issues, and online counselling is expected to increase over the next 10 years (Norcross & Lambert, 2018).

Due to the novelty and innovation of online counselling services as a therapeutic medium, counsellors are researching ways to create more therapeutic environments in this setting (Rochlen et al., 2004). Before the advent of ICT, which enabled therapists to broaden their counselling approaches, in-person counselling was the only method used to provide services (Kolog et al., 2014). Studies conducted in Ghana like Arthur and Brafi (2013), have shown that students frequently use the internet with mobile phones being the most widely used device for internet access (Frimpong & Vaccari, 2015). According to Darko-Adjei (2019), 93 per cent of Ghanaian students use the Internet, and 45 per cent of them can connect wirelessly

using laptops, cell phones, and other portable devices, including game consoles and mobile devices like phones, iPads, and iPods. People engage in everyday activities wherever they are (Rosen, 2014). Additionally, more people are getting internet access and spending more time online (Caver et al., 2020).

In the modern world, the internet, via social networking sites like Facebook, Zoom, Teleconferencing, WhatsApp, and others, makes it easier to offer counselling services. Online counselling is a type of counselling that makes use of telecommunications technology, including phones, the internet, and teleconferencing, according to (Obob, 2020). According to Tutu-Danquah (2017), online or cyber counselling is the professional counselling practice in which a client and a counsellor, who may be in indifferent or distant locations, communicate with one another via electronic means or digital services and tools. Asynchronous, synchronous, audio, video, and avatar therapy are all becoming more common in online counselling (Pulat, 2022). Email therapy, which includes client-therapist email exchanges, is the predominant form of asynchronous internet therapy (Chester & Glass, 2006; van der Merwe, 2013). Synchronous internet therapy uses chat or instant messaging to communicate in real-time. VoIP and video services like Zoom, WhatsApp, and Skype, as well as audio and video conferencing systems, allow for real-time communication. Online synchronous counselling offers one-on-one, text-based support from a mental health professional in real-time, and is one of the most widely used online counselling techniques (Riedl, 2022).

Online synchronous counselling has a major advantage over other modalities, like email-based asynchronous chat, because it is instantaneous and real-time. According to Dhesi et al. (2022), synchronous counselling is a therapeutic approach in which clients and therapists converse and exchange messages in real

time, reacting right away. The provision of counselling services via the Internet may benefit from the effective communication method of video conferencing. Affum and Attafuah (2022) state that the system consists of a personal computer, a camera, and software designed specifically for video conferences. Many smartphone models and brands have an intuitive video conferencing feature pre-installed. Moreover, you can provide online counselling services through smartphone-compatible apps like Zoom, Teams, Telegram, and WhatsApp.

To replicate in-person interactions, online therapists are using video (Békés & Doorn, 2020). Similar to in-person sessions, video sessions have been shown to promote therapeutic relationships. According to one study, respondents who used video and telephone/audio felt safer and assumed more responsibility for their communication (Dowling & Rickwood, 2013).

Although video conferencing technology has been available to the general public for nearly two decades, its use increased significantly beginning in the spring of 2020, when many individuals and institutions began relying more heavily on digital communication platforms (Plummer et al., 2020). Business, education, healthcare, academia, many private sectors, and even the legal and judicial systems have all used Zoom devices to maintain communication (Toney et al., 2021). Video conferencing allows people and companies to stay in touch so that counsellors and other professionals can continue their work. Travel costs are reduced through video conferencing (Denstadli et al., 2012) and contribute to environmental protection (Schueller et al., 2019). The results of the study show, that students know and use online advising via Zoom as part of their learning modalities, although Kankam and Adinkrah (2023) confirms the absence of online advising systems in the evaluated schools The interest is: How do clients think about synchronous online counselling at

Wesley College of Education in the Ashanti region of Ghana? The aim of the study was therefore to examine how Ghanaian college students feel about synchronous online counselling.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The rise in online counseling access suggests that the availability of synchronous online counselling will continue to increase, and yet little is known about the experiences of College of Education students in this medium. With the rapid advancement of digital technologies and increasing demand for mental health services, online counselling has emerged as a viable alternative to in-person therapy. Synchronous online counselling, where communication between counsellor and client takes place in real-time via platforms such as Zoom, Skype and other video conferencing tools, has gained importance worldwide, especially in the Western world.

In Western countries, the growth and use of online counselling have been widely documented, particularly in the area of synchronous (real-time) counselling. Studies have shown that synchronous online counselling can provide benefits comparable to traditional face-to-face therapy while also improving accessibility and convenience for clients who may face barriers to attending in-person sessions (Dhesi et al., 2022). Simpson (2016) conducted a study to examine experiences with synchronous counselling. Additionally, Zamri and Johari (2021) conducted a study on counselling graduate students' experiences with online counselling sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Tibbs et al. (2022) examined the experiences of online synchronous chat counselling for young people aged 12–25 using the mixed methods system. Moreover, Yurayat and Seechaliao, (2022) conducted a study at

Maharakham University to examine undergraduate students' experiences with online counselling.

Following studies conducted in Africa, the work of Deyzel (2014) aimed to examine clients' experiences of e-counselling at the University of South Africa. Again, Pelekelo-Silishebo, (2018) examined factors influencing the provision of online counselling and advisory services in selected colleges in the Lusaka District. However, it can be inferred that these studies were conducted in geographical settings other than the Ghanaian context. This means that the results may not be the same if the study is repeated in the Ghanaian context.

Studies such as Simpson (2016) and Tibbs et al. (2022) used mixed methods that differed from those used in this study (qualitative studies). While these studies contribute to the understanding of online counselling experiences in the Western world, a knowledge gap remains regarding the impact of the experiences on clients' emotional responses.

In Ghana, despite this growing interest, the use of synchronous online counselling in Ghanaian Colleges of Education remains relatively new and underexplored. Amos et al. (2020) conducted a study about undergraduate students' experiences with online counselling at some universities. Kankam and Adinkrah (2023) conducted a study on the attitude of students of colleges of education towards the use of online information dissemination tools for counselling in Ghana. This study was conducted in a different region from the region in which this study was conducted. It is crucial to study the experiences of Ghanaian college students and gain access to online counselling platforms. This study aims to address the challenge of obtaining empirically validated answers to these questions. Numerous studies have conducted research similar to the one we are examining. While studies exist in

Western and African context, little is known about Ghanaian College of Education students' experiences with synchronous online counseling using Zoom. This study addresses that gap. Nevertheless, the method, sampling techniques and theories are different from this study (Amos et al., 2020; Yurayat & Seechaliao, 2022). Again, Amos et al. (2020) conducted a study on counselling experiences of undergraduate students but used Skype and WhatsApp calls but this study will consider Zoom in the current study. Also, the study of Amos et al. (2020) was done in universities where the students may have different experiences from that of College of Education Students.

In addition, many existing studies are based on theoretical models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), psychodynamic theory and Bordin's theory. These models are useful for understanding the behavioural aspects of technology adoption and fully covering the therapeutic and emotional aspects of counselling. My study integrates the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Rogers' client-centered therapy. TAM will help understand students' acceptance and use of online counselling platforms, while Rogers' client-centred therapy provides a framework for understanding the emotional and relational aspects of the counselling experience. In addition, researchers at Ghana's colleges of education have conducted studies on online counselling. Studies such as Kankam and Adinkrah (2023) have examined counselling-related issues within Colleges of Education in Ghana. For instance, their study involved 411 students from Kibi Presbyterian College of Education (KPCE) and Abetifi Presbyterian College of Education (APCE). However, their research did not specifically explore students' experiences with synchronous online counselling. Additionally, their study employed a quantitative research approach for data collection and analysis. In contrast, the present study adopts a qualitative research

approach in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students who have participated in synchronous online counselling sessions. It appears that there is a lack of data on clients' experiences and emotional responses to synchronous online counselling in Ghanaian colleges of education using qualitative method. Based on this, the study aimed to examine the online counselling experience: providing synchronous counselling sessions to college students. The specific context of this study – the Wesley College of Education in Kumasi – provides a unique opportunity to examine how students experience synchronous online counselling in a Ghanaian educational setting. Wesley College is located in a region where technological infrastructure is still developing and Internet access may be inconsistent. These factors, combined with cultural attitudes toward mental health, make it an important site for studying how to effectively implement online counselling in Ghana. The limited research on the experiences of online counselling in Ghanaian Colleges of Education, particularly in synchronous formats, and the challenges faced by students in this context, motivated me to conduct this study to investigate how these services can be optimized in order to meet their needs.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of students of the Colleges of Education in Ghana towards online synchronous counselling.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to explore;

1. college students' perception of the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling compared to in-person counselling focusing on emotional responses.

2. the opportunities that facilitate the establishment of trust and therapeutic alliance between clients and counsellors during online synchronous counselling sessions.
3. the challenges in establishing trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling.
4. the avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing the proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling.

1.5 Research Questions

The following questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. How do college students perceive the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling compared to in-person counselling focusing on emotional responses?
2. What opportunities exist for clients to establish trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling?
3. What are the challenges faced by clients in establishing trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling?
4. What are the avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The first thing the findings would show is how familiar the students were with the College of Education's online counselling. It would be possible for counselling units and other interested parties to concentrate on educating students about the value of the service and boosting utilization if they were aware of how client felt and their emotional responses to synchronous online counselling. Second, among the different

counselling departments on the campuses of colleges of education, the study's findings will increase understanding of the various experiences that college students have towards synchronous online counselling. This will provide college administrators and counsellors with the opportunity to address the issues that have dogged college counselling and led students to the unique challenges and opportunities faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling.

As a result, college administrators and the Ministry of Education would use a range of techniques, such as workshops, seminars, and symposia, to inform college of education counsellors about clients' experiences with synchronous online counselling and alleviate clients' worries. Other academics will also use the study's findings as their primary source of material for further research on the topic.

1.7 Delimitation of the Study

In terms of content, the study was delimited to the experiences of the Wesley College of Education students and the focus was on synchronous online counselling. The experiences of synchronous online counselling were explored through interviews. Geographically, the study was delimited to Wesley College of Education in the Ashanti Region.

1.8 Definition of Terms

Online Counselling: This refers to the provision of professional psychology support and guidance through internet-based platforms rather than face-to-face interaction.

Synchronous Communication: This is a real-time counselling interaction between a counselor and a client using digital platforms such as Zoom.

Asynchronous Communication: This communication is not in real-time and therefore involves participants responding to each other online when they have time.

Emotional Experience: This refers to the feelings and affective responses expressed by clients during and after their online counselling sessions.

Colleges of Education: Tertiary teacher-training institutions in Ghana responsible for preparing pre-tertiary teachers.

Lived experiences: These are clients' first-hand accounts and personal interpretations of participating in synchronous online counselling.

1.9 Organization of the Study

The study covers five chapters. Chapter one presents the introduction which discusses the following subthemes: Background to the study, theoretical framework, statement of the problem, purpose of the study and research objectives. Moreover, it presents guiding questions, the significance of the study, delimitations, limitations and definition of terms. Chapter Two presents the literature review of the study. Chapter Three deals with the research methodology adopted. It discusses the research paradigm, research approach, research design, study area, population, sample, sampling technique and data collection instrument. It further presents the trustworthiness of the data collection instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis and ethical considerations. Chapter Four presented the results of the study. Chapter Five presents the summary, conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents an empirical review of related literature to the topic. The chapter accounts for and discusses literature on the therapeutic alliance, the therapeutic process in online counselling and the therapeutic presence in online counselling. It also presents on the challenges of establishing a therapeutic alliance in synchronous counselling, the opportunities for establishing a therapeutic alliance in synchronous counselling and avenues for overcoming the challenges of online synchronous counselling.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Person-Centred Theory by Carl Rogers, Ajzens and Fishbein's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Technology Acceptance Model by Davis.

1.2.1 Person-Centred Theory by Carl Rogers

Rogers hypothesised from his psychotherapy experience that people can self-knowledge and self-heal and that a facilitative environment can change and grow personalities (Rogers, 1957). Rogers believes that people and environments promote human growth and development, while others hinder it. Innate self-directive processes enhance self-differentiation, self-regulation, self-understanding, and acceptance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Rogers' "actualising tendency" explained the organism's desire to maximise innate potential (Bozarth & Brodley, 1991; Goldstein, 1940; Rogers, 1957). The therapeutic relationship often determines psychotherapy success (Ahn & Wampold, 2001). Rogers' essential conditions help therapists succeed regardless of orientation. Carl Rogers' person-centred theory helps people with personal and life

issues (Rogers, 1980). Rogers introduced psychotherapy for troubled children in 1939 and later expanded to couples, families, and groups. Over his career, Rogers applied client-centred principles to education, marriage, group interactions, personal power, and conflict resolution (Rogers, 1972).

Cherry (2022) identifies three person-centred therapy traits:

1. Unconditional positive regard is crucial for person-centred therapy. Therapists must accept and support clients, regardless of their situation.
2. Congruence: A person-centred therapist should be comfortable discussing emotions. This will help the therapist and client build a healthy, open relationship, model effective communication, and accept vulnerability.
3. Empathetic Understanding: Therapists consider clients' feelings and thoughts during sessions. They attempt to understand and monitor your point of view. Clients feel understood and connected to their therapist. The client may gain new insights by focusing on inner thoughts, perceptions, and emotions.

Empathy is essential for a person-centred therapist to connect with the client and reflect their feelings. This helps clients understand themselves. This theory states that personality development issues arise when parents, teachers, and peers condition our values rather than accept us unconditionally (Ruto et al., 2017). They will only appreciate us if we meet their standards. Humans want respect, so we try to meet it, even if it means denying ourselves self-actualisation and unconditional love. We distort and reject reality, creating a value-based self-image that justifies our mistakes as counsellors. Therapists must show unconditional positive regard, empathy, and honesty. Such counsellors help clients disclose their experiences, self-actualize, question and reject worth criteria, and achieve unconditional acceptance and respect.

