

UTILIZING VIRTUAL TECHNOLOGY IN PROMOTING COUNSELLING AND CARE-GIVING SERVICES IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Olaleye, V.O.

University of Ilesa, Ilesa
olaleyevictor10@gmail.com

Abiola, T.O.

University of Ilesa, Ilesa
titiabbey6@gmail.com

Oke, S.B.

University of Ilesa, Ilesa
jideoke2017@gmail.com

&

Adebami, I.B.

University of Ilesa, Ilesa
adebamiqyan@gmail.com

Abstract

Virtual technology is gaining ground at all fronts in human endeavor. The use of virtual technology in counselling service and caregiving has improved the human helping professions. This paper focused on the integration of technology into rendering services in counseling and caregiving. Digital counselling services for clients are of great importance in the digital era. This paper delved into clarifying issues relating to virtual technologies, counseling and care giving services, digitalization of counselling and caregiving services, possibilities of utilizing virtual technologies in counselling and caregiving services, benefit of digital counselling and problems of digital counseling service. Recommendations for counsellors, care-givers, institutions and government were also enumerated which can foster improvement in digital counselling and care-giving work in providing cyber-security and protecting confidentiality of the clients.

Keywords: *Virtual technology, Cyber counseling, Digital literacy, Digitalization, Counseling and Care-giving.*

Introduction

The global paradigm shift involving transformation from mechanical phase to digital phase through innovations of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has brought dramatic change to all frontiers of human endeavor. Education, Counseling and Care-giving services are not left behind in the digital era. Adebowale, Popola, Obisakin & Oyaziwo (2012) stress the significant role of ICT in improving education, enhancement of quick and quality services delivery of which counselling and care-giving are included. While digital communication is newer to the Counselling realm, it is a growing field, as digital technologies adapt their professional communication to meet the expectations and needs of consumers (Johnson 2016). Virtual counseling or psychotherapy involves a variety of activities such as psycho-education, individual therapy, and automated selfhelp interventions delivered via internet. Muraina and Kabir (2020) refer to digital counselling as cyberspace counselling which is the provision of expert intellectual fitness counseling providers through the use of internet. According to them, it is additionally regarded as web counseling, ecounseling, online counseling, internet remedy or far flung therapy; this provided is generally presented by way of e-mail, real-time chat and video conferencing (Lannop, 2012). Abdullahi (2023) refers to ICT Counselling as a process of providing counseling services on internet by utilizing e-mail, chat, video or even internet phone, connecting clients living in remote or isolated areas with Counsellor.

Clarification of Some Concepts

To foster better understanding, some key constructs in this discourse must be explained and clarified. These terms are virtual technology, counseling, care-giving, digital counselling.

Virtual technology

Ukwueze and Eya (2017) define virtual technology as an aspect of technology that involves the use of computer software and business methods to solve problems. According to them, it is a tool created by the application of mental and physical effort in order to solve real world problems. Borgmann (2006) succinctly explains virtual technology as the application of computer software as tools for changing or forming culture such as the communication technology medium of exchange. These tools are ICT scientific innovations involving using computers and internet facilities to reach the target audience. In this digital era, counsellors and care-givers make use of

virtual technology to reach their clients virtually in order to solve their problem through ecounselling.

Counseling

Several scholars have defined Counselling in several ways based on their environment, exposures training and experience of several definitions, the most suitable for this discourse is “Counselling is a face-to-face helping relationship involving Counsellors and clients in order to solve academic, vocational, social and psychological problems challenging people” (Federal Ministry of Education, 2000).

Care-giving

Care-giving is the act of providing physical, emotional or financial support to another person in need. Care giving can take different forms such as caring for elderly parents, providing emotional support to a friend going through a different time or volunteering to help feed the homeless.

Digital Counselling

Digital counselling is also known as virtual counselling. It is a mental health service that is provided through online medium such as mobile apps, video conference, text messages, e-mail, or any platform where a conversation can occur virtually.

