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Digital Guidance and Counseling Services for Improving Student Mental Health in African Universities

Flora Enotiemwonmwan Egbadon

Department of General Studies/ Guidance & Counselling, College of General Studies, Wellspring University, Benin City, Edo State

Abstract: Mental health has been an increasing issue among university students in Africa due to the influence of academic stress, social problems, financial constraints, and lack of professional counseling. Digital counseling has emerged as one of the ways through which universities can offer counseling to students for the improvement of their mental health. This study evaluates the role of digital counseling in enhancing the psychological welfare of university students in Africa. Through literature review only, the paper reviews existing literature on the availability, awareness, utilization, effectiveness and limitations of digital counseling services in universities. It focuses on the ways universities have embraced the digitalization of counseling through online counseling, use of mobile applications for mental wellness, virtual group counseling and others. At the same time, the paper highlights the awareness of students about the digital counseling and its effects on their psychological well-being. According to the findings of the literature review, the use of digital counseling can prove useful in expanding accessibility, reducing stigma and offering flexible mental counseling services in university settings. Nevertheless, several constraints including internet connectivity challenges, digital illiteracy, privacy issues, insufficient funding, lack of qualified counselors and lack of institutional commitment have limited the implementation of such services in universities.

Keywords: Digital counseling, guidance services, student mental health, African universities, psychological well-being.

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1. Introduction

The issue of student mental health is now considered a crucial topic in higher education around the world, and universities in Africa are not immune to this problem. Students experience a variety of pressures that may lead to vulnerability to stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, loneliness, suicidal behavior, etc. Transitioning to university education means leaving home, getting used to the new academic requirements, financial uncertainty, peer pressure, identity creation, and worries concerning job prospects. Moreover, in many African countries, students encounter additional problems like poverty, political instability, underdevelopment of mental health services, stigma, overcrowded universities, and lack of trained counselors and psychologists. As per the World Health Organization (2022), mental disorders account for a considerable part of disability of young people, and investment in accessible mental health support should be made, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Due to the majority of university students belonging to the youth and young adult age groups, universities can play a crucial role in identifying mental health problems, preventing them, providing counseling and psychosocial services.

The issues related to students' mental well-being have been growing in importance in African higher education since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic interrupted the schedules of universities, caused changes in the learning environment, increased financial difficulties of students, and made them uncertain about the future. Despite returning to campuses, many students continued to experience psychological distress because of the loss of learning, mourning, social isolation, and reduced motivation. Research has shown that university students all over the world experienced elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress due to the pandemic and its consequences, and students in countries with resource constraints faced extra obstacles for formal care (Kaggwa et al., 2022; Osborn et al., 2022, Idhalama, et. al. 2023). Thus, universities in Africa are challenged with the necessity of reconsidering traditional counseling models that imply only face-to-face consultations and counseling on campus. However, although conventional counseling has its worth, it might be insufficient for modern university students.

Digital guidance and counseling can become a solution to mental health issues of students in African universities. Services of digital counseling may encompass online counseling, telephone counseling, mobile applications, chatting, email counseling, virtual peer groups, screening for mental disorders, psychoeducational websites, crisis hotlines, artificial intelligence referrals, etc. Digital counseling allows students who cannot or do not want to visit counseling on campus to get flexible and confidential help. Besides, universities can provide preventive mental health education, stress management, career and academic advice, referrals to other services via digital platforms. Moreover, due to the growing availability of mobile phones and internet in Africa, there is a great potential for digital counseling of university students (ITU, 2023). According to the International Telecommunication Union (2023), the use of internet and mobile broadband has continued to grow all over the world, including Africa. Nevertheless, there are still some inequalities in the usage of digital technologies in Africa because of differences in geographical areas, gender, and income. For university students, who belong to the most digitalized group of people in terms of their age, digital counseling can be especially useful.