In person-centred counselling, the counsellor welcomes the client regardless of his views, feelings, and behaviour. The counsellor demonstrates respect and empathy through their words and actions. The counsellor considers the client's intrapersonal and experiential domains. After counselling, the client investigates himself and reveals denied emotions, attitudes, and events. Self-reorganisation creates a more authentic person without consequences, disturbed emotions, or disordered behaviour (Ruto et al., 2017). Client can receive online counselling at their convenience. The process prioritises student well-being and resource accessibility. In this study, service providers or counsellors don't know client's identities because everything is conceptualised except appointments and pseudocodes, or IDs. If students believe they will share their secrets online without their consent, they are more likely to use the counselling platform. Applying this theory to online synchronous counselling, clients can receive counselling services without being physically present at their convenience. This puts the welfare and contentment of the client first, and the process centres on their easily accessible services.

1.2.2 Ajzens and Fishbein's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour was developed as an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action proposed by Fishbein and Ajzen. While the theory of reasoned action posits that behaviour is determined by behavioural intentions shaped by attitudes and subjective norms, the Theory of Planned Behaviour introduced perceived behavioural control to account for situations where individuals may not have complete control over their actions. According to Arthur (2020), this addition enhances the model's predictive power across various behavioural contexts. In 1980, Fishbein and Ajzen developed the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to predict an individual's behaviour at a specific time and place. The theory explained all self-

controllable behaviours. The main component of this paradigm is behavioural intent, which is influenced by the probability that the behaviour will achieve the desired outcome and the subjective assessment of its risks and benefits. Every endeavour, including online counselling, requires psychological preparation. Intentions are the best predictors of all behaviour, even when it is rare, difficult to monitor, or delayed (Krueger Jr et al., 2000). Counselling takes more than a day to plan and execute. Fishbein and Ajzen, (1977) developed the 'Theory of Planned Behavior' to compare people's intentions to a behaviour like counselling. Ajzen (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) elucidates the formation of behavioural intentions and their likelihood of manifestation.

Some behavioural ideas include pursuing a career based on performance. It's believed intentions drive behaviour. Therefore, the greater the desire for a behaviour, the higher the likelihood of its execution. Ajzen (1991) lists three key factors for changing intentions and behaviour. Individuals hold personal beliefs and attitudes regarding the behaviour they engage in. Online counselling may appeal to students due to its time-saving, cost-saving, and freedom of expression benefits. Second, the subjective norm is social. This factor refers to social pressure from the environment on the individual to perform or not perform behaviour, such as discouraged people who were unable to resolve their issues through online counselling, Internet fraud victims, and online privacy invaders. The third intention-influencing factor is behavioural. This distinguishes the model from a behavioural model. To measure online counselling intentions, Ajzen (1991) tested the TPB on various human behaviours. Autio et al. (2001) discussed how Ajzen's TPB clarified the advertising campaign structure. Knowledge alone won't change a recipient's behaviour; focus on changing their attitudes and perceptions of a product. People have also used Ajzen's

(1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to explain voting, problem drinking, and weight loss (Krueger Jr et al., 2000). Autio et al. (1997, p. 3) say "Prior research has satisfactorily tested the hypothesis of planned behaviour." Intentions account for 30% of behaviour variation, while attitudes account for 50% of intention variation. According to Autio et al. (1997, p. 3), intentions have a greater impact on the ultimate behaviour the more regulated it can be.

This study is based on planned behaviour because it describes how clients will use an activity. The idea helps the current research understand client's ultimate motivation for online counselling. The hypothesis suggests that an individual's attitude towards online counselling affects their intent and decision to use it. School and counselling services use the well-validated Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) decision-making paradigm. According to the TPB, attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control influence behavior; students may use online counselling services depending on their control variables. Students will use online counselling services, and vice versa if they believe it will relieve them of their counselling duties. Students may use online counselling services if they believe their peers do so, and vice versa. The availability of an online counselling service at any time and place, without interfering with their busy schedules, also influences student use. Online counselling effectiveness depends on students' views, social influence, and personal beliefs.

The theory of planned behaviour relates to the current study since it describes how an individual will ultimately use an activity. The theory supports the current investigation by elucidating the ultimate motivation behind individuals' enrolment in online counselling services. Their attitude toward online counselling has a general impact on their intentions to use the service and ultimately do so, according to the

theory. Because the theory explains the goal of determining students' attitudes toward online counselling and ultimately has predictive value on their use of the service, it was chosen. As a result, the theory was deemed appropriate for the research.

1.2.3 Technology Acceptance Model by Davis

The Theory of Reason and Action (TRA) inspired the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which characterizes an individual's adoption of information technology (IT). Technology Acceptance Model was derived from the popular social psychology theory of Theory of Reason and Action which explains a person's conduct through their intentions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977). Venkatesh et al. (2003) widely recognise TAM as a solid, effective, and concise model for forecasting user acceptance. TAM aims to investigate why users' attitudes and beliefs affect their adoption or rejection of technology. TAM seeks to explain the factors that influence the adoption and use of technology. Davis (1989) developed the TAM, which is based on the TRA, to understand the causal linkages between users' internal beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, as well as to anticipate and explain the acceptance of computer technology (Davis et al., 1989). Both the user's mood and their perception of usefulness have an impact on their behavioural purpose. It is believed that two essential beliefs, perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU), have a significant impact on the user's attitude and that these beliefs act as mediators between environmental variables and intention to use. According to TAM, PU and PEOU determine an individual's behavioural intention to utilize a system. Davis et al. (1989) demonstrated that attitude does not significantly influence the link between belief and intention. In 2000, Venkatesh and Davis introduced TAM2, which covers the theoretical concepts of social influence and cognitive instrumental processes. The

researchers discovered that these extra components have a direct impact on the adoption and utilisation of "information technology" (IT) in the workplace.

Initially, researchers developed TAM to explain computer usage behaviour (Rauniar et al., 2014). A variety of social media sites have existed since the late 2000s, some of which continue to exist and enjoy stratospheric development in terms of user numbers, while others have failed and shuttered. Their poor services contributed to the collapse of several of these social platforms. According to Davis et al. (1989), the significance of PEOU reflects the perceived ease of comprehension, learning, and operation of an invention. The perceived usefulness of IT indicates how much users believe that using some kind of system improves their task achievement ability, and perceived ease of use indicates how much they believe that a specific system is simple to use. When it comes to online counselling, the client may evaluate the site based on how easy it is to use and how effective it is in helping them achieve their goal.

2.1 Therapeutic Alliance

The therapeutic alliance is a relationship between a counsellor and a client that is characterised by trust, cooperation, and the sharing of emotions and attitudes (Norcross & Wampold, 2011). To understand the concerns of clients, counsellors must exhibit respect, engage in active listening, demonstrate authenticity, maintain positive regard, and display empathy. The establishment of a strong bond with clients requires these qualities, as indicated by (Kelley et al., 2014). Building trust is dependent on the first interactions between counsellors and clients, which may involve assessments or initial calls. During these interactions, counsellors must show openness and a strong dedication to fostering a collaborative relationship with their clients (Plexico et al., 2010).

Participating in collaborative decision-making and goal-setting is crucial in forming a therapeutic alliance. The process of making well-informed decisions regarding therapeutic interventions necessitates a collaborative effort between clinicians and clients (Queins, 2024). This supports the idea of client autonomy and the right to actively participate in decision-making to customise interventions according to their specific needs, values, and preferences (Plexico et al., 2010). Moreover, it guarantees that clients possess a comprehensive comprehension of their conditions, the available treatment options, and the rationale behind the decisions made for their treatment. These foster increased client motivation, overall wellness, and compliance with the treatment plan (Shay and Lafata, 2013). The literature has extensively studied therapeutic alliances, highlighting their crucial role in influencing treatment outcomes in various therapeutic settings and populations (Baier et al., 2020; Graßmann et al., 2020; Kadur et al., 2020). Martin et al. (2000) conducted a meta-analysis to investigate the therapeutic alliance, which they defined as a multifaceted concept that includes rapport, trust, and shared objectives. The meta-analysis of over one hundred studies revealed a consistent correlation between positive treatment outcomes and a strong therapeutic alliance.

According to Queins (2024), the quality of the therapeutic alliance is a crucial factor in determining the success of treatment, regardless of the type of therapy or the setting. The studies conducted by Norcross and Lambert (2018) and Norcross and Wampold (2011) corroborate this conclusion. Norcross and Lambert (2018) investigated the significance of therapeutic alliances and the long-term influence of a favourable therapeutic relationship on treatment adherence, client contentment, and overall therapeutic efficacy. In addition, they analysed the shared elements that contribute to effective therapy.

2.2. Therapeutic Process in Online Counselling

The concept of working alliances or therapeutic relationships stems from psychoanalytic therapy and is widely utilized in various forms of treatment (Bordin, 1979). A successful therapeutic relationship includes the establishment of alliances, objectives, empathy, client feedback, participation, and positive esteem (Norcross & Wampold, 2011). In addition to these factors, the therapists' interpersonal behaviours play a vital role in determining the client's level of satisfaction with the therapy (Moors & Zech, 2017). Hence, comprehending the therapeutic alliance in online counselling is crucial as it involves prioritizing the client's counselling goals and preferences through the establishment of strong rapport and trust (Agathokleous & Taiwo, 2022). There is uncertainty and inquiry over the efficacy of online therapies and whether the level of rapport between clients and therapists may be equivalent to that in in-person sessions (Agathokleous & Taiwo, 2022).

The investigation of the therapeutic alliance in online counselling is a subject of debate. This argument arises from research suggesting that the establishment of a therapeutic connection may be achieved through Internet counselling. Conversely, some argue that the relationship is non-relational. However, it lacks some components, such as a more structured and informative procedure, the inability to perceive nonverbal signals, challenges with physical closeness, and overall discontentment with the assistance process.

A meta-analysis of 23 research indicated that online counselling is comparable to face-to-face counselling in terms of creating a therapeutic relationship between clients and psychological counsellors, despite the limitations of internet quality for both parties (Simpson & Reid, 2014). In contrast to review studies, qualitative research discovered that empathy, establishing rapport, and providing an atmosphere

for interpersonal connections were seen as obstacles to developing a therapeutic relationship among online practitioners (Knott et al., 2020).

The study participants expressed that they experience less empathy during online counselling due to the physical separation from the client. Building rapport in online counselling might be difficult owing to the absence of facial expressions and interruptions caused by internet connection freezes. Furthermore, internet counselling fails to capture both nonverbal and vocal clues. This problem leads to a decline in the significance of interpersonal relationships (Knott et al., 2020).

In a recent study, Trabucco et al. (2021) investigated the comprehension of mental health professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists) on the establishment of the therapeutic alliance in online counselling. The inquiry pertained to the assessment of professionals' subjective experiences when transitioning from in-person settings to online environments. 57% of the providers indicated that their clients valued this procedure because it fostered compassion and acceptance in their relationship, even in periods of social isolation when they were physically separated. However, a significant 43.9% of professionals indicated that they greatly prioritize their clients' preferences for returning to in-person interactions. Significantly, 42.5% of the professionals reported that clients exhibited a sense of emotional distance and isolation in their relationships, particularly if they resided with others in their household (Trabucco et al., 2021).

According to Trabucco et al. (2021), providers generally felt reassured by the ongoing therapeutic relationship in online counselling and appreciated the opportunity to be more involved in their clients' home lives. However, they did encounter difficulties in communication, concentration, and accurately identifying clients' clinical conditions. Zeren (2017) conducted qualitative research in Turkish literature

to investigate the perspectives of counsellor candidates on creating a therapeutic connection. Out of the eleven psychological counsellors, it was discovered that nine of them characterized the goal-setting process as a collaborative endeavour between the client and the counsellor. However, two of them had difficulties with this aspect. Nine goals were created and completed during online counselling, about goal attainment.

Nevertheless, a study conducted by Zeren (2017) found that three participants encountered obstacles in achieving their objectives, two individuals discontinued their participation, and two clients saw a shift in their goals throughout the counselling process. Psychological counsellors were also queried on the resolution of clients' issues during online assistance. According to Zeren (2017), a study revealed that 8 out of 11 psychological counsellors encountered difficulties in comprehending their clients' concerns while attempting to resolve them. While many aspects of the therapeutic connection were attainable, the counsellor candidates may perceive other aspects as difficult. A notable distinction exists in the literature on three modes of communication: Face-to-face, videoconferencing, and telephone. It was discovered that therapists expressed a predominant level of satisfaction with face-to-face services (Zentner et al., 2022).

Furthermore, a study comparing the level of satisfaction in relationships between face-to-face interactions and video conferencing found that the average satisfaction level in video conferencing was significantly lower than in face-to-face interactions. This suggests that technology hurts the ability to understand, convey warmth, and exhibit empathy (Rees & Stone, 2005). Leibert & Archer Jr. (2006) researched the client's perspective of the therapy interaction. The clients' working alliance had a substantial impact on their happiness with obtaining online assistance.

Nevertheless, those who were provided with in-person assistance exhibited higher levels of satisfaction with the working partnership compared to those who got online counselling. Therefore, these findings suggest that in-person counselling and direct engagement offer distinct communication advantages, and individuals are more used to them.

Furthermore, the literature presented divergent findings in several investigations. A qualitative study conducted by Zeren (2015) revealed that client satisfaction with online therapy closely resembled that of face-to-face counselling. Furthermore, a further study conducted by Zeren (2017) demonstrates that customers expressed significant levels of satisfaction with online therapy. The establishment of the therapeutic relationship between psychological counsellors and clients in online counselling is accomplished by the attainment of goals, the assignment of tasks, and the development of a bond (Zeren, 2017). In addition, a study using a mixed-method approach examined the processes before and after therapeutic interventions in both face-to-face and online formats.

There were no notable disparities in the therapeutic relationship before the implementation of the intervention. After the resolution of the intervention, it was discovered that there were notable disparities in the therapeutic alliance between face-to-face and online counselling environments. Face-to-face counselling exhibits a substantially superior formation of therapeutic alliance among clients (Werbart et al., 2023). Therefore, the question of whether a firmly established therapeutic alliance is achievable in online counselling is a subject of much debate in the research, due to varying outcomes. Additionally, the feasibility of online counselling can be influenced by a range of elements, including technological and technical prerequisites

and advancements, the ability to effectively transfer the therapist's capabilities to the online environment, and the specific sort of online counselling being considered.