Overview of Counselling Service

Guidance and Counselling is a helping relationship between counsellor and clients by which counsellor assists clients to achieve greater awareness of who they are and who or what they can become. Guidance is a general umbrella term that covers many other services which focus on rendering help to clients resolve clients to resolve client’s life-threatening challenges in the realm of vocational, educational, psycho-social or personal-social in nature.

Archibong (2009) posits that Guidance can be seen as a process developmental in nature by which an individual is assisted to understand, accept and utilize his abilities, aptitudes, interests and attitudinal patterns in relation to his aspirations. Essien and Archibong (2020) see counselling as a process in which a trained Guidance Counsellor helps an individual, group of individuals or family members to gain self-understanding and understanding of others in order to solve problems more

effectively and resolve conflicts in everyday living. According to them, guidance is preventive in nature, whereas Counselling tends to be healing, curative and ameliorative in nature.

Oladele (2007) maintains that Counselling has been used to denote extensive vary of strategies, which include recommendation giving, assistance in instances of hassle, need, encouragement, data giving and check interpretation. Counselling is a manner by means a capacity of which the helper expresses care and subject toward the man or woman with a problem; it helps that person's non-public increase and brings adjustments through self-knowledge (Salawu & Abdulkadir 2011).

Guidance and Counselling provides an atmosphere as well as a setting-physical, social and psychological within which one person (the counsellor) can provide help to another person or group of persons (the counsellee or counsellees) in terms of acquiring decision making skills, making appropriate choices from a number of alternatives, acquiring coping skills, learning adjustments strategies and problem solving skills, getting acquainted with and becoming aware of opportunities in the personal, social, educational and vocational world, experience and exploring various international communication roles and systems, assessing various value systems, as well as in terms of self study and analysis leading to adequate understanding (Ibikunle and Oke 2012).

According to Wole and Oke (2012), the goals of guidance and counselling in schools are to help students to:

- acquire social, economic and moral coping skills,
- learn problem solving techniques,
- be aware of a number of opportunities in the educational, social, vocational and personal environments,
- take suitable, relevant and appropriate and timely actions about immediate and envisaged concerns,
- acquire and utilize adjustments modes,
- have self understanding through self-study, examine and assess their various value systems,
- meaningfully understand, explore, appreciate and experience existing interactional and communication roles systems.

Guidance services rendered in schools are as follows:

- information services

- counselling services
- planning, placement and follow-up services
- referral services
- orientation services

Care-giving in a Digital World

Definition

Care giving is the act of providing physical, emotional or financial support to another person in need. Care giving can take different forms such as caring for an elderly parent, providing emotional support to a friend going through a difficult time or volunteering to help feed the homeless. Essentially, it is about offering assistance to someone who needs it whether a loved one, a stranger or a community as a whole. Care giving can be incredibly rewarding and it can also be physically and emotionally demanding.

In early childhood education, care giving is all about providing children with the love, support, and attention they need to grow and develop into well-rounded individuals. It includes providing basic needs like food and shelter as well as emotional support, positive reinforcement and opportunities for socialization. Also, care giving involves creating a nurturing and stimulating environment for children and helping them develop important skills like language, reading and Mathematics. In short, it is all about setting the stage for a lifetime of learning and growth (NAEYN 2009).

Technology in Care-giving

Technology has become an increasingly important tool in all facets of life including care giving in Early Childhood Education (ECE). For instance, there are many apps and websites that offer educational games and activities for young children. Technology can be used to track a child's development and also to connect parents and teachers so they can work together to ensure the best possible outcome for the child. In some schools, video conferencing and virtual reality are used to create immersive learning experiences for their students. Technology can be used to provide more personalized instruction since each child learns at different pace and in different ways (AAP 2016).

In addition, technology is used to track progress, provide feedback and offer extra support to children where necessary. Children can connect with other students around the world giving them opportunity to learn about different cultures and perspectives. Lastly, children can be kept safe by providing them better security and monitoring systems through the use of technology.