The importance of digital guidance and counseling services is also associated with the existing stigma related to mental illnesses in many African countries. Some students avoid going to the university counseling center because of the fear of being perceived as "weak," "mad," or being under a spell. Moreover, they may be concerned about the negative impact on their reputation, academic performance, relationships, and job prospects. Digital counseling can reduce these obstacles because of the privacy that online services provide. Online platforms can also normalize seeking help through campaigns on mental disorders, self-assessments, and psychoeducation. As research on digital mental health has shown recently, the interventions provided with the help of technologies are efficient for improving access, reducing psychological distress, and complementing traditional services provided in culturally competent, ethical manner with the involvement of specialists (Naslund et al., 2021; Torous et al., 2021). Thus, in university environment, digital counseling can become a part of a more complex student support strategy alongside student affairs, academic advising, disability services, health centers, and emergency response.

There are several challenges to the implementation of digital guidance and counseling services in African universities. First, there is still a great deal of digital inequality. Some students lack access to the internet, smartphones, privacy for online counseling, or money for purchasing data. In addition, electricity shortage and weak information technology systems of universities can limit the service delivery. Second, digital counseling poses some ethical and professional issues concerning the protection of the confidentiality of patients, informed consent, data protection, counselor competency, emergency management, and cross-border service delivery. Data related to the mental health of students are especially sensitive and need to be kept secret, and universities should ensure compliance of the digital systems with the required standards and prevention of the misuse of personal data. The emergence of artificial intelligence and automatization of mental health tools increases the need for regulation, transparency, and human control over digital tools (WHO, 2021). Without proper planning, digital counseling can only reproduce existing inequalities or give shallow support instead of the necessary intensive psychological or psychiatric care.

The problem of cultural relevance is another issue that should be addressed. Most of the tools of digital mental health are created in high-income countries and may not reflect the realities of African students: their

language, values, beliefs, family structures, spiritual beliefs, and everyday experiences. To become effective in universities of Africa, digital counseling services should be culturally adapted and tailored according to the needs of university students. It may include multilingual platforms, culturally relevant counseling techniques, cooperation with students, and referral networks involving campus health facilities, providers of community mental health care, and appropriate faith-based services. As research on global mental health shows, digital interventions are more likely to be sustainable and accepted by users when users are engaged in the development of interventions and when interventions are integrated into systems of care (Borghouts et al., 2021; Lehtimaki et al., 2021). Therefore, African universities should not simply adopt digital counseling models but create student-centered systems that suit local needs.

This study is significant because of its focus on the interconnection of the problems of mental health, digital innovations, and development of higher education in Africa. Although universities widely employ digital technologies for teaching and administration, few of them systematically integrate digital tools into student counseling services. There is a need for research on how digital counseling can enhance students' mental health, what barriers exist in its implementation, and how the efficiency of the service can be improved. Research of this kind will contribute to policy development, counseling practice, student welfare programs, and sustainable development goals on good health and well-being as well as inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2023). Healthy students will more likely participate in classes, achieve academic success, establish positive relationships, complete their education, and contribute to society.

In conclusion, digital guidance and counseling services can become a groundbreaking method of improving students' mental health in African universities. They open up opportunities for early intervention, greater access, confidentiality, psychoeducation, crisis counseling, and continuity of care. On the other hand, their effectiveness depends on the elimination of digital exclusion, ethical risks, professional standards, cultural adaptation, and institutional commitment. As African universities develop, digital counseling should be seen not as an alternative but as an additional service complementing human-centered care.

Statement of the Problem

There has been an increase in the number of student psychological issues in African universities. Such problems include stress, anxiety, depression, academic pressures, challenges in socialization, financial difficulties, and uncertainties about future job prospects. Although there have been guidance and counseling services in many universities, access to such services could be hampered by the lack of adequate professionals in counseling and guidance, stigmatization of seeking psychological help, lack of awareness of such services, underfunding of the programs and the high number of students in the university. This means that most of the students needing emotional and psychological care could go unaddressed and end up underperforming academically, withdrawing from courses, engaging in drug use or any other negative consequences. Due to the fast development of technology, the provision of online counseling services, mobile applications, tele-counseling, chat services, and virtual guidance services has been facilitated. Nevertheless, there has not been enough study on the potential of digital guidance and counseling services to enhance student mental health in the African universities. The need to explore the opportunities, challenges, effectiveness, ethical considerations, and requirements for providing such services in the African university setting is important. This study explores the literature on digital guidance and counseling services and their contribution to enhancing student mental health in African universities.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the availability of digital guidance and counseling services in African universities.
2. To assess students' awareness and utilization of digital counseling platforms for mental health support.
3. To investigate the effectiveness of digital counseling services in improving students' psychological well-being.
4. To identify barriers limiting students' access to digital guidance and counseling services in universities.
5. To determine the relationship between digital counseling usage and students' academic adjustment outcomes.
6. To recommend strategies for improving digital guidance and counseling services in African universities.

