The Use of Online Counselling Platform among Youth: The Interrelationship among Attitude, Self-Stigma, and Intentions Explained

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Abstract. Previous literature has shown that online counseling can be ethically provided and might have effective outcomes. However, the context surrounding online counseling application is still debatable, with limited research has been done in examining the use of online counseling. Using Ajzen's theory of planned behavior as a framework, this study investigated several factors associated with the youth intention to use online counseling. These factors are attitude toward online counseling and self-stigma of seeking help. We also seek the influence of demographic attributes of the youth to their intentions to use online counseling. Gathered through online survey, analysis is conducted from 394 youth (M age= 20.85) in Jakarta coming from both college students and workers. Results indicated that both attitude toward online counseling and self-stigma of seeking help could predict youth intention to seek help from online counseling. In addition, we found that the youth's gender, rating of perceived emotional condition, and experience of online counseling played a role in their predisposition toward online counseling, while age and socioeconomic status did not. Discussion and limitation are all listed.

Introduction

Technological advances are changing the way psychology can be delivered. The internet is ushering in a new period of online counseling provided via the internet. Online counseling is defined as a collection of psychological services that are provided via the internet[1]. Online psychological services can be categorized as :(1) e-therapy, which involves a therapist and client communicating on internet-based treatment program for a specific disorder; (2) e-counseling, which involves a therapist and client communicating via internet about an issue; (3) internet self-guided programs that do not involve a therapist; (4) psycho-educational websites; (5) online support groups; and (6) online screenings/assessments [2].

Researchers have started to examine the therapeutic relationships involved in online counseling. Some factors lead communication in online therapy differently than in face-to-face therapy, terming this the online disinhibition effect [3]. On the other hand, another empirical investigation shows that online therapy successfully produces a therapeutic relationship between youth client and therapist, and this relationship positively contributes to the client outcomes [4]. Despite the contradiction on the outcome of online counseling, many agrees that to date there is still limited
research that has been done in examining the use of online counseling. Meanwhile, such practice is starting to be common [5].

Another major objection on online counseling is targeted toward its ethical issues. Major ethical issues involve considerations for the therapeutic relationship, client confidentiality, informed consent, medical records, and suicide. As a responds, there is now an attempt on weighing the ethical issues involved in online counseling by psychologists [6]. These developments have laid a foundation to claim that online counseling can be ethically performed. Due to these developments, the ethical climate is currently one that is open to online counseling.

This research aims to seek the contributing factors of the youth intention to seek online counseling. Our focus on intention is due to the nature of the variable itself. Ajzen (2005) stated that intention maintains the disposition of behavior until the right time and the right opportunity, so effort is needed to translate this intention into action [7]. Thus, examining the factors associated with intention is suitable to dig further about the application of online counseling, in respect to its current debates on pro and contra. Based on the theory of planned behavior by Ajzen, we predict that the youth intention to seek online counseling depends on their level of three aspects, namely atttitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control.

Attitude toward the behavior is a positive or negative evaluation of a person in performing certain behaviors. The attitude is determined by expected consequences of the target behavior, in which positive evaluation is associated with positive consequences, and vice versa. Subjective norm is a person's perception of social pressure to display or not to display certain behavior under considerations. It also refers to a person's belief of the acceptability of behavior in the eye of other individuals or in-group. The third aspect named perceived behavioral control is the sense of efficacy or perceived ability to display certain behavior. Perceived behavioral control is the antecedent and has a motivational impact on the intention, which depends on the presence or absence of factors that facilitate or inhibit the conduct of corresponding behavior. These beliefs are shaped by past experiences of conducting the behavior, and also by gaining secondary information from observations of the experiences of others. If the individual thinks that there are more opportunities than the obstacles anticipated, then their perceived behavior control will be greater [7].

In this research, we use the framework of theory of planned behaviour by Ajzen with several adaptations in accordance with the online counselling context. The attitude toward the behaviour is adapted into attitudes toward online counselling, defined as the positive, negative, or neutral beliefs toward online mental health services. The subjective norm is adapted into self-stigma of seeking help, defined as the belief that the behaviour of seeking online mental health treatment is unacceptable. In addition, Ajzen stated that measuring perceived behavioural control will only provide low degree of accuracy to predict behaviour when people have little information about behaviour. Due to the nature of online counselling as a new kind of psychological treatment available and is still looking for its applicability, our aim to explore factors of youth intention to seek online counselling does not yet involved the measure of perceived behavioural control.