Technology used in caregiving in early childhood education

- Online learning platforms that offer educational games, videos and other resources
- Smart toys that help children develop their motor skills
- Cognitive abilities and creativity
- Video conferencing software that allows for virtual learning
- Interactive whiteboards that make learning more engaging
- Mobile apps that provide educational content in a convenient and portable format

Despite the positive impact of technology in caregiving, a number of hindrances are encountered in its application. One big challenge is the cost of purchasing and maintaining technology. Also ensuring that technology is used in a way that is developmentally appropriate and does not cause children to become too dependent on screen. There is the risk of children being exposed to inappropriate content and the need to ensure that privacy and security are maintained. It is important to strike a balance between using technology as a tool to enhance learning and making sure that children still have plenty of opportunities for unplugged play and exploration.

Digitalization in Counselling and Care-giving Services

The use of digital devices such as smartphone, artificial intelligence, automation, digital communication and any other types of technology in counselling and caregiving services has taken these helping profession to a globalized level in this digital era. The rapid development in ICT which is the dynamics of the internet globally with the launch of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s. (Ardi & Sukmawati, 2019) is the greatest advancement made by humans in the 21st century. The nexus between content development and internet innovation has elevated social media to a new digital era. Social media is a new area with interphase that has attracted more internet users around the world (Ngai, Moon, Lam, Chin, & Tao 2015). The new innovation has brought technological challenges to the counselling profession, making counsellors and care givers to strive harder to inculcate creativity through digitalization into the helping professions.

Innovations that have brought great impact on counselling services through changing counsellors and counsellee in the 21st century are expected to produce the same result in school improvement both in helping students achieve, leading the student to overcome obstacles in achieving good results and creating a positive school climate (Suryahadikusumah & Nadya 2020). The use of digital devices in counselling and care-giving services is giving the practice of guidance and counselling a new direction and dimension in recent time (Gordon Babo & Lanen 2018).

In this digital era, the trending innovation is known as combinatorial innovation. According to Ciriello et al. (2018), combinatorial innovation is a new digital solution that are often created by combining existing modules with embedded digital capabilities or blending different modules with the same standard. In the context of guidance services, digitalization is obtained by combining and integrating technology into the practice of guidance and counselling services. Popoola, Ibraheem & Yusuf (2023) posit that digital literacy is accompanied by a commitment to quality in the concept and practice of TPACK (Technology, Pedagogy, Content and Knowledge). In their submission, they maintain that digital literacy and competence of school counsellors will not only help to find information that can be shared with students, but they will also be habitual in finding new ideas that will be created more attractive and high-quality guidance and care-giving programmes. The synergy of digital literacy and innovation in content development of counselling services and caregiving service bring about digitalization in counselling services. Children that are born in digital era and counsellors that are trained in digital era are digital natives. These digital natives are known as dynamic groups susceptible to changes, quick to adapt, fast to receive and versatile in using technology more than any generation that came before them. They are referred to as Generation Z, especially those who are born between 1997 and 2017 (Petrescu-Mag et al. 2023). These digital natives cannot be satisfied by “analog counsellors and care-givers”. The millennial counsellors understand better the counsellees that are of Generation Z. That is why counselling in this digital era must be digitalized for the smooth running of the counselling and caregiving services. Popoola, Ibraheem & Yusuf (2023) opine that the skills of technology owned by these digital natives will help them to understand the challenges in the counselling process and the needs of their clients and be able to proffer effective and convenient forms of innovative guidance programmes. This justifies the development of digital communication in synergy with guidance and counselling with ICT in connection with the lifestyle of rapidly changing learners as digital natives (Popoola, Ibraheem & Yusuf 2023).

Possibilities of Utilizing Virtual Technologies in Counselling and Caregiving Services

There are great possibilities, excitement and of opening new vistas in the worlds of human relations and area of scholarship through virtual technologies. Help givers must be able to learn digital literacy to meet the needs of students in the Z generation (Kavanagh & O'rourke 2016). Ukueze and Eya (2017) contend that most commonly used media for counselling such as faceto face (individual/group counselling), telephone (one-to-one), counselling by letters and hand book are becoming obsolete and cumbersome in the present day digital situation. Hence there is the need to integrate social media tools in helping profession with the availability of computers with highspeed internet access and the prevalence of hand-held digital devices.