2.3 Therapeutic Presence in Online Counselling

Cultivating a therapeutic presence during online sessions may enhance the delivery of online counselling services (Rathenau et al., 2021). The presence of the counsellor is a crucial element in ensuring the efficacy of the counselling process. According to Pulat (2022), it is characterized as the state of fully and immediately experiencing one's existence on several levels, including the physical, emotional, cerebral, and visceral, while maintaining a grounded and centred posture within oneself.

Additionally, they noted that therapeutic presence centers around the therapist's presence, with the goal of the therapist being fully present and supportive of the clients. Furthermore, it promotes the safety of clients and ensures that they are heard and understood in the therapeutic setting (Pulat, 2022). According to Geller (2013), the initial step in developing empathy is the therapeutic presence, which is necessary for experiencing empathetic understanding. Therapists' presence has been proposed to be linked to the therapeutic connection, and the client's perception of the therapist's presence is a vital component in achieving positive outcomes and facilitating the therapeutic process. The study by Grad (2022), indicates a significant correlation between therapeutic relationships and children who have had interpersonal trauma.

Limited research has been conducted on the therapists' subjective perception of presence during remote therapy sessions. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Geller (2021) released a paper outlining recommendations for effectively maintaining a

therapeutic presence in online counselling sessions, both before and during the sessions. This essay suggested many elements of therapeutic presence in tele-mental health. These factors encompass ensuring safety and security, maintaining congruence with the environment in which the counselling session takes place, adjusting the distance from the screen and optimizing lighting, dressing in a professional manner, and assessing the client's current state. For instance, the extent to which the therapist is engaged and attentive in online counselling is a strong indicator of the quality of the therapeutic relationship formed throughout eight or 12 sessions of cognitive behavioural therapy. Therefore, it was determined that the act of being present is of utmost importance in the formation of connections (Pulat, 2022).

According to a recent study by Rathenau et al. (2021), the perceived qualities related to empathizing, employing quiet, and maintaining information security are important factors in providing therapeutic presence among tele-mental health professionals. Furthermore, research employing interpretive phenomenological analysis demonstrates a correlation between therapists' adherence to their theoretical orientation and their ability to actively listen to their clients (Bernhardt et al., 2021). According to Bernhardt et al. (2021), using a holistic approach to being with the client has a good impact on therapeutic interactions. The presence of therapists may need their undivided attention and concentration. The attention and focus of psychotherapists are adversely impacted by distractors encountered during online therapy sessions (Trabucco et al., 2021). The therapeutic presence is a topic of discussion in both in-person and online therapy. As online counselling continues to advance with time and technology, it becomes increasingly important to have a strong therapeutic presence in online counselling methods. Clients who engage in computer-

based therapy anticipate a comparable rapport to that of traditional face-to-face counselling sessions (Pulat, 2022).

2.4 Experiences and Emotional Responses of Clients on Online Synchronous Counselling

Synchronous online counselling has revolutionised mental health treatment by allowing clients to participate in therapy remotely (Amos et al., 2020). To maximise the effectiveness of counselling, it is important to gain an understanding of how clients experience and respond emotionally to their circumstances. Smith and Gillon (2021) recognized the accessibility and simplicity of synchronous online consultation, which is highly valued by customers. Clients can arrange sessions without travel restrictions, allowing for higher levels of participation and interaction. In addition, being in a familiar environment during therapy sessions could increase well-being and promote deeper engagement with one's experiences (Amos et al., 2020). Cipolletta and Mocellin (2018) highlight the technical barriers that certain communities encounter and that may impact their experiences. To overcome these hurdles and ensure a positive counselling experience and emotional response, it is crucial to provide tailored support.

According to van Kessel et al. (2022), clients often express positive emotional reactions when they see that their online advisors understand and support them. The ability to perceive facial expressions and recognize voice tone plays a crucial role in fostering empathy and building a sense of connection.

According to Rathenau et al. (2021), building strong therapeutic alliances can significantly improve clients' emotional well-being and engagement in treatment. In contrast, some clients may experience anxiety or a sense of detachment during online sessions, particularly when faced with technical interruptions or the absence of

personal cues (Rathenau et al., 2021). To effectively manage negative emotional reactions, it is important to address these issues quickly and build a positive relationship using various methods.

2.5 Experiences of Online Synchronous Counselling among College Students as Compared to In-person Counselling

Online consultation methods have opened up new channels for contacting customers due to rapid technological advances (Armstrong, 2022). Synchronous counselling may be a more convenient option for students who live off campus, have inflexible work schedules, or do not wish to participate in in-person psychotherapy due to social stigma. Researchers have conducted numerous studies to compare the effectiveness of online counselling with traditional counselling. Novella et al. (2022) used brief, solution-focused therapy to treat college students with mild to moderate anxiety. Their results showed that synchronous video counselling produced comparable results to in-person therapy. However, it is important to note that they did not compare their results to those of a control group. Stubbings et al. (2013) found that there was no significant difference between in-person and videoconference cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in depression, anxiety, stress, quality of life, work alliance, and customer satisfaction.

Viskovich and Pakenham (2020) conducted additional research that found online therapy was more effective at relieving symptoms than waiting on a waiting list for treatment. Suranata et al. (2020) conducted a study comparing the effectiveness of internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) with group cognitive behavioural therapy and a waitlist control condition. The results showed that both the online and face-to-face groups demonstrated greater resilience in terms of their psychological well-being than the control group immediately after treatment and

during the follow-up period. The synchronous treatment carried out via a module completion program with the possibility of synchronous communication with a counsellor was indistinguishable from in-person group treatment.

Meta-analyses by Lin et al. (2021) have shown that synchronous counselling is just as effective as traditional in-person therapy. The positive results of these studies lead us to think about the possible influence of online therapy on the therapist-client relationship, as this can greatly affect the effectiveness of the treatment (Cameron et al., 2018). In a previous study, Reese et al. (2016), examined differences in empathic accuracy and therapeutic connection between videoconferencing, telephone, and face-to-face counselling techniques. The study found no significant differences in empathic accuracy or therapeutic alliance ratings between therapy modalities, suggesting that therapist and client can build as robust a therapeutic relationship through online delivery as traditional delivery. They found that the Telehealth Attitude Questionnaire measures clients' attitudes toward telepsychology as a predictor of therapeutic alliance.

Specifically, positive attitudes toward telepsychology were associated with higher ratings of the therapeutic alliance in video counselling. This means that clients who have negative attitudes towards online counselling may encounter greater challenges when starting therapy via digital platforms. This has implications for both clients beginning therapy exclusively online and for clients transitioning from in-person therapy to online modalities. Despite the comparable effectiveness of online psychotherapy to face-to-face psychotherapy, a significant number of college students“ express skepticism about how it is delivered. According to Bird et al. (2020), students expressed greater dissatisfaction with online methods and

experienced higher levels of self-stigmatization, which refers to a negative view of oneself when seeking help.

2.6 Benefits of Online Synchronous Counselling

Compared to in-person counselling, synchronous counselling offers more flexibility and benefits for students' health, academic performance, and career advancement. Some benefits of online counselling are listed below.

2.6.1 Convenience

The convenience of synchronous counselling benefits clients (Pulat, 2022). Both clients and therapists can use the services 24/7. Non-personal counselling allows customers to circumvent restrictions. Synchronous counselling aims to improve accessibility, resource utilisation and satisfaction. Because life design development is ongoing, tracking student progress requires a systematic approach. Thanks to electronic counselling, clients can access the service around the clock, including on public holidays. This method allows counsellors to speak to students remotely. Synchronous counselling helps students to receive guidance anytime, anywhere (Arthur, 2020). Smartphones, laptops and other devices needed for consultation can be expensive. After acquiring the necessary resources, people can save money on transportation, accommodation, and time management (Pulat, 2022).

This may be because the person giving advice is far from the counselling centre or office. Electronic consultation saves time and money compared to face-to-face appointments, making it an advantageous choice for those in need. Online counselling can help people who live in remote areas, who have physical disabilities or agoraphobia that prevent them from leaving the house, who are moving but want to continue seeing their counsellor, or who have busy schedules or unusual work

arrangements. Online consulting services allow clients to consult counsellors in their field regardless of their location (Sussman, 2004).

2.6.2 Time Management

Time is irreplaceable and cannot be restored. To be successful in your career, you must master time management. With online counselling, the counsellor and client can choose a convenient time to meet (Pulat, 2022). After arranging a meeting appointment, e-counselling gives clients more autonomy and less time for irrelevant topics. This means everyone can concentrate on the main agenda items planned for that point in time.

2.6.3 Reduced client intimidation risk.

Many students view addiction to drugs and illegal substances as a serious problem. Homosexuality is highly stigmatised in Ghana, but legal in many other countries. Public disclosure of personally sensitive information could lead to student suicide due to humiliation (Arthur, 2020). Some people are embarrassed to confide in a therapist because they keep their problems to themselves, even from their loved ones. Online counselling allows clients to speak, express concerns and remain anonymous to counsellors. Several online platforms offer confidential counselling services. Victims of child abuse and those in court proceedings can submit evidence via video link.

According to Arthur (2020), this strategy reduces fears of intimidation. Academic articles recommend online counselling as a cost-effective option for clients. It improves social security and privacy (Arthur, 2020). Customers may feel more emotionally sensitive and comfortable at home. Additionally, people have the opportunity to tell their romantic partners about the treatment. Online therapy can

help counsellors reduce costs. According to Attridge (2004), there are many advantages, including the ability to communicate with colleagues remotely, greater flexibility in scheduling, and serving more customers per day. When employees can work from home, they don't have to rent an office, hire additional staff, or set it up. According to Sussman (2004), careful recording and archiving of meetings can improve supervisory skills and eliminate the need for progress notes. Consultants can benefit from international supervision. Scheduling conflicts are less likely with this arrangement.

Proponents of online therapy argue that clients' rapid access to session transcripts requires a strict ethical framework (Stoll et al., 2020). According to Murphy and Mitchell (1998), online counsellors, found that people prefer to text rather than talk for information. This study examines previous research on the benefits of online counselling. Online counselling is considered highly accessible because it can be used by anyone with an internet connection. Social phobics will also benefit from this event. According to Fenichel et al. (2002), this event will also benefit those who are hesitant to attend therapy (Barnett & Duvall, 2017).

Internet access can motivate people to begin online therapy. Online counselling is popular due to its convenience. Advice is available to customers around the clock. According to Nelson-Jones (2009), the convenience of access at home makes Internet therapy attractive. According to Centore and Milacci (2008), online counselling can increase client safety. This is because clients can consult a counsellor at home. This method allows you to express your feelings better. For security reasons, therapists and patients are separated by anonymity. This attitude can make clients feel more comfortable sharing sensitive thoughts and behaviours and reduce defensiveness, anxiety, and fear.

2.6.4 Eliminating Social stigma

Online counselling can reduce the social stigma surrounding therapy. It allows people who do not want to go to counselling to receive private counselling services (Queins, 2024). Synchronous counselling from home on the computer or telephone offers many options. It can also help the client feel less stigmatised since they don't have to deal with waiting room employees, office staff, or passersby. Online counselling offers privacy, which makes clients feel less judged and encourages them to seek help.

2.7 Challenges of Establishing Therapeutic Alliance in Online Synchronous Counselling

There has been limited investigation of the therapeutic alliance in online synchronous therapy. According to a systematic review by Sucala et al. (2012), out of 840 studies, only 11 specifically addressed the therapeutic relationship in online counselling. Nevertheless, Sucala et al. (2012) and Simpson and Reid (2014) addressed the intricacies of the therapeutic alliance in the context of online-based interventions. Their results suggest that the quality of the therapeutic alliance in online therapy is comparable to the quality of traditional face-to-face environments. This awareness is important as technology is increasingly used in mental health treatments.

Additionally, research by Queins (2024), shows that clients can form strong alliances with counsellors online, leading to favourable treatment outcomes, in contrast to concerns about potential limitations of virtual therapeutic contacts, including a lack of trust. Furthermore, Wind et al. (2020) highlighted the possibility that virtual media can act as a supportive environment for developing and maintaining close therapeutic relationships. Given that many people view the Internet as a safer

environment than offline interactions that could promote therapeutic relationships in online therapy settings, online counselling appears to be a suitable therapy option in the face of therapeutic alliances (Ancis, 2020). They see it as a “safe arena” that could help patients be more honest and open in therapeutic contact. Additionally, a lack of face-to-face contact could reduce feelings of guilt and anxiety (Queins, 2024). As a result, some people may find it easier to participate in online therapy because they perceive it to be less stigmatising than face-to-face therapy (Sucala et al., 2012). Nevertheless, several issues related to therapeutic alliances in online counselling have been examined.

Some articles outline ethical concerns regarding online therapy, including client and therapist privacy and data confidentiality (Stoll et al., 2020). In addition, general technological difficulties, disruptions and communication problems related to technology may occur. Therapists must also know how to use certain online psychological methods, such as behavioural experiments (Buckman et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021).

Additionally, it has become clear that therapists need specialised training, additional communication, and remote working skills to properly utilize online synchronous counselling and build therapeutic alliances (B. Andrews et al., 2023; Buckman et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Stoll et al., 2020). For example, counsellors need to be better informed about the benefits of online counselling to gain confidence and ensure therapeutic quality and relationships (Barker & Barker, 2022). Some voices also claim that online counselling limits the therapeutic process and could negatively impact a therapeutic relationship or make it more difficult to establish, for example, due to a lack of face-to-face interactions, non-verbal signals and technical problems (Cataldo et al., 2021; Sucala et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2021). Video

conferencing may be better than email-based therapy for several reasons. Video conferencing allows clinicians and clients to initially see each other and gain access to a range of visual cues.