Ajzen also mentioned several background factors that are known to influence one's given beliefs. Some of these factors are age, gender, socioeconomic status, mood, and information exposure. In respect to the belief held by youth in constructing their overall intention to use online counselling, thus we aim to explore the relationship of these background factors with the youth intention to use online counselling.
Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine if the youth intention to seek online counselling could be predicted by their attitude toward online counselling and their self-stigma of seeking help (Figure 1). We also aim to examine the relationship of several individual variables with the youth intentions to seek online counselling. This research will provide understanding of how youth individual differences impact their intentions to seek online counselling services. Much theoretical discussion has addressed these issues but little empirical research has examined these factors. The results will help shape how online counselling services are viewed in the future and may be used to reach certain youth who do not seek help through traditional services.

**Method**

**Participants**

The data was obtained from a sample of 394 youths aged 18-30 years old ($M = 20.85$, $SD = 1.60$) in Jakarta. Data is collected through the medium of online survey using cross-sectional approach based on convenience sampling. The participants consisted of 263 female (66.8%) and 131 male (33.2%). Among them, 59 persons (15%) are worker while the remaining 335 (85%) are students. For the student participants, the majority of them ($N=115, 34.3\%$) are still on their 4th semester in college. In respect to the experience of using online counseling, 72 persons (18.3%) out of all participants have taken online counseling before, while persons 322 have not.

**Measurements**

**Intentions to Seek Counseling Inventory – Online (ISCI)**

To measure the participant intentions to seek online counseling, we adapt The Intentions to Seek Counseling Inventory – Online (ISCI) by. This inventory assesses how likely an individual is to actually seek online counseling for different concerns or problems [8]. The ISCI is a self-report instrument consisting of 16 items that are rated from 1 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). Higher scores reflect greater intention to seek online counseling. After doing language adaptation, the 16-items ISCI yields a corrected item-total correlation (CrtT) values ranging from 0.227-0.637 and Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.846. Thus, the ISCI satisfied the standard properties of reliability and construct validity.

**The Online Counseling Attitudes Scale (OCAS)**

To measure the participant attitude toward online counseling, we adapt The Online Counseling Attitudes Scale. The prior scale contains two subscales of 5 value items and 5 discomfort.
items, with the total items of 10 [9]. Participants respond to questions with Likert-scale responses from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores reflect more positive attitudes toward online counseling. After doing language and psychometric adaptation, two items were eliminated due to the CrIT below 0.2 as guided by Nunally & Bernstein (1994). The 8-items OCAS now yields a CrIT values ranging from 0.406-0.711 and Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.840.

The Self Stigma of Seeking Help Scale – Online (SSOSH)

To measure the participant self-stigma toward online counseling, we use the adapted version of The Self Stigma of Seeking Help Scale – Online (SSOSH) [1]. The adapted scale has 10 items in which participants respond to statements around stigma related to the practice of online counseling on a 5-point Likert-style scale, from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Higher scores reflect greater stigmas individual hold toward online counseling, means that the lesser confidence for online counseling. After doing language and psychometric adaptation, we reduce half the items into 5-items SSOSH with CrIT values ranging from 0.267-0.776 and Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.815. We decided to use this scale for it satisfactorily displayed the expected reliability and validity coefficient.

Procedure and Analysis

The first step was to adapt the instruments that were not originally available in Bahasa Indonesia. Next, an analysis of reliability coefficient and CrIT is conducted to validate the instruments. After determining the validity and reliability of the instruments, we collect the data which also include the informed consent of the study. Finally, the data gathered were transcribed into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS 18 software. For the purpose of this quantitative study, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses to investigate the influences of certain predictors on the target variable. We also conducted several correlation analysis and analysis of variances to explore if there is a relationship between individual variables with the target variable.

Result

Table 1 presents the total scores of the variables and related dimensions (minimum, maximum, and mean scores, and standard deviations).

According to Table 1, on the average the youth had moderate levels of ISCI (Intention) ($M=41.75$), based on the cut-off $32 < x < 65$. Regarding OCAS (Attitude), the results show that on the average the youth had high level of attitude toward online counseling ($M=34.03$, cut-off $16 < x < 33$), which means their attitude tends to be positive. In addition, their SSOSH (Self-stigma) score is also high ($M=11.43$, above 17). It means that the average had a high level of stigma related to the practice of online counseling.