2. Research Methodology

This research employed a pure literature review method to evaluate the role of digital counseling and guidance services in enhancing student mental health in African universities. The literature review method comprised a systematic process of searching, selecting, analyzing, and synthesizing information from journal articles, books, conference papers, policy documents, institutional reports, and credible online sources. Data were searched for using reputable academic databases and platforms such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ERIC, and ResearchGate. Some of the keywords used in the research included “digital counseling,” “online guidance services,” “student mental health,” “African universities,” “e-counseling,” “telepsychology,” and “mental health services in higher education.” The research analyzed information related to the application, usefulness, challenges, accessibility, ethical considerations, and effectiveness of digital counseling interventions in universities, especially those in Africa. Data were selected according to their relevance, credibility, currency, and contribution to the research question. The selected literature was analyzed thematically to identify key themes, gaps, and findings concerning digital counseling and student mental health outcomes. As the research was based solely on secondary data sources, no fieldwork, questionnaire surveys, or interviews were conducted.

3. Literature Review

Availability of digital guidance and counseling services in African universities

Nowadays, the availability of digital guidance and counseling services at African universities has become more widespread than before, which is explained by the fast development of technologies, high demand for mental health services among students, and the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on university organizations. Prior to the pandemic, most of the universities provided face-to-face counseling services to students via student affairs divisions, university clinics, chaplaincies, or counseling centers (Agyapong et al., 2022; WHO, 2022). However, the outbreak revealed the weaknesses of conventional counseling models, which made many universities implement new digital platforms, such as telephone counseling, e-mail counseling, WhatsApp, videoconferencing, university portals, and applications aimed at improving students' mental health (Agyapong et al., 2022; WHO, 2022). As a result, some universities considered hybrid models where online counseling and in-person counseling services co-exist.

At African higher education institutions, there is much variability in terms of the availability of digital counseling services in different regions, countries, and types of universities. Universities located in countries having relatively good digital infrastructures, including South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, and Egypt, have shown some growth of their interest in implementing e-counseling platforms, online student support portals, telepsychology services, and mental health awareness programs promoted through social media (Makhubela, 2021; Naslund et al., 2021). For example, several universities located in South Africa have introduced online booking systems, virtual counseling consultations, and online psychoeducation services as part of their student wellness programs. At the same time, many Kenyan and Nigerian universities started to use WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meet, and their institutional learning management systems to provide counseling and mental health services to students, especially when campuses are closed and stressful study period is approaching (Ojo et al., 2023).

However, despite this progress, digital counseling services are still unequally distributed between African universities. Many public universities having a great number of students are often deficient in professional counselors, funding, and technological capacity to develop comprehensive digital counseling systems (UNESCO, 2022). Furthermore, in many cases, digital counseling services are informal and depend on individual efforts of counselors who use their personal phones, emails, or social media accounts rather than university-managed technologies. It creates additional problems concerning the issues of privacy, confidentiality, documentation, ethics, and data protection (Hanach et al., 2023). Additionally, many universities lack digital mental health platforms, tele-counselors, and relevant institutional policies regulating online counseling services.

The availability of digital counseling services also depends on digital inequality in Africa. Mobile phone penetration in Africa has grown significantly, but internet access, electricity supply, data affordability, and smartphone ownership are still big barriers for many students (GSMA, 2023). In addition, universities and students located in rural areas are more disadvantaged. Thus, even though some universities are able to implement digital counseling services, students may not be able to use them because of their lack of technology.