Moreover, in this type of counselling, the counsellor and client can hear each other's tonal cues, helping to decipher nonverbal features, particularly those related to affect. O'Reilly et al. (2007) examined whether online video chat consultation "could produce clinical outcomes at least equivalent to those of face-to-face consultation" (p. 836). According to their responses, most of the 495 study participants were satisfied with the service in both groups (254 face-to-face therapy, 241 teletherapy); The clinical results were also the same. After their four-month study, both groups showed significant improvement in functioning (O'Reilly et al., 2007). As long as family members meet in person at least twice a year to improve interaction and strengthen the therapeutic alliance, and all therapy participants are visible on screen, family therapy via Zoom can be just as effective as in-person therapy (Kuulasmaa et al., 2004). Because participants are not visible on the screen, they are likely to feel left out and "drop out of the discussion" (Kuulasmaa et al., 2004, p 128).

One of the biggest problems with synchronous (Zoom) online counselling is that it is less reliable than in-person therapy because an internet connection may not always be available during a scheduled session (Queins, 2024). If a counsellor loses power in their office on a scheduled e-session day, has an unstable connection, or is unable to connect to the Internet, they will be required to cancel the session, thereby depriving clients of treatment. Connection problems and image or sound distortions can be disturbing for both parties and impair the therapeutic process.

According to Kuulasmaa et al. (2004), this treatment approach should only be used when necessary, as these factors make it impossible to replace face-to-face meetings. Still, clients may feel disconnected from a counsellor, even if the technology runs smoothly and the video session is going as planned. Counsellors may also find it difficult to acquire the “relational capital” required for successful treatment (Queins, 2024). In addition, according to Riedl (2022), prolonged use of video conferencing platforms such as Zoom can lead to fatigue among participants. We call this phenomenon Zoom fatigue or Zoom burnout. Zoom fatigue is a state of fatigue experienced by individuals or users while using the Zoom video conferencing application (Nurismawan et al., 2022). Video conferences require more concentration from students and teachers than communication in offline or face-to-face lessons (Riedl, 2022). Nurismawan et al. (2022) explained that fatigue is due to the need to pay attention to non-verbal cues and constantly be aware of what one is doing while using the zoom camera.

2.8 Opportunities for Establishing Therapeutic Alliance in Online Synchronous Counselling

The transition from traditional in-person therapy to synchronous online counselling has opened up numerous possibilities for future counselling (Danilewitz et al., 2020; Kingsley & Henning, 2015; Murphy et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2021). Bhome et al. (2021) and Simpson et al. (2021) report that online counselling increased access to mental health services during the pandemic. Research shows that online counselling increases flexibility for clients and therapists, saves time and money, and makes therapy more accessible (Sturm et al., 2021). Online consultation makes treatment more accessible. Online counselling has expanded access to therapy during societal crises and for clients who cannot leave their homes or live in rural areas

(Bhome et al., 2021). According to Andrews et al. (2023), online counselling is significantly more effective in treating anxiety, depression, and insomnia compared to traditional counselling. Andrews et al. (2010) found that online counselling has the potential to be an effective treatment for PTSD and substance abuse.

Moreover, according to Simpson et al. (2021), online counselling has the potential to improve people's ability to express themselves and their relationship with their therapist. Online counselling is a viable alternative to traditional in-person therapy that is effective across a wide range of populations (Queins, 2024). Implementing new technologies in healthcare offers numerous benefits. First, research has shown that it can reduce expenses for both the counsellor and the client (Dhagarra et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study by Jansen-Kosterink et al. (2019) on a telehealth application found that participants valued the tool's versatility and ability to reduce travel time. In addition, the devices aim to improve the professional's interaction with the customer while reducing the need to consult a professional (Queins, 2024). Implementing new technologies in healthcare offers numerous benefits. First, research has shown that it can reduce expenses for both the counsellor and the client (Dhagarra et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study by Jansen-Kosterink et al. (2019) on a telehealth application found that participants appreciated the tool's versatility and ability to reduce travel time. In addition, the devices aim to improve the professional's interaction with the customer while reducing the need to consult a professional (Queins, 2024). Implementing digital tools in mental health care allows clients to receive counselling without travelling to the office or facing embarrassment due to societal shame (Schueller et al., 2019).

2.9 Avenues of Overcoming Challenges of Online Synchronous Counselling

Services

To address the issue of security in synchronous counselling, it is necessary to promote the use of encryption software among all clients (Queins, 2024). This reduces the risks associated with the transmission and storage of sensitive advice data. However, it is important to recognise that clients may not have the necessary software or expertise to encrypt their synchronous (Zoom) counselling sessions. If appropriate software is missing, we recommend using freely available software from the Internet. The Therapy Online website recognises that certain customers may experience increased stress in obtaining and familiarising themselves with encryption software. These customers are permitted to use the Services without encryption provided they are willing to assume full liability for the dangers of using unencrypted Zoom. They must pay close attention to pitch, intensity, vocabulary selection, and changes in speech patterns (Nurismawan et al., 2022). Zoom consultants must develop comparable compensatory skills. Based on our experience, we have found that close attention to basic counselling skills, when expressed in written form, is extremely successful in establishing and maintaining a therapeutic connection. Clients appreciate the extensive use of empathy, warmth, paraphrasing, interpretation and immediacy.

Additionally, consultants can offer guidance on the most effective learning techniques via Zoom, as recommended by experts (Riedl, 2022). These techniques include positioning the camera in an optimal location, using active facial and body expressions as if engaging in a one-on-one conversation, and arranging the body and environment in a conducive manner (e.g., sitting upright and clear positioning). Notes for each task and minimising distractions and notifications when using Zoom (Nurismawan et al., 2022).

2.10 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter reviewed relevant literature on synchronous online counselling within educational settings. The chapter examined key concepts such as online counselling, therapeutic alliance, emotional experiences, and technology acceptance.

The review was guided by Rogers' Person-Centered Theory, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which provide a framework for understanding both the relational and technological aspects of online counselling. Empirical studies were discussed to highlight the effectiveness, benefits and challenges of online counselling.



CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research methodology. It includes the following subheadings: research paradigm, research approach, research design, study area, population, sample and sampling technique, and data collection instrument. In addition, the trustworthiness of the data collection instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis, and ethical considerations are presented.

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions

The study of research philosophy focuses on the beginnings, fundamental characteristics and continuous growth of knowledge (Bajpai, 2018). This is a viewpoint that addresses the appropriate methods for collecting, processing and using data on a social issue. Positivism and interpretivism are the two predominant schools of thought in the field of research within the scientific tradition. The philosophical approach of interpretivism was adopted in this study. Interpretivists look for meaning in the individual experiences and perspectives of people who actively engage in social interactions (Nelson et al., 2014). The application of this philosophy is appropriate and justified, even though this study examines clients' subjective experiences with synchronous online counselling.

3.2 Research Approach

The study used a qualitative research approach. Creswell and Creswell (2018), defines qualitative research as the investigation of the characteristics of a phenomenon. It is particularly suitable for addressing concerns about the reasons for observations, evaluating treatments with several components, and concentrating on

enhancing interventions. Qualitative research involves studying occurrences in their natural circumstances and interpreting their significance based on the investigated individuals' perspectives. The study used a qualitative research methodology to investigate the online counselling experience, specifically focusing on the provision of synchronous counselling sessions among college students at Wesley College of Education. It is especially beneficial for answering questions about why something is (or is not) noticed, evaluating complex multi-component interventions, and emphasising intervention improvement. This indicates that qualitative research is the study of items in their natural settings, to explain a phenomenon based on the meaning provided by the individuals being studied. The study used a qualitative research approach because it aimed to explore the online counselling experience, specifically focusing on the provision of synchronous counselling sessions among college students at Wesley College of Education.

Similarly, Creswell and Creswell (2018) postulated that the use of a qualitative research approach enables the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of the research problem and the core phenomenon of the study. The use of this research approach enabled me to uncover thoughts and opinions and also delve deep into the problem under investigation. A review of the literature suggested that little is known about the online counselling experience, specifically focusing on the provision of synchronous counselling sessions among college students at Wesley College of Education. Thus, students were, more often than not, generalised to face the same experiences as many other College of Education Students.

At addition, Creswell and Poth (2016) states that the researcher gained a deeper comprehension of the rationales, viewpoints, and experiences of clients who have gone through a phenomenon . In the same vein, Creswell and Creswell, (2018)

proposed that using a qualitative research technique allows researchers to comprehensively grasp the research topic and the central phenomena being studied.

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, there are several evident constraints. Rahman (2016) contends that qualitative research methodologies sometimes neglect contextual sensitivity and instead prioritize meanings and experiences. Once again, the process of analyzing the instances requires a significant amount of time, and the findings can only be applied to the wider population in a very restricted manner (Flick, 2022). Nevertheless, despite these limitations, qualitative research seems to be the superior method to use for this investigation. Qualitative research involves the study of the nature of phenomena which includes their quality and different manifestations, the context in which they appear or the perspectives from which they can be perceived (Ugwu & Eze 2023). This study collects data related to clients' own words and describes their experiences in as much detail as they can provide.

3.3 Research Design

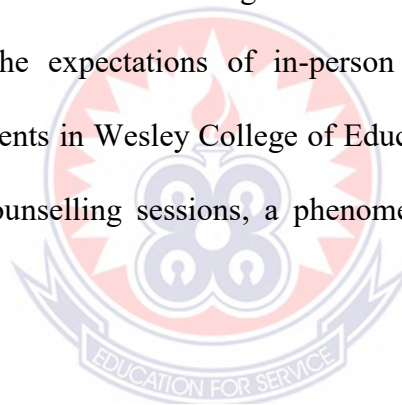
The research used a descriptive phenomenological design to understand the meaning of the online counselling experience, specifically focusing on the provision of synchronous counselling sessions among college students. This research seeks to comprehend the experiences, perspectives, and recommendations of clients about synchronous online counselling. To achieve this objective, the researcher used one of the qualitative research designs which is phenomenology.

According to Gallagher and Zahavi (2020), phenomenological research is centred on providing detailed accounts of individuals' experiences and how they perceive and interpret those experiences. One aspect of the phenomenological

approach is the belief that there exists a fundamental nature to collective experiences (Greening, 2019).

Additionally, Pathak (2017) argued that in a phenomenological investigation, it is important to analyze the experience to identify the fundamental components that are shared across individuals in a certain community. Gallagher and Zahavi (2020) argued that phenomenology seeks to achieve a more profound comprehension of the ordinary encounters of a certain set of individuals.

The researcher considered the phenomenological design for the study because it allowed him to separate his preconceptions from the investigation (Greening, 2019). Given the objective of collecting data on the emotional experiences, the differences between the expectations of in-person counselling and synchronous counselling of the students in Wesley College of Education in Kumasi who have had synchronous online counselling sessions, a phenomenological design was deemed suitable for this study.



3.4 Study Area

The research focused on Wesley College of Education, located in the Kumasi metropolitan between New Tafo and Old Tafo towns of the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly (KMA) in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The Methodist Church founded Wesley College of Education in 1918. The initial site of the facility was Kemp, Aburi in the Eastern Region of Ghana, but it was relocated to its present position in Kumasi in 1924. The primary purpose of the College's establishment was to provide education and training for those pursuing careers as teachers, catechists, and clergy. The institution has undergone several transformations and enhancements since its inception.

During the 2023/2024 academic year, Wesley College of Education had a total of 1621 students. This included 340 first-year students, 346 second-year students, 485 third-year students, and 450 fourth-year students. Students have access to a Counselling Unit that provides academic, emotional, and social counselling services. Students are provided with academic counsellors who assist students encountering challenges in their academics and other academic-related problems. (Wesley College of Education, 2022). Students facing emotional and social challenges, such as difficulty adjusting to college life, feelings of loneliness, and interpersonal conflicts, may access counselling services. As a result of the college's academic schedule, students who are on holiday or participating in an out-programme section seek online counselling. Counsellors use Zoom and sometimes WhatsApp to conduct counselling sessions with students.

3.5 The Population of the Study

The population is the larger group to which a researcher intends to apply and generalize the findings of a study (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2011). The population for this research was students at Wesley College of Education, Kumasi-Ghana.

3.5.1 Target Population

According to Explorable (2012), target population refers to the "entire group of individuals or objects to which researchers are interested in generalising the conclusions" The target population of the study comprised all 1621 students at Wesley College of Education, Kumasi-Ghana (Wesley College of Education, 2022). The target population comprised of 813 Males and 808 Females.

3.5.2 Accessible Population

Explorable (2012) asserts that an accessible population is the section of a population to which the researcher can apply his conclusions. The accessible population of the study also comprised Fifty-five (55) students at Wesley College of Education, Kumasi who have received both in-person counselling and synchronous online counselling. These individuals were used for the study because it was believed that they knew the topic under investigation and for that reason can help gather needed information to address research questions.

3.6 Inclusion Criteria

The study included participants who met specific criteria relevant to the objectives of the research. First, participants had to be students of Wesley College of Education in Kumasi. Second, participants must have previously participated in both face-to-face counselling and 2 sessions of synchronous online counselling sessions through Zoom. Third, participants had to be willing to share their experiences voluntarily and provide informed consent to participate in the study. Finally, participants needed to have access to digital devices and internet connectivity to enable them participate in the Zoom interviews conducted for the study.

3.7 Sample Size

Sampling is a method that involves selecting a sample size for a study. They are a subset of the population intended to arrive at a conclusion or solution for the population (Singh & Chan, 2014). The sample size was selected based on the recommendation of Creswell and Creswell (2018) who believed that the sample size for a phenomenological study should be between 5 and 25 as the focus is on understanding the experiences of individuals rather than generalizing findings to a larger population.

Furthermore, Thorne (2016) believes that in qualitative research, a sample size as small as 5 up to as large as 30 can be use depending on the depth of inquiry, the complexity of the phenomenon and homogeneity of the sample. Fifteen participants were interviewed for this study to ensure balance between depth and diversity of experience while maintaining data for manageable data for thorough analysis. The researcher settled on fifteen participants at the point of data saturation during the interviews and transcription because no new pieces of information or themes came up after the sample size of 15.

3.8 Sampling Technique

A homogenous purposive sampling technique was used for the study. According to Pathak (2017), purposive sampling is often regarded as the most suitable sample criterion for conducting phenomenological studies. Participants who have received both in-person counseling and synchronous online counselling sessions were purposively selected for the study. Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research because it allows the researcher to interview participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, & Poth, 2016). In addition, targeted sampling according to Palinkas et al. (2013) is most commonly used in qualitative studies. This technique allows the researcher to carefully select the sample according to the goals of the study. Each participant contributed unique and insightful information that was useful to the research.