Regarding the regression analysis, Table 2 shows that the influence of the various predictor on ISCI accounted for 5.3% under the fit model ($F > 1$ and $p < 0.001$). Moreover, higher levels of OCAS predicted higher scores of the participants’ ISCI. The same result also applies to SSOSH, in which higher levels of SSOSH predicted higher scores in the participants’ ISCI. However, from correlation analysis we found that SSOSH is negatively correlated to OCAS. Thus, our first research question is answered that the youth attitude toward online counseling and their self-stigma of seeking help could predict their intention to seek online counseling.

Another research question is if there is relationship of individual variables with the intentions to seek online counseling. We found that participant’s current emotional state is negatively related to intention to seek online counseling (ISCI, $r= -0.307$, $p<0.01$) and also on attitude toward online counseling (OCAS, $r= -0.130$, $p<0.01$). We also found that participant’s gender plays a role in their intention to seek online counseling and self-stigma of seeking help. Female is significantly higher on their intention to seek online counseling than male ($t(392)=3.266$, $p=0.001$). On the other hand, male is significant hold a greater self stigma of seeking help in comparison to female ($t(392)=3.177$, $p=0.002$).
In respect to the experience of online counseling, those with experience are higher on their intention to continue and seek online counseling than those without experience (t(392) = 2.270, p = 0.024). However, the same effect is not found on attitude toward online counseling and self-stigma of seeking help. There are also no differences nor relationships of age and socioeconomic status on intentions to seek online counseling, attitude toward online counseling, and self-stigma of seeking help.

Table 1. *Descriptive Analysis of the Variables and Background Factors*

| Variables          | Minimum | Maximum | Mean  | SD   |
|--------------------|---------|---------|-------|------|
| ISCI (Intention)   | 16      | 64      | 41.75 | 8.874|
| OCAS (Attitude)    | 9       | 48      | 34.03 | 6.711|
| SSOSH (Self-stigma)| 5       | 30      | 11.43 | 4.283|
| Age                | 18      | 30      | 20.85 | 1.602|
| Rating of Perceived Emotion | 1 | 10 | 5.64 | 2.141|

Gender

| Type           | N    | Percentage (%) |
|----------------|------|----------------|
| Male           | 131  | 33.2           |
| Female         | 263  | 66.8           |
| <Rp. 1.000.000 | 92   | 27.5           |
| Rp. 1 - 2.000.000 | 150 | 44.8           |

Socioeconomic Status (student only)

| Type                  | N  | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------|----|----------------|
| Rp. 2 - 3.000.000     | 61 | 18.2           |
| Rp. 3 - 5.000.000     | 22 | 6.6            |
| > Rp.5.000.000        | 10 | 3.0            |
| With experience       | 14 | 3.6            |
| Without experience    | 45 | 11.4           |

Table 2. *Results from the Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of the Predictors of ISCI*

| Predictors         | Non-standardized coefficients | Standardized coefficients | Sig. |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|------|
| (Constant)         | 28.801                        | 2.866                     | .000 |
| OCAS (Attitude)    | .214                          | .105                      | .103 | .043 |
| SSOSH (Self-stigma)| .309                          | .067                      | .233 | .000 |

| F                  | 10.999                         |                            |      |
| Sig.               | 0.000                          |                            |      |
| R²                 | 0.053                          |                            |      |
| Adjusted R Square  | 0.049                          |                            |      |

Discussion

Online counseling is a new area that is unfamiliar to most people. The current study is limited in its generalization due to the method it used for the intentions measures. The participants were asked
about issues that they may not have been experiencing at the time. A more accurate perception of what online counseling is may impact these relationships, and their attitudes, self-stigma, and intentions may have been different if they were actually in need. Future studies should address this issue to refine the findings. In addition, a measure of perceive behavior control of participant is strongly advised to better predict the likelihood of youth seeking online counseling service.

Conclusion

From this study, we conclude that both attitude toward online counseling and self-stigma of seeking help could predict youth intention to seek help from online counseling. In addition, we found that the youth's gender, rating of perceived emotional condition, and experience of online counseling also play a role in their predisposition toward online counseling, while age and socioeconomic status did not. This study gives an insight that online counseling can serve as a promising medium for improving collective mental health condition of youth under some circumstances.

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