Okoroegbe emphasizes that social media networks have evolved as a technology deeply rooted in time and space, hence the need for counsellors to acquire sufficient expertise to utilize social media sites like facebook, e-mail, google talk, twitter, skype and blogs as counselling aids to disseminate information and engage in interaction with students. Adubale, Aluede & Adebowale (2015) suggest another approach of virtual technologies through e-mail which is often refer to as asynchronous method or using video conference/chat also known as synchronous approach through telephone. Suryahakikusumah & Nadya (2020) stress that the use of social media is also raising new opportunities and challenges in clinical mental health practice. Facebook as the most popular social media and has many features provides opportunities to develop guidance service strategies.

Advantages of Digital Counseling Service for Clients

Digital counselling is gaining ground each passing day. As of 2009, there were more than four million online counselling websites (Haberstroh, 2009). The number of counsellors corresponding with their clients has increased since these last statistics because of the benefits the clients are experiencing from the online counseling (Johnson 2016). Mahev & Gordon (2000) observed that more than 63% of professional counsellors use e-counseling for education issues compared to 41% and 22% for family and anxiety/adjustment problems respectively. This indicate that virtual counselling is suitable for both counsellor and the clients. The use of virtual technology in counselling is necessitated by the fact present medium, using face-to-face is inadequate to meet students' inquiries, complaints, information dissemination, advising and counselling needs of the

students (Okopi 2010). According to Okopi (2010) e-counselling would enable counsellors to interact with more learners simultaneously at different locations using bulleting board system where counsellors announce the contact time in cyberspace and learner log in to discuss their issues, such as assignments, feedback, individual or group counselling using e-mail or block email.

In a nutshell, online counselling can be of advantage in the following ways:

Accessibility

All categories of clients among digital natives in the urban and remote areas connected by technology can be reached without much ado. Virtual technology is advantageous mostly to the digital natives of which college students are in the majority. Thomas & Knezek (2008) maintain that present day College students are described as “digital natives” because they spent their whole lives surrounded by the usage of computers, videogames, digital song players, video cams, cellphones and all toys equipment of the digital age. Such can easily be reached via online counselling. Online counselling is additionally filling the unmet need of clients living in area where professional counsellors are not found. Rural residents and expatriates who cannot have physical contact with professional due to geographical barriers can have direct access to appropriate therapist online via virtual technology. Online counselling is also advantageous to client who may have challenges with booking appointment within working hours with professional counsellors. It is also advantageous to the disable and rural dwellers who historically under-utilize face-to-face counselling services (Muraina & Kabir 2020).

Digital literacy

In the past, limited education and training in the realm of technology cause many school counsellors not to understand how to factor in technology effectively into counselling service; but in this digital era, series of workshops and training has brought lots of technological innovation into counselling and caregiving services.

Toshkhujaeva (2022) explains that digital literacy brings about awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyze and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others in the context of specific life situations, to enable

constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process with the clients. As a matter of fact, literacy and innovation being maximized through digital counselling service has brought great blessings to clients in land and climes.

Convenience

Online counseling is comfortable and convenient for both counsellor and clients who may have problem of fixing time and meeting specified spatial and special requirement for face-to-face counselling. It is most suitable to client struggling with social phobias, agoraphobia or anxiousness problems (Adewuyi & Muraina 2019; Suleiman, Muraina & Suleiman 2019).

Social stigma

Some social stigma attached to peculiar concern of clients may not be brought to open glare as it may occur in face-to-face counselling. Clients may be less stigmatized and can best self disclose their problems when their identify and confidentiality are not compromised. Face-to-face counselling may not be suitable for client suffering from social stigma, such will prefer online counselling.

Problems Facing Digital Counselling and Care-giving Services

With several gains of the technology, there are several pains either for the counsellor or the clients that arise through online counselling. Popoola, Ibraheem & Yusuf (2023) caution that counsellors and social workers may have their challenges in providing services, especially in the millennium with the goal of digital generation services (digital native). According to them, the counsellor's challenges can be in form of maladjustment conditions that arise from excessive internet use, social problems originating from internet and other addictions that arise. Cyberbullying, cyber fraud and cybercrime of which counsellor and social workers could be vulnerable victims are also problematic.