The justification for using the purposive sampling technique was the fact that they had in-depth knowledge about the study and would contribute positively to the interview (Pathak, 2017). In phenomenological research, the individuals or groups that experienced the phenomenon serve as sources of information. For this reason, fifteen (15) participants were selected for the study using a purposive sampling

technique. All participants were interviewed via Zoom. This study selected clients with experiences of in-person counseling and synchronous online counselling at Wesley College of Education.

3.9 Data Collection Instruments

In this study, data collection was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 16 open-ended questions organised into five sections that were designed to elicit in-depth information about participants' experiences in online synchronous counselling. This was considered based on Pathak (2017) who opined that Semi-structured interviews are often used as a strategy by phenomenologists engaged in phenomenological research to get insights into an individual's life worlds. Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to its ability, as described by Creswell and Poth (2016), to facilitate the gathering of data that allows for the description, questioning, assessment, and analysis of personal narratives, as well as biographical and historical information.

In addition, semi-structured interviews have the potential to create a combative atmosphere and provide a platform for narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The questions were developed in collaboration with the research supervisor, in conjunction with key concepts identified within the literature review. The interview guide was in two parts. The first part consists of the demographic information (age, sex, level). The second part was in 4 sections that included questions about experiences differences in the outcome of synchronous counselling from in-person counselling, challenges of synchronous counselling, opportunities and suggested avenues for enhancing synchronous online counselling. The interview guide included questions like

1. How do you perceive the impact of participating in online synchronous counselling on your emotional well-being compared to traditional in-person counselling experiences you may have had?
2. How did you experience the process of building trust and a therapeutic relationship with your counsellor in the online synchronous counselling setting? Were there any unique challenges or advantages in this regard?
3. From your perspective, what could counsellors do to ensure that clients are comfortable and confident in using online platforms for therapy, and to optimize the therapeutic process?
4. What are the avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling?

3.10 Data Collection Procedures

The Department of Counselling Psychology, University of Education, Winneba (UEW) approved this research. The researcher contacted clients who participated in both face-to-face counselling sessions and synchronous online counselling sessions. Participants were then notified via WhatsApp and the interviewer explained to them that he was interested in their experiences with synchronous online therapy. As a rule, the interviewer and respondent agreed on a mutually acceptable time. The interviewer provided clients with a consent form via Google Forms that the information they provided would only be used for research purposes and that personal and confidential information would be protected. Five hours before the interview, the researcher submitted the permission form. The consent form contains the purpose of the study, how the respondent was helped, information about the present research and the researcher's contact information. The form asked

for permission to record audio. Zoom was used for the interviews with all eleven participants.

Participants were given ample opportunity to answer questions during the interview. Because of their availability as students and their schedules, all participants were interviewed in the afternoon. Interviews were conducted with one participant per day. Seven women and eight men were the participants. The researcher met with the participants at their convenience and willingness, and for legitimate student reasons, 15 participants in the study were interviewed by the researcher over 25 days. Zoom recorded two distinct types of data: audio and video. After the session, the researcher removed the video because voice recordings were adequate for the research. The researcher kept all participant information on her computer completely private.

3.11 Methods of Trustworthiness

Validating results entails establishing the veracity or correctness of the findings via techniques such as member checking or triangulation. Qualitative researchers use a variety of terminology to characterize this correctness or believability (authenticity and trustworthiness) (Lincoln et al., 1985). The most common types used by qualitative researchers include dependability, confirmability, member checking, researcher positionality, credibility and transferability.

The researcher took the following steps to enhance the validity and reliability of the study's findings, as well as their ability to guide future research. First, I present a full description of the study environment, including the demographics of the participants. Similarly, considerable efforts were undertaken to describe the results of this investigation. The objective was to give information that might assist other audiences to determine if the study's findings are relevant to their circumstances. By

describing an occurrence in sufficient depth, one may begin to assess the transferability of the findings to other periods, locations, circumstances, and individuals (Lincoln et al., 1985).

Second, I examined the growing data and its interpretation with a well-informed, critical acquaintance that provided consistent feedback on my research from its inception. Her input was crucial in structuring my field activities and data interpretation. In addition, I documented as much data as possible as precisely as possible, and I conducted member checks with participants to ensure that the data recorded truly reflects their accounts. Using an audio recorder allowed me to revisit events Creswell and Poth (2016) and discussions, particularly when I was uncertain. I maintained an audit trail by documenting my actions and the nature of the data acquired so that a third party could verify the veracity of my findings. I collaborated carefully with my supervisor throughout all phases of the study process.

3.11.1 Credibility

According to Herren et al. (2020), the credibility of qualitative research is determined by the veracity of the investigation's findings. The credibility or truth value of the findings is determined by the researcher's ability to establish confidence in them based on the research design, participants, and context. It aims to answer the question "How do you know your results are real and accurate?" To ensure the study's reliability, an interview guide was used throughout the investigation, as well as detailed notes. The researcher also documented the entire research process to provide ample evidence for those who are curious about how the conclusion will be reached. To establish the validity of this study, peer assessment was used in conjunction with note-taking. In this strategy, a master of Philosophy student from the Department of

Counselling was given preliminary findings to review and comment on the raw data. The feedback increased my trust in the study's findings.

3.11.2 Dependability

Dependability corresponds to the reliability of findings in qualitative research (Merriam & Associates as cited in Kusi, 2012). Guba and Lincoln (1985), admit there could be no credibility without dependability in qualitative research. Also, it is concerned with whether we would obtain the same results if we could observe the same thing twice (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). An extensive and detailed evidence of the process in which the research is conducted was documented in order that others can replicate and ascertain the level of dependability. To ensure dependability, interpretive researchers must provide adequate details about their phenomenon of interest and the social context in which it is embedded in order to allow readers to independently authenticate their interpretive inferences (Bhattacharjee, 2012). In this study, dependability was established through the establishment of appropriate enquiry decisions. This included review of interviewer bias to resist early closure and, at the same time, prevent the provision of unreliable data due to boredom on the part of the participants because of prolonged interview sessions. In addition, information from literature assisted the researcher to develop questions that elicit appropriate responses to answer the research questions that are formulated to guide the study. There was a systematic data collection procedure that reached the point of saturation. The extensive documentation of the data (transcriptions of interview narratives), methods, and decisions in the memo are steps in proving the dependability of the data. Thesis supervisors assessed the work to find out whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions were supported by the data.

3.11.3 Confirmability

Trochim and Donnelly (2006) declare confirmability to mean the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. Also, confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings reported in interpretive research can be independently confirmed by others, typically participants. This is similar to the notion of objectivity in functionalistic research. In order to establish confirmability, the researcher, after coding and transcribing the audiotapes, interview questions, and all other relevant information and documents regarding the study, gave it back to the participants to confirm the responses. The researcher made changes where necessary and gave the transcribed data back to the participants again for them to authenticate the inferences derived by the researcher. The researcher then took the final transcribed data from the participants as a true record of what the respondents factually provided.

3.11.4 Member Checking

The use of member checking is a method with which the reliability of the qualitative results can be checked. In this approach, the final report or individual descriptions or themes are returned to participants and those participants are asked to rate whether they believe the descriptions or themes are accurate or not. This does not mean that the raw transcripts will be taken back to check their accuracy; Rather, as a researcher, I have stripped back parts of the polished or semi-polished product, for example, the key findings, the themes, the case analysis, the cultural description, and so on. I also took back parts of the product that were not polished. Additionally, I have accepted the return of any unpolished product components. This approach was helpful to me because it involved conducting a follow-up interview with the study participants and allowing them to comment on the results. In addition, this approach allowed me to receive feedback from participants.

3.11.5 Reflexivity Statement

I became interested in internet counselling in 2020 when I enrolled in a certificate programme at the TUCEE Institute of Counselling and Technology during the COVID-19 pandemic. GPA-accredited TICT (TUCEE Institute of Counselling and Technology) in Ghana offers a counselling certificate programme. I studied Internet counselling after years of telephone therapy. At Wesley College of Education and Akenten Appiah Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED), the researcher participated in online counselling sessions during practicum. Zoom meetings allowed the researcher to interact with many students synchronously. Students use online platforms for socialising, making the internet a viable option for seeking help. Online counselling has garnered student interest, prompting the AAMUSTED Counselling Unit to work with an Information Technology Student to develop software for it. This initiative aims to meet rising counselling demand. My professional experience in the online job sector showed that some students using online services were hesitant to seek face-to-face or telephone counselling. Participants who preferred online therapy over in-person counselling felt less awkward and more private. Internet counselling may have been my choice for counselling psychology training because I wanted to connect my previous career to my current academic pursuit.

Technology gave a sense of security and comfort when exploring a new field by providing a reliable framework. During my preliminary research, I found that counselling psychology trainees, psychotherapists, and possibly some adults were sceptical of online therapy's efficacy. My research topic observations and conversations led to this idea. I've never heard this from online counsellors. At the outset, I had to recognise a certain level of personal investment in online therapy's

efficacy, possibly due to my belief that my online counselling initiatives had helped students who sought help through the platform.

However, I had difficult situations. A client contacted me, saying he needed counselling due to his current situation. I suggested using Zoom or another online platform for our meeting since I couldn't attend the workplace. He opposed in-person counselling. Additionally, he kept his personal information private. At my practicum sites, counsellors doubted the identities of the people they interacted with. As I began my research, I realised how important it was to suspend my assumptions about students' online counselling propensity. Understand that these assumptions may not apply outside of the group with whom I have direct contact. I must also overcome my distrust of customers and fear of malicious phone calls. Despite my initial lack of knowledge, my practicum interactions with students led to a positive attitude towards online counselling and the possibility of a strong therapeutic partnership.

Therefore, caution was needed when conducting the research project to reduce subjective bias. This was solved by recording personal thoughts and activities in a study notebook. This experience helped me understand my decision-making factors. To illustrate, I've listed my literature review paper selection criteria. This was done to ensure that all relevant literature was considered fairly and objectively, including studies that questioned the therapeutic alliance's online efficacy. Since researching internet-based therapy's efficacy, my interest has waned. Since starting my counselling psychology studies in October 2020, I have been a non-practitioner, making online counselling impossible. My perspective has changed due to my extensive face-to-face counselling experience. I am now more open to other perspectives on online therapy and less enthusiastic about promoting its benefits.

3.12 Ethical Consideration

3.12.1 Voluntary Participation

The researcher is aware of the ethical issues that should influence all aspects of the research process. In the research field, the concept of voluntary participation is very important as it assures potential participants that their participation is optional and that they can withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any negative consequences (Dixon et al., 2016). Participants were made aware that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, each participant received an information sheet that further explained the overall goal of the study. This ensured that participants were aware that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any time if they wished.

3.12.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

The ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity place great emphasis on the need to protect the identity of participants. Anonymity is achieved in a survey when neither the researcher nor the respondents can associate a particular participant's answer with that participant (Babbie, 2004). The researcher assured participants in this study that their identities would remain anonymous and emphasized that only the research leader would have access to the data they collected. Because the interviews were recorded, anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms in the final report of the study to conceal participants' names.

3.13 Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analysed using thematic analysis to determine overarching themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a theoretically

flexible approach which entails reading a body of information and identifying, analysing, and recording emergent themes. This method involves six stages; however, these stages are not linear, and one can move between phases as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Initially, all interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Then the researcher began the six stages, which involve familiarisation with the data, coding (i.e., creating a short phrase that captures what is important in bits of data), generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the results section. In this first level of analysis, I completed an initial coding using the axial coding method.

Next, the researcher engaged with the data on a deeper level by assigning codes or short phrases to capture the meaningful content in the data, keeping in mind the research questions.

Thirdly, the researcher organised the themes. In addition, the researcher looked for repetitions, similarities, and differences in the data to help refine it. Moreover, the researcher refined and defined the themes for the analysis.

In the final phase, the researcher produced thematic definitions which captured each theme's key ideas. The researcher then produced the written report, which involved selecting compelling quotes from participant interviews that illustrated each theme, as well as connecting the themes to the literature review and research questions used in the findings and discussion section of Chapter Four of the study.

3.13 Summary of the Chapter

In summary, this chapter extensively talked about how the study was conducted. Thus how was data collected in the field, analysed and interpreted. It

presented the researcher's philosophical assumptions, research approach, research design, population, sample and sampling techniques, instruments, reflexivity, study area, source of information, data authentication and trustworthiness, and ethical issues of the study.



CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the study. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of students of the Colleges of Education in Ghana towards online synchronous counselling. In this chapter, the researcher presents the data gathered qualitatively. Data were gathered to answer four research questions:

1. How do college students perceive the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling compared to in-person counselling in terms of emotional responses?
2. What opportunities exist for clients to establish trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling?
3. What are the challenges faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling?
4. What are the avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling?

In answering these research questions, the responses were coded into themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants' responses based on the variables delimited to the study and 13 major themes emerged based on the thematic analysis of the data. These themes were described with supporting quotes from the participants. The themes that came out were presented and discussed as follows;

4.1 Bio Data Results

Out of the 15 individuals interviewed, their ages ranged from 20 and 25 years old. Specifically, four individuals were 20 years old, five were 21, four were 23, and

two were 25 years old. Regarding the academic level, two were in level 100, four were in level 200, two individuals were in level 300 and seven were in level 400. The outcome indicates that the study involved youthful and experienced students with some level of education. As such, participants were well acquainted with both in-person counselling and online synchronous counselling experiences and hence provided detailed information on their experiences with synchronous online counselling in the Wesley College of Education in Kumasi of Old Tafo Municipality of the Ashanti Region of Ghana.

4.2 Theme one: Effectiveness of online synchronous counselling compared to in-person counselling in terms of emotional responses

The main purpose of the research question was to explore the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling compared to in-person counselling in terms of emotional response. The following themes were emerged from the interviews: a) positive emotional response, b) negative emotional response and c) initial skepticism and surprising outcomes d) comparison with in-person counselling. The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed how effective online synchronous counselling and emotionally response to online synchronous counselling were.

4.2.1 Positive Emotional Responses

Comments from some of the participants indicated that clients found online synchronous counselling is highly validated, convenient, with benefits including ease of access, time-saving, and the elimination of travel. Sub-themes under this sub-theme are secure, convenience and sense of belonging.

4.2.1.1 Security and Respect

Some participants find synchronous online counselling as secure. Participants perceived synchronous online counselling as secure and respectful. Their responses indicate that confidentiality procedures and professional communication practices contributed significantly to their sense of safety. The act of sending meeting links privately prior to sessions, as well as the structured organization of the counselling process, enhanced students' trust in the service. Participants interpreted these actions not only as technical arrangements but as signs of professionalism, respect, and validation. This suggests that security in online counselling is experienced both in technological terms and relational terms. When counsellors demonstrate intentional preparation and confidentiality awareness, clients feel emotionally protected and valued.

For instance, one client said:

Online synchronous counselling is simple and easy to experience. I felt good and secured when I had synchronous counselling. My counsellor, will before the start of the meeting will send the meeting link to me and that made me feel respected and validated. [OC 1]

Another participant stated:

I felt safe during the online session because the counsellor assured me that whatever we discussed would remain confidential. The way the meeting was organised and protected with a password made me feel respected and taken seriously. [OC 5]

4.2.1.2 Convenience

Some participants had positive emotions response in a form of convenience. Participants expressed positive emotional responses to synchronous online counselling, particularly in relation to convenience and accessibility. The data indicate that the virtual format reduced emotional barriers and practical constraints that might

otherwise limit participation. For some students, the online environment provided psychological comfort, especially in moments of emotional vulnerability. Others highlighted the flexibility of attending sessions without travelling, which enabled them to balance counselling with personal and family responsibilities. The findings suggest that convenience in online counselling extends beyond physical accessibility; it also includes emotional ease, reduced social pressure, and enhanced openness. Participants' accounts demonstrate that the virtual setting created a supportive space where they could express themselves freely while managing other obligations.

A participant said:

It is convenient. The shyness of shedding tears is covered. When reflect on the sessions that I had with my counsellor, I can say that it was very convenient for me. [OC 3]

Similarly, a participant mentioned:

The virtual platform was very convenient and accessible. I was able to attend the session without necessarily travelling which helped me to take care of my wards at home. The online counselling sessions also created a sense of safety and anonymity which allowed me to open up more freely about my thoughts and feelings. It relieved me from the mental stress and the distress I was experiencing, and it also helped me to regain the lost hope for the future. [OC 11]

Feedback from these participants suggests that certain clients have positive emotional reactions to synchronous online counselling.

4.2.1.3 Sense of Belonging

Participants expressed that engaging in synchronous online counselling within familiar environments enhanced their emotional comfort and promoted a strong sense of belonging. Being physically distant from the counsellor did not diminish their feeling of connection. Instead, participants emphasized that active listening, feedback, and relatability fostered emotional closeness despite geographical separation. This

suggests that therapeutic presence in online counselling is not dependent on physical proximity but rather on relational engagement and meaningful communication.

For instance:

Have a listening ear at the other end of the world is gratifying. The feedback provides that sense of belonging and the fact that you matter. The relatability the counsellor shared stood out for me even being very far away from me. [OC 8]

Again, another participant said:

Even though we were not in the same physical space, I felt connected to my counsellor. The way the counsellor responded to my concerns made me feel that I was not alone and that someone genuinely cared about what I was going through. [OC 5]

4.2.2 Negative Emotional Response

While many participants reported favourable emotional experiences, others encountered negative emotional reactions. These were primarily associated with poor network connectivity and concerns about the security of online conversations. Such challenges occasionally disrupted emotional flow and weakened clients' sense of safety. This indicates that technological instability and perceived confidentiality risks can undermine the therapeutic experience.

4.2.2.1 Not Secure

Some participants reported feeling emotionally insecure during sessions due to technical disruptions. Although the overall experience was positive, unstable network connections created doubts about the privacy and security of conversations.

The specific response is as below:

I felt good and it was a very nice experience but the bad network was the key problem for me. Sometimes, I felt like the conversation with the counsellor is not secured. [OC 8]

Similarly, a participant shared that:

Sometimes when the network breaks or the screen freezes, I become uncomfortable because I don't know if someone else might be listening or if the session is still private. That makes me feel a bit insecure.” [OC 5]

4.2.3 Initial Skepticism and Surprising Outcomes

Responses revealed that some participants entered synchronous online counselling with preconceived notions shaped by traditional in-person counselling experiences. Many initially doubted the effectiveness of online sessions but later reported that their expectations were challenged positively. The findings indicate that prior assumptions about therapeutic effectiveness do not necessarily determine actual outcomes.

For instance, one participant said:

I preconceived that online counselling would not be effective but it was otherwise. How the traditional counselling is structured, I didn't expect that in the online synchronous counselling and the actual experience differs from this expectation. [OC 1]

Similarly, another also said:

I was thinking that counselling should be face-to-face as we all know. Though, I was expecting the counsellor to be doing 1 or 2 physical touch which is not okay to happen in the online session. However, what I experienced differed from my initial expectations. It has really helped me. [OC 3]

In sharing the differences participants observed in terms of emotional responses and the effectiveness of the therapeutic process in online synchronous counselling, some of the participants were of the view that though there were some challenges but the effectiveness of the synchronous counselling was not compromised. This was obvious from the comments some of them gave. For example, a participant said:

It was very effective. The online environment didn't hinder the effectiveness of the therapeutic process in online synchronous counselling. The counsellor took me through all the procedures in each session. I don't see the difference in the traditional in-person therapeutic process and that of synchronous online counselling. [OC2]

Another participant shared a similar experience by saying:

To me, I think there's more attention given in traditional counselling than online. However, the therapeutic process in online synchronous counselling was effective if I reflect on the previous experiences with traditional counselling. [OC 4]

4.2.4 Comparison with In-Person Counselling

This theme examines how the experiences of synchronous online counselling be compared to that of in-person counselling. It explores how the impact of participating in online synchronous counselling on a client's emotional well-being compared to traditional in-person counselling experiences. This theme explores how participants compared synchronous online counselling with traditional in-person counselling. The data reveal mixed perspectives. Some participants perceived no difference in emotional impact, while others noted distinct advantages such as reduced physical distractions and decreased stigma.

The specific responses are as below:

I have had in-person counselling before. Though, in online synchronous counselling, its time-saving however, I don't see any differences on my emotional well-being. In-person helped me to be happy the same way the synchronous counselling also helped me to be happy. [OC 2]

Again, another participant said:

The impact of online synchronous counselling is not different from traditional in-person counselling. I have had in-person counselling before and the impact is not different from what I got from the online counselling. [OC 4]

Likewise, another participant said:

The synchronous counselling helps me to overcome the stigma associated with mental health treatment in the in-person

counselling. If I compare it with the in-person counselling, the online therapy was as effective as the in-person therapy I have had and it impacted positively on mental health conditions. Online therapy accommodates individuals with physical disabilities like me. [OC 4]

However, one participant said:

The experiences I had participating in online synchronous counselling on my emotional well-being, is different from what I experienced in the in-person counselling. In synchronous counselling, there is less physical distraction and can therefore remain focus. [OC 4]

Again, another participant said that:

It was not that easy due to network problems and the need to adjust oneself because it was online. However, the expectation was different from the earlier expectation. [OC 4]

4.3 Theme two: Opportunities for clients to establish trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling

The main purpose of this research question was to explore the opportunities that facilitate the establishment of trust and therapeutic alliance between clients and counsellors during online synchronous counselling sessions.

4.3.1 Opportunities of Establishing Therapeutic Alliance in Synchronous Online Counselling

The respondents recount aspects of online synchronous counselling that are an opportunity to establish trust or therapeutic alliance in synchronous counselling. Online counselling platforms, by their virtual nature, often help shy or reticent clients feel more comfortable. This suggests that the digital environment diminishes in-person intimidation and encourages clients to open up more freely.

4.3.1.1 Easy to share

Participants reported that the online environment reduced shyness and social pressure, making it easier to disclose personal concerns. The absence of physical presence appeared to lower psychological barriers. Some participants shared that they are okay to share their problem and this is an opportunity to establish trust and therapeutic alliance.

One participant said:

Yes, on the synchronous online counselling, client is okay to share his/her problem and I think this enhance therapeutic relationship as compared to the in-person counselling where sometimes client finds it difficult to share a problem. [OC 2]

Another participant shared by saying

The virtual environment takes away shyness. I think this also enhances therapeutic relationship in synchronous online counselling. In the in-person counselling, the presence of the counsellor sometimes hesitates counsellee from speaking. [OC 4]

4.3.2 Strategies to Foster Trust and Therapeutic Alliance

Participants identified specific strategies employed by counsellors that strengthened trust and rapport. These strategies included empathy, reassurance, confidentiality measures, and professional communication practices. The data suggest that counsellor intentionality plays a crucial role in building therapeutic alliance in online settings.

4.3.2.1 Empathy

Empathy emerged as a central factor in fostering trust. Participants described feeling heard, understood, and emotionally supported. The counsellor's warmth, humour, and appropriate self-disclosure contributed to relational closeness. This finding reinforces the importance of interpersonal competence in digital counselling

environments. From the participants' responses, some participants expressed that empathy is one strategy used by counsellors to foster trust and therapeutic alliance.

Specific comment is below:

The counsellor empathically listened to my concerns and it helped create a supportive space where I felt heard and accepted. Both of us built rapport and trust through humour, warmth, and self-disclosure among others. The counsellor told me a lot about his personal life which motivated me to open up too. [OC 11]

Again, OC 5 shared by saying:

The counsellor was very patient with me and allowed me to talk without interrupting. The way he responded to my emotions made me feel understood and not judged. That made it easier for me to trust him and continue sharing my concerns. [OC 5]

4.3.2.2 Assurances of confidentiality

Formal assurances of confidentiality strengthened participants' confidence in the counselling process. Signing confidentiality forms and implementing verification procedures enhanced perceptions of professionalism and security. These procedural safeguards appeared to reduce anxiety and encourage openness. The findings suggest that visible confidentiality measures are essential in online therapeutic contexts. The responses from participants showed that some participants said that assurance of confidentiality is one strategy that helped them to foster trust and therapeutic alliance.

Again, one participant shared by saying:

The counsellor asked me to sign a form of confidentiality and the counselling session was verified with a two-step verification code. [OC 2]

These comments reveal strategies the counsellor used to build trust and rapport, including assurances of confidentiality, empathy, signing confidentiality forms, and demonstrating a private setting.

Another participant shared that:

“The counsellor assured me that whatever we discussed during the session would remain confidential and would not be shared with anyone else. This made me feel comfortable enough to talk freely about my problems.” [OC 6]

4.4 Theme three: Challenges faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling?

The main purpose of this research question was to explore the unique challenges faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling. Themes found within the data regarding this question were: a) network instability b) security concerns and c) absence of non-verbal cues. Participants commented on challenges in online counselling and how they were addressed. They reveal challenges like network instability, absence of non-verbal cues and security concerns.

4.4.1. Network instability

Network instability was frequently cited as a major barrier. Disruptions interfered with the flow of communication and occasionally created suspicion or uncertainty. Participants addressed this challenge by scheduling sessions during periods of stronger connectivity. This suggests that practical adjustments can mitigate technological barriers.

One participant said:

The online nature at a time posed challenges of trust because of not stable network. I was thinking the session had been hacked by someone. This challenge was addressed by using a time that was strong internet connection at the evening and at weekends. [OC 2]

Again, OC 3 shared by saying:

Yes, network problem. I think the network problem posed challenges to the synchronous counselling. This challenge was addressed by both me and the counsellor for agreeing on time that network will be favourable to both of us. [OC 3]

4.4.2 Security Concerns

Participants expressed fears about the confidentiality of their sessions, with some worried that others might overhear their conversations. This concern initially hindered the establishment of trust and openness in the therapeutic relationship. A specific comment from a participant is below:

I was afraid there someone else where may listen to my conversation. My counsellor made me understand that the meeting is between two of us. He even allowed me to create the meeting link which made secured. [OC 4]

4.4.3 Absence of non-verbal cues

Participants' responses show that the absence of non-verbal cues in synchronous online counselling sessions was noted as a challenge. Participants shared that in addressing this challenge, the counsellor adapted by being more intentional with verbal communication and creative in their approaches to maintain connection. This connotes that lack of visual and physical cues, such as body language and eye contact, which are critical in face-to-face interactions are perceived as a barrier to building a strong therapeutic connection in synchronous online counselling.

One participant shared by saying:

Online sessions lack visual and physical cues (such as body language, eye contact, and gestures) that therapists typically rely on during face-to-face interactions. Again, the security of the online interaction and the counselling processes. [OC 4]

Another one shared that:

In the online session, I could not fully see the counsellor's body language like in face-to-face counselling. Sometimes it makes it

difficult to know how the counsellor is reacting, and that can affect the connection. [OC 6]

4.5 Theme four: The avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing the proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling

The research question 4, “What are the avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing the proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling?” was asked to the participants. The main purpose of this research question was to find out the avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing the proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling. Themes found within the data regarding this question were: overcoming online counselling challenges, maximizing online counselling benefits and technological and logistical Improvements. The following responses were given by some participants to affirm this declaration according to the themes.

4.5.1 Overcoming Challenges in Online Synchronous Counselling (Zoom)

From the participants responses, sub-themes deduce from this theme are Favourable time and training.

4.5.1.1 Favourable Time

Participants commented on network-related challenges and how to address it in online synchronous counselling. Participants recommended scheduling sessions during periods of stable internet connectivity. Agreeing on favourable times was perceived as a practical solution to network-related disruptions. This highlights the importance of flexibility and collaborative planning in online counselling. One participant shared by saying that:

Network challenge. And I think counsellor and client should agree on a time that network will be favourable to them. [OC 1]

Another participant also shared that:

The network problem can be managed if we plan properly. If we agree on a specific time when the connection is stable, the session will flow smoothly without distractions. [OC 5]

4.5.1.2 Technological Training

Moreover, on the overcoming challenges of online counselling, participants made mention of technological literacy and training. Technological literacy emerged as a key recommendation. Participants emphasized that both counsellors and clients require training on digital platforms to minimize interruptions and enhance confidence. The findings suggest that digital competence directly influences the quality of online therapeutic engagement.