Concerning care-giving, the world of children could be dangerously tempered with if the care givers are not sensitive and selective in the discrete use of virtual technologies. Video and films that are laden with violence and aggressiveness are not good for mental health and character development of children.

Access to pornography and phono-action which leads to free sex among teenagers is the bane of uncontrolled access to cyber activism. This has eroded moral value and promote promiscuity in our permissive moral bankrupt society. This has pose serious threat to our society which government do not have solution for, as of the moment. **Problems Facing Utilizing Virtual Technology in Counselling**

i. Technical hitches

Several technical hitches such as server or network failure, inadequacies of service provider, epileptic power supply, power surge among others often hamper free flow of information thereby truncating the counselling session online. Constant breakdown in communication due to service failure or malfunctioning of ICT devices can inhibit the online counselling session.

ii. Digital illiteracy

Several people are digitally illiterate despite technological innovation in this digital era. Several people above four billion people are still living in digital darkness without access to internet facilities (Luxton 2016; World Development Report 2016). These people have no opportunity to receive global or local news and communicate with others through e-mail, Instagram, or other social network services. Others who have and can utilize the digital devices may not be interested in using such devices for online counselling, while some are technophile, some others are technophobic and may have a negative predisposition about digital counselling.

iii. Digital Darwinism

This ideology of Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest is also applicable in the cyberspace. According to Olamilekan (2013), less robust virtual technologies cannot be useful in the digital counselling, only smart phones can be easily utilized for digital counselling. Non-digital hand held devices and computer with low carrying capacities and memory are procured by low income earners which may not be useful for the online counselling. Counsellor, care-giver and client must have access to hi-tech devices in order to enjoy online counselling.

iv. Confidentiality

The very heart of counselling is confidentiality. Johnson (2016) maintain that confidentiality is not only essential for the therapeutic relationship but also the privacy of both the client and provider.

Client must be aware of the limitation of online counselling or using online counselling or using online resources and this is the job of the provider to explain (Townsend, Leese, McDonald, Li, Kerr & Backman 2015). Counsellor should do everything humanly possible to prevent confidentiality compromise by utilizing security websites and e-mail encryption.

v. Cybersecurity

Digital counselling can be hampered by cybercriminals. Issue of privacy and data security is a serious threat to digital counselling. Cyber hackers can hack clients' data and use it for pecuniary reason or even commit fraud or cyberbully the client or counsellor. Digital enterprises must build cybersecurity as a core feature of their value chains before engaging in online counselling services (Kaplan et al. 2019).

vi. Financial Implication

Financial involvement in buying sophisticated devices, constant data subscription and data consumption can truncate the efficacy of digital counselling. Some Nigerian students cannot afford personal computers or costly smartphone for internet counselling. The student also needs financial help in order to recharge their airtime to engage in uninterrupted counselling session.

Conclusion

Having considered the emerging virtual technologies and their advancement of the frontiers of counselling and care-giver, the onus lies on the counsellors and care-givers to scale up a synergy between virtual technology and counselling service using combinatorial approach to develop concept based on technology, pedagogy content and knowledge in relation to digital counselling in order to meet the need for digital natives and also bring into limelight those who are still groping in the digital darkness in solving peculiar problems of clients who can best be reached using virtual technology. To this effect, counsellors and care-givers must sharpen their wit in technology in order to digitally deliver digital services in counselling and care-giver in this digital era.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is strongly recommended that obsolete equipment in our archives and counselling offices should be replaced with modern digital equipment that assist in digital counselling .

Secondly, since contemporary counsellors and care-givers are dealing with “generation Z”, they also must be trained on how to utilize the digital facilities to facilitate effective digital counselling.

Thirdly, institutions should be garnished with all cyber facilities, electricity and ergonomics that will make service delivery effective and efficient.

Lastly, government should empower students and staff through loan or any other means to assist campus communities in acquiring, maintaining and sustaining digital services and also ensuring proper cybersecurity that are currently serious threat in this digital era.

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