One participant indicated:

They may face an unstable network and I suggest there should be a stable network for smooth Counselling. Again, I think both counsellors and clients should be trained on the use of Zoom and how to be secure online. [OC 4]

Another participant also said:

If both the counsellor and the student understand how the online system works, there will be fewer interruptions. Training will help us feel more confident when using the technology. [OC 2]

4.5.2 Maximizing the benefits of online synchronous counselling

The participants' interview reveals various strategies and practices employed by counsellors and clients to maximize the benefits of online synchronous counselling, particularly when using Zoom. Participants highlighted awareness creation, continuous professional training, and improved technological infrastructure as necessary steps for maximizing online counselling benefits. These strategies were viewed as essential for sustaining trust and effectiveness.

4.5.2.1 Awareness Creation

Participants highlighted the need for education and awareness. Organizing programs, educating clients about confidentiality, and providing continuous training for counsellors are vital.

A participant said:

Counsellors should organize programs and create the awareness of online Counselling. They should frequently go through training to help then eliminate cyber fraud which may affect the counselling process and trust. [OC 3]

A similar participant shared that:

I think many students are not aware of how online counselling works. If the school organizes seminars and orientation programs to educate us about its benefits and confidentiality, more people will be willing to participate.” [OC 6]

4.5.2.2 Training

Participants shared that the competency of counsellors in handling online platforms and ensuring security was a significant concern. OC 2 shared by saying:

Counsellors should have enough training and studies on online counselling experience. They have to learn how to use the audio-visual applications for counselling. [OC 2]

Another participant shared that:

They must continue to educate the clients and as well as counsellors, they should be regular in-service training for online counsellors and new ways to initiate counselling in an online mode. [OC 7]

This comment suggests that counsellors should undergo sufficient training and study how to use audio-visual tools effectively. Competence in using these tools can prevent technical issues that might otherwise cause discomfort for clients. It also emphasized ongoing training and education for counsellors to stay updated with the latest online counselling practices and strategies to combat cyber fraud.

4.5.3 Technological and Technical Improvements in Online Counselling

Platforms

Participants shared their views on technological and technical improvements in online counselling platforms like Zoom.

4.5.3.1 Electronic Devices

Respondents highlighted the need for strong electronic devices and adequate lighting to improve the quality of online counselling sessions. Additionally, using quality gadgets were considered essential for smooth and effective counselling.

OC 6 shared that:

There should be quality smart gadgets, to support these platforms effectively for smooth online counselling. [OC 6]

OC 5 also shared that:

If the devices are not strong enough, the video may freeze or the sound may not be clear. So, both the counsellor and the client should use good phones or laptops with proper lighting to make the session effective. [OC 5]

The participant's comment suggests that the effectiveness of Zoom video conferencing relies heavily on the quality of the hardware and environmental setup. This finding agrees with Salendab et al. (2024) who said that using reliable video equipment and maintaining a conducive environment for sessions ensure clear communication and minimize technical disruptions.

4.5.3.1 Pre-Session Preparation

Again, on the technological and technical improvement in synchronous counselling, a participant made mention of Pre-Session Preparations. The comment suggests creating virtual waiting rooms and testing technology before sessions. These

practices can improve the user experience by ensuring that both clients and counsellors are prepared and that any technical issues are addressed beforehand.

One participant shared that:

You can create virtual waiting rooms for clients to join before their sessions. Again, technological tools should be tested by both the counsellor and client before they are used in synchronous online counselling. [OC 8]

The idea of creating virtual waiting rooms for clients to join before their sessions was proposed, along with the need for both clients and counsellors to test technological tools before use. This ensures that any technical issues are addressed before the session begins, leading to a smoother experience.

Another participant also emphasized the importance of preparing the technology before the counselling session begins.

“Before the counselling session starts, both the counsellor and the client should make sure their internet connection, camera, and microphone are working well. This helps to avoid interruptions during the session.” [OC 11]

This statement further highlights the importance of technological preparation before synchronous online counselling sessions. Ensuring that devices and internet connections are functioning properly can reduce disruptions and promote a smoother and more effective counselling process.

4.6 Discussion of the Findings

Technology is here to stay, and we must take advantage of its numerous benefits. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of students of the Colleges of Education in Ghana towards online synchronous counselling.

The first objective of the study which has a connection with the research question one "How do college students perceive the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling compared to in-person counselling in terms of emotional

responses?" was to explore college students' perception of the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling compared to in-person counselling focusing on emotional responses. Through in-depth interviews with participants, the study uncovered experiences of online synchronous counselling, positive and negative reactions and how emotions influence therapeutic alliance. Participants perceived online synchronous counselling as convenient, secure, sense of belonging and reduction of shyness. This finding aligns with Smith and Gillon (2021) which increases accessibility by letting clients get beyond time and geographical obstacles, therefore increasing therapeutic involvement. These experiences are consistent with Davis, (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which suggests that perceived ease of use (PEOU) and perceived usefulness (PU) are critical factors in user acceptance of technology.

Again, some participants felt better following online counselling. Emphasising simplicity and privacy, participants said the virtual format helped them to feel safe and validated, and to express emotions. A participant found the anonymity of the internet to help express their emotions. This finding agrees with Rathenau et al. (2021), that online synchronous treatment can create a safe environment for emotional expression. Online synchronous sessions create a strong therapeutic relationship using validation and respect, therefore enhancing the emotional well-being of clients. Notwithstanding the positive emotional response, few participants complained of unpleasant emotional reactions because of technical problems including poor network access and online communication security concerns. This finding aligns with Cipolletta and Mocellin (2018) research that technical limitations can impede online therapy and that counsellors' success depend on addressing these challenges.

The emotional reactions of clients shaped interactions between online client-counsellors. Online validation enhanced links with therapists, therefore enhancing emotional well-being and the therapeutic alliance. This finding agrees with van Kessel et al. (2022) that therapeutic relationships require empathy and connection and especially understanding nonverbal signals helps clients feel better and happier throughout therapy. This study supports Rogers (1980), person-centred approach by demonstrating that essential therapeutic components like emotional connection, empathy, and unconditional positive regard can flourish even in a virtual environment.

Moreover, sub-theme Initial Scepticism and Surprising Outcomes "delved into how initial expectations differ from actual experiences. Participants recounted that their experiences with synchronous counselling contradicted their original concerns regarding the efficacy of online. This moves from pessimism to optimism reflects changing attitudes towards online treatment. The study finding aligns with Armstrong (2022) that rapid technological improvement has increased the possibilities for client engagement, making internet (synchronous) counselling more possible and successful. Additional data from studies conducted by Novella et al. (2022) and Stubbings et al. (2013) supports the participants' experiences, demonstrating that synchronous video counselling can provide results comparable to in-person treatment.

When participants were asked to compare the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling with traditional in-person counselling in terms of emotional responses, their comments discovered no significant changes in emotional impact between the two modes. Again, participants believed that internet treatment was equally beneficial in meeting their mental health needs. Some participants stated that both online and in-person counselling helped them achieve pleasure.

Meanwhile, others reported disparities in their experiences. The study found that online counselling was critical in reducing the social stigma associated with seeking mental health care, a benefit that was less obvious in face-to-face therapy sessions. These findings are consistent with research undertaken by researchers such as Cameron et al. (2018) and Bird et al. (2020) who emphasised that online therapy can minimise self-stigma and provide a more confidential and less scary setting for those seeking treatment. The study sought to investigate the differences between clients' expectations and prior contacts with traditional face-to-face counselling and their experiences using synchronous internet counselling. The findings reflect a complex dynamic in which, for many people, initial mistrust turned into positive encounters. While some people believed that online counselling successful as in-person counselling, others emphasised unique benefits such as less stigma and enhanced convenience, making online counselling more appealing. Lin et al. (2021) and Stubbings et al. (2013) found that online counselling can be as beneficial as traditional therapy in many cases.

The results of this study demonstrate that although there may be initial scepticism regarding online counselling, clients' experiences frequently exceed their expectations, leading to therapeutic outcomes comparable to those of traditional in-person counselling.

The second objective of the study: The opportunities that facilitate the establishment of trust and therapeutic alliance between clients and counsellors during online synchronous counselling sessions which has a connection with question 2, "What opportunities exist for clients to establish trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling?" was to explore the opportunities that facilitate the establishment of trust and therapeutic alliance between clients and

counsellors during online synchronous counselling sessions. Participants saw major benefits from online synchronous therapy. A major benefit was clients' increased comfort and openness in the virtual world. For shy or reticent people, online counselling seems to reduce the fear of face-to-face sessions. Participants felt more comfortable discussing sensitive topics, which built trust and a stronger therapeutic partnership. This finding aligns with Queins (2024) and Ancis, (2020) who found that online safety and reduced stigma may increase therapy openness and honesty. Again, the ability of the virtual environment to reduce face-to-face intimidation is consistent with Roger's belief that a supportive environment can enhance clients' self-knowledge and self-healing processes (Ruto et al., 2017). This suggests that for some clients, the digital environment may facilitate the therapeutic process better than traditional face-to-face counselling, which can seem more intrusive. Virtual counselling also offered anonymity and security that in-person counselling lacked. This connotes that a sense of security helped build trust between the client and counsellor, which aided therapy. This finding of the study aligns with Rogers' Person-Centred Theory which emphasises empathy, acceptance and understanding in the counselling relationship. Participants reported that counsellors' empathy, attentive listening and supportive communication contributed to the establishment of trust and therapeutic alliance in online sessions. This supports Rogers' view that therapeutic change occurs when counsellors demonstrate empathy and unconditional positive regard.

Also, counsellors used a variety of methods to build trust and a strong therapeutic connection to overcome the limitations of online synchronous counselling and maximise its benefits. Counsellors' empathy and attentive listening created a supportive, nonjudgmental environment where clients felt heard and understood. This technique builds rapport and trust by making clients feel valued and respected in

therapy. To reassure clients about session security, counsellors used confidentiality agreements, enabling Zoom two-Factor Authentication and locking of session on Zoom. These solutions addressed clients' privacy concerns and emphasised counsellors' commitment to safe and secure therapy. The counsellors' self-disclosure and humour improved the therapeutic alliance. By sharing personal details and using humour to lighten the mood, counsellors were able to help clients open up and participate in therapy. This finding is supported by Buckman et al. (2021) and Andrews et al. (2023) who stressed the importance of personalised communication in online counselling. This study contributes to the field by demonstrating how traditional barriers to counselling, such as shyness and fear of judgment, can be alleviated through online platforms, thereby promoting a stronger therapeutic alliance for some clients.

The third objective of the study: The challenges in establishing trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling which has a connection with question 3, “What are the challenges faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling?” was to explore The challenges in establishing trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling. Three main barriers to trust and therapeutic connection during online synchronous counselling sessions were identified by study participants.

Network instability was a major obstacle to maintaining a therapeutic link. Online session security worries made participants worried that unauthorised parties could listen in on their chats. The online platform and therapy process were hard for clients to trust. The finding aligns with Abbott-Gaffney et al. (2022) that technology disruptions are a major challenge in online counselling. Lack of nonverbal cues like

body language, eye contact, and facial expressions hindered therapeutic connections. Nonverbal cues convey empathy, understanding, and support in face-to-face interactions. The lack of these cues in online sessions forced counsellors to be more attentive with their verbal communication and find new ways to maintain the therapeutic relationship. Also, the finding agrees with Stoll et al. (2020) who questioned the role of nonverbal communication in therapy. It shows that network instability, lack of non-verbal cues and security concerns remain significant challenges that need to be addressed. These results suggest the need for continuous innovation and improvement in the technological infrastructure of online counselling platforms to ensure that they can better facilitate the therapy process

Objective four of the study was to find avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing the proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling. The study raises concerns about network stability and the importance of technological literacy in online synchronous therapy. Counselling sessions depend on reliable internet access, participants said. Having clients and counsellors agree on a more reliable network time is a smart way to reduce network issues. Participants also stressed the importance of teaching counsellors and clients Zoom while ensuring online security. These findings show how important technological readiness is for online counselling. The emphasis on network dependability and user training suggests that online counselling may be compromised if these issues are not addressed. This finding is in line with Nurismawan et al. (2022) and Riedl (2022), who emphasise that digital literacy and technology infrastructure help in a successful online intervention. The finding is consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model, which emphasises perceived usefulness and ease of use as key determinants of technology adoption. Participants

indicated that convenience, accessibility and time efficiency made them accept synchronous online counselling platforms such as Zoom.

Again, the study finds that regular training to address cybercrime and use audio-visual tools shows that online counselling requires constant adaptation and skill development. Online therapy success depends on counsellors' web tool skills, so training is important. Teaching clients about confidentiality and training counsellors in online counselling methods emphasises client psychological safety. Research supports ongoing professional development and a safe and reliable counselling environment (Queins, 2024). Online counselling system technology advances online counselling can be improved by addressing technological and logistical issues. Participants stressed the importance of using high-quality electronics and lighting to improve sessions. To reduce technical disruptions and improve user experience, virtual waiting rooms and technology testing before sessions are proactive. Online counselling sessions are equally affected by the technical and physical environment, according to these recommendations.

Again, the finding is in line with Salendab et al. (2024) that pre-session preparations and reliable technology support the idea that technical details in online counselling can greatly impact session effectiveness. Participants' responses suggest that online counselling challenges require a multifaceted approach that includes improving technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and counsellor professional development. This finding aligns with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which states that perceived usefulness and ease of use drive technology adoption and use (Davis, 1989).

The study concludes that addressing technological issues, improving digital literacy, and training counsellors will help implement online synchronous counselling.

In this study, counsellors used empathic listening, confidentiality policies, and creative communication to build trust and rapport, following best practices in the literature. Online counselling requires overcoming technological challenges and ensuring secure connections to maintain the therapeutic alliance.

4.7 Summary of the Chapter

The chapter presented and analyzed the findings of the study based on data collected from fifteen students who participated in synchronous online counselling sessions at Wesley College of Education. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the findings were organized into major and related sub-themes derived from participants experiences.

The results showed that students generally experienced positive emotions such as comfort and relief, and they perceived online counselling as effective and comparable to face-to-face sessions. Participants also reported the development of therapeutic relationships characterized by trust and empathy. However, challenges such as unstable internet connectivity and limited non-verbal cues were identified.

Despite these challenges, students acknowledge the convenience and accessibility of synchronous online counselling and suggested improvement to enhance service delivery.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

The chapter presents the summary, conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

5.1 Summary

The study explored the experiences of students of the Colleges of Education in Ghana towards online synchronous counselling. Objectives guiding the study were to explore:

1. college students' perception of the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling compared to in-person counselling focusing on emotional responses
2. the opportunities that facilitate the establishment of trust and therapeutic alliance between clients and counsellors during online synchronous counselling sessions
3. the challenges in establishing trust and therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling
4. the avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing the proper use of online synchronous (zoom) counselling

The study adopted the social constructivism paradigm and used a qualitative research approach together with a phenomenological design. A homogenous purposive sampling technique was used to select 15 participants who had experienced both traditional face-to-face counselling and synchronous counselling. A semi-

structured interview guide was used for data collection. The data were analysed using thematic analysis approach.

5.2 Key Findings of the Study

The following are the key findings of the study

The study found that Wesley College of Education students perceived the effectiveness of online synchronous counselling, particularly via Zoom as convenient, secure, sense of belonging and reduction of shyness. Again, the study found that Wesley College of Education students have mixed (positive and negative) emotional responses to online synchronous counselling. This study revealed that positive reactions were feelings of security and validation, ease of emotional expression, and a sense of belonging and Support however, negative emotional responses were technical problems including poor network access and online communication security concerns. Also, the study revealed that the positive emotional reactions of the client affected the therapeutic alliance between the client and counsellors through synchronous counselling.

Moreover, the study discovered that clients' experiences with synchronous counselling contradicted their expectations concerning the efficacy of online synchronous counselling. However, their experiences were not different from that of in-person counselling. Participants initially did not see synchronous counselling as effective.

The study revealed that empathy, attentive listening, creative communication, and enabling two-factor authentication were opportunities used by clients and counsellors to establish a therapeutic alliance with counsellors through Zoom.

The study found that network instability and lack of nonverbal cues were challenges faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling.

The study discovered that continuous education and awareness-building among clients and counsellors, creating virtual waiting rooms, and pre-testing gadgets are avenues to overcome the challenges of online synchronous counselling.

5.3 Implications of the Findings

Policy Implications

The results highlight the benefits of online synchronous counselling in terms of convenience, cost-effectiveness, and time efficiency. This suggests that there is a need for Wesley College of Education to integrate formally online counselling services in their mental health policies. This will ensure that students can access mental health support regardless of location or time constraints. Again, there is a need for the Ministry of Education and other pertinent stakeholders to integrate online counselling components into the Ghanaian educational curricula and professional training and development programmes for counselling.

Theoretical Implications

This study suggests that in order to compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues, traits like empathy, creative communication, and attentive listening can help build a strong therapeutic alliance virtually. Positive emotional responses, such as feelings of security, validation, and belonging, demonstrate that clients can still establish rapport and trust with their counsellors through virtual interactions. This runs counter to modern theories like Social Presence Theory that emphasise the value of physical presence and nonverbal cues in the formation of therapeutic relationships.

Practical Implications

The study identified network instability and technical problems as significant barriers to building trust and establishing a therapeutic alliance during online sessions. The findings also suggest that online synchronous counselling can be as effective as traditional in-person sessions in many cases. Furthermore, the study revealed that the positive emotional reactions of the client affected the therapeutic alliance between the client and counsellors through synchronous counselling.

5.4 Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of students who participated in synchronous online counselling sessions at Wesley College of Education in Kumasi. The findings provide valuable insights into the emotional responses of clients, the opportunities for establishing therapeutic alliance in virtual counselling environments, the challenges encountered during online counselling, and the strategies that can enhance the effectiveness of synchronous online counselling.

The findings indicate that students generally had positive experiences with synchronous online counselling. Many participants described the counselling sessions as convenient, secure, and emotionally supportive. The online platform allowed some clients to express their concerns more freely, particularly in situations where they felt shy or uncomfortable in traditional face-to-face counselling settings. The virtual environment also enabled participants to attend counselling sessions without the need for physical travel, thereby increasing accessibility and flexibility.

Furthermore, the study revealed that trust and therapeutic alliance can be effectively established in synchronous online counselling when counsellors demonstrate empathy, active listening, and assurances of confidentiality. Participants

emphasized that the counsellor's supportive communication style played a significant role in creating a safe and trusting counselling environment.

Despite these positive experiences, the study also identified several challenges associated with online counselling. Network instability, concerns about the security of online platforms, and the absence of non-verbal cues were reported as key obstacles that sometimes affected the counselling process. However, participants suggested that these challenges could be minimized through improved internet infrastructure, technological training for both counsellors and clients, and better preparation before counselling sessions.

Overall, the findings suggest that synchronous online counselling can be a valuable and effective counselling approach within Colleges of Education in Ghana when adequate technological support and professional counselling practices are ensured. The study therefore contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital counselling practices and highlights the importance of integrating technology into counselling services within educational institutions.

5.5 Recommendations

As a result of these findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

1. The study discovered that clients found online synchronous counselling to be as effective as in-person sessions. The study therefore recommends that the college authority engages in awareness campaigns to highlight the effectiveness and benefits of online counselling. Ensuring that students are informed about the availability and advantages can help to reduce scepticism and increase participation.

2. The study revealed that empathy, attentive listening, creative communication, and activating two-step verification passwords were opportunities used by counsellors to establish a therapeutic alliance with clients through Zoom. Therefore, the study recommends specialised training to counsellors on empathy, attentive listening, and creative communication techniques to build trust in online settings, where nonverbal cues are limited.
3. The study revealed that network instability and lack of nonverbal cues were challenges faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling. This study recommends that the management of Wesley College of Education, Kumasi takes steps to expand and improve the internet services in the college. These efforts are vital in building trust and fostering a strong therapeutic alliance.
4. The study discovered that continuous education and awareness-building among clients and counsellors and pre-testing gadgets are avenues to overcome the challenges of online synchronous counselling. Therefore, this study recommends that the college management regularly organise workshops and seminars focused on using the Zoom platform, managing emotional responses, and leveraging creative communication strategies. It should include pre-session protocols, such as Zoom waiting rooms and pre-testing of gadgets to assist with troubleshooting and implementing two-step verification.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

The study was limited in the following ways:

1. The study adopted an interview guide and conducted the data collection via Zoom.
2. The researcher recognised that, due to network instability, some participants were finding it difficult to share their experiences.
3. The study also selected participants from the Wesley College of Education in Old Tafo Municipality. This implies that generalising the study's findings to the diverse experiences and perspectives of all students in the country or other college education settings is not appropriate.
4. Additionally, while the study explored the challenges and opportunities associated with online synchronous counselling, it did not delve deeply into the counsellors' perspectives. The lack of counsellor input may present an incomplete picture of the therapeutic dynamics involved in online synchronous sessions.

5.7 Suggestions for Further Studies

The study's findings and recommendations are specific to the Wesley College of Education. Therefore, future researchers may consider using a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods. While the qualitative approach used in this study provided rich and in-depth insights into students' lived experiences, a mixed-methods approach could allow researchers to explore these experiences in greater depth while also examining patterns and trends among a larger population of students.

Again, future studies could investigate the perspectives of counsellors who provide synchronous online counselling services in Colleges of Education.

Understanding counsellors' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of online counselling would provide a more holistic view of the effectiveness and limitations of this counselling approach.



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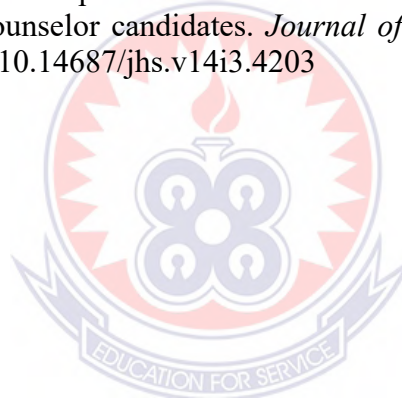
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CLIENTS

UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA

FACULTY OF APPLIED BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES IN EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study.

My name is Charles Obeng and I am a researcher who will be interviewing you to try and understand your experience of synchronous online counselling. Firstly, it is important that you do not tell me your name or any other information that might let me know who you are. Secondly, if you do not wish to take part in the research anymore you do not need to give a reason why you wish to leave. Finally, what we talk about will be confidential but if you were to tell me that you or someone else might be at risk of harm. This interview guide is intended to explore **ONLINE COUNSELLING EXPERIENCE: THE PROVISION OF SYNCHRONOUS COUNSELLING SESSIONS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS**. Using the internet for counselling involves the use of Skype, Email, Zoom, Facebook and WhatsApp. Your responses to this interview guide will be used for academic purposes.

SECTION A: Background Information

Please read each item carefully and indicate your response by ticking (✓) the appropriate column.

- | | | | | |
|------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------------|--------|
| 1. Age: | 17-20 years [] | 21-24years [] | 25years and above [] | |
| 2. Gender: | Male [] | Female [] | | |
| 3. Level: | 100 [] | 200 [] | 300 [] | 400[] |

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences and emotional responses of clients who have participated in online synchronous counselling sessions?

1. Can you describe your overall experience with online synchronous counselling? What emotions or feelings stand out to you when reflecting on your sessions?
2. How do you perceive the impact of participating in online synchronous counselling on your emotional well-being compared to traditional in-person counselling experiences you may have had?
3. Were there any specific moments or aspects of online synchronous counselling sessions that triggered strong emotional responses for you? If so, can you elaborate on those experiences?
4. Can you provide examples of how the virtual environment of online counselling influenced your emotional engagement or connection with your counsellor, either positively or negatively?

Research Question 2: How do these experiences compare to their expectations and prior experiences with traditional in-person counselling?

1. What were your expectations when you first started online synchronous counselling, and how did your actual experiences align or differ from these expectations?
2. Reflecting on your previous experiences with traditional in-person counselling, what notable differences have you observed in terms of emotional responses and the effectiveness of the therapeutic process in online synchronous counselling?
3. Were there any specific aspects of online synchronous counselling that you found more beneficial or challenging when compared to traditional in-person counselling, especially in terms of emotional engagement and progress?
4. Can you describe any adjustments or adaptations you had to make in your expectations and coping strategies when transitioning from in-person counselling to the online format?

Research Question 3: What are the unique challenges and opportunities faced by clients in establishing trust and a therapeutic alliance with counsellors during online synchronous counselling?

1. How did you experience the process of building trust and a therapeutic relationship with your counsellor in the online synchronous counselling setting? Were there any unique challenges or advantages in this regard?
2. Were there specific strategies or actions that you or your counsellor took to foster trust and a strong therapeutic alliance in the virtual environment? Please provide examples if possible.
3. Can you recall any instances where the online nature of the counselling sessions posed challenges to building trust or a therapeutic connection? How were these challenges addressed or overcome?
4. In your opinion, are there any aspects of online synchronous counselling that offer new opportunities for enhancing the therapeutic relationship compared to in-person counselling? If so, please elaborate on those opportunities.

Research Question 4: What are the avenues for overcoming the challenges and enhancing the proper use of online synchronous (Zoom) counselling?

1. Based on your experiences, what are some of the key challenges you believe clients and counsellors may face when using platforms like Zoom for counselling, and how can these challenges be addressed effectively?
2. Can you share any strategies or practices that you found helpful in maximizing the benefits of online synchronous counselling, especially when using Zoom?
3. From your perspective, what could counsellors do to ensure that clients are comfortable and confident in using online platforms for therapy, and to optimize the therapeutic process?
4. In your view, are there specific technological or logistical improvements that could be made to platforms like Zoom to better support the needs of clients and counsellors engaged in synchronous online counselling sessions?

APPENDIX B

Summary of the Coding Process used in generating the themes

Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit (Description close to the text)	Condensed Meaning Unit (Interpretation of Underlying Meaning)	Sub-theme	Theme
OC1: "Online synchronous counselling is simple and easy to experience. I felt good and secure when I had synchronous counselling. My counsellor, before the start of the meeting, will send the meeting link to me, which made me feel respected and validated."	Simple, easy, secure; respected and validated	Feeling secure and respected enhances the counselling experience	Security and Respect	Positive Emotional Responses
OC9: "I wish everyone would experience this synchronous counselling. Easy to access your counsellor and it saves time too. I felt good and okay and it was good for me. Going to the counselling centre, people start to develop meaning for going there but for the synchronous counselling, I felt in a good	Easy access; saves time; good environment	Accessibility and time-saving create a positive environment	Accessibility and Time-Saving	Positive Emotional Responses

environment and place."					
"The online nature at the time posed challenges to trust because of not unstable network. I was thinking the session had been held by someone. This challenge was addressed by using a time that was strong internet connection at the evening and weekends."	Network instability posed trust challenges, addressed by scheduling during strong connection times	Network stability is crucial, and addressing it can mitigate trust issues	Network Issues	Challenges in synchronous Online Counselling	
"At the exploration stage. The way the counsellor went about it was very good and I think that was an opportunity for enhancing the therapeutic relationship."	Effective exploration stage by a counsellor	Initial stages handled well can enhance the therapeutic relationship	Effective Exploration	Opportunities in Online Counselling	
"They may face an unstable network and I suggest there should be a stable network for smooth Counselling. Again, I think both counsellors and clients should be trained on the use of Zoom and how to be secure online."	Unstable network; need for training on Zoom	Training and a stable network are key to effective counselling	Training and Network Stability	Overcoming challenges in online synchronous counselling	

Source: Adapted from Bedu-Addo (2010)