There is another problem related to digital counseling – the shortage of culturally appropriate digital tools for counseling African students. Existing digital mental health content developed in a Western context does not reflect all cultural beliefs, languages, help-seeking behavior patterns, and the understanding of mental health of African students (Naslund et al., 2021; WHO, 2022). African university students suffer from the problems with their mental health caused by the combination of factors, including academic pressure, fear of unemployment, expectations of family, financial problems, social stigma, and political/economic instability. Hence, existing digital counseling services should be adjusted to local conditions in order to be efficient and appealing.

In any case, the existing literature reveals the potential of digital guidance and counseling services for African universities. Such services may increase access to counseling services, make the waiting times shorter, offer flexible schedule, and reach those students who may prefer to receive counseling online in order to avoid being seen in the counseling center because of the stigma (Agyapong et al., 2022; Torous et al., 2021). In addition, digital tools may be helpful for conducting preventive work through screening, psychoeducation, peer support groups, referrals in crisis situations, and provision of self-help resources.

Students' awareness and utilization of digital counseling platforms for mental health support

Student awareness and use of digital counseling platforms are significant variables in determining the effectiveness of digital mental health interventions at African universities. If a university is offering digital counseling services, then such students should have awareness of its existence as well as positive attitudes towards it. In the event that university students do not know that such digital mental health support exists, they may shy away from it due to fears such as mistrust of the platforms and fear of confidentiality breaches (Ojo et al., 2023; WHO, 2022).

Awareness will depend on how effective the communication by the university regarding digital counseling is. In most cases, digital counseling is offered by counseling departments which may not be highly visible to the university students. University students find out about the existence and importance of digital counseling through orientation programmes, referrals, or crisis situations (Makhubela, 2021). Once the digital platforms are introduced into the university and no further publicity done, the students will end up using alternative forms of counseling such as from social circles, friends, religious figures, and family members. This shows that introduction of digital platforms alone does not guarantee that there will be awareness of its existence and use. The university administration will need to actively advertise such digital counseling services through student portals, learning management systems, SMS alerts, social media pages, campus radios, online seminars, and faculty level announcements.

Utilization of digital counseling platforms in the context of African university students is dependent on mental health literacy. The students who can detect signs of stress, depression, anxiety, substance misuse, and academic burnout are likely to utilize the platforms. Those students who understand the signs of psychological distress will not view such distress as weakness, spiritual attack, or normal academic pressures (Campbell et al., 2022). Stigma on mental health continues to pose barriers in the help-seeking among the African university students. Most of the students feel that seeking help from counseling will make them appear weak, mad, unstable, and not capable of handling university pressures. The digital platforms will provide privacy, anonymity, and ease of use to the students. However, they still fear being exposed since they cannot tell whether the discussion in the digital platform is going to remain private.

Digital literacy is another factor that influences the utilization of digital counseling platforms. While young people are considered as 'digital natives', it does not mean that all students have the skills of accessing the digital counseling platforms. They may not be able to use structured e-counseling system, install mental health

applications, use online screening tool, and participate in video counseling. Those students who have limited internet access, low digital skills, have disabilities or come from poor families will be left behind (GSMA, 2023). This means that the utilization of the digital mental health counseling will depend not only on student willingness but also on accessibility, affordability, usability, and multilingual platforms.

Perception of the quality and relevancy of the digital counseling platform will influence the utilization. There are some students who will choose face-to-face counseling since they consider it to be more personal, emotionally supportive, and more trustworthy while others prefer online counseling since it gives them convenience, privacy, and ease in communication, especially in cases of sexual health, trauma, depression, failure in academics, relationship issues, and substance abuse (Torous et al., 2021). Studies conducted on digital mental health interventions indicate that utilization of the platforms depends on user-friendliness, responsiveness, confidentiality, and integration into the current university systems (Agyapong et al., 2022; Naslund et al., 2021).

The popularity of the commonly used platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams has increased since these platforms are easily accessible, inexpensive, and familiar. However, the professional standards of privacy and secure clinical documentation of information may not be met using such platforms. Thus, there is a conflict in ensuring accessibility and ethical provision of the services. The universities will need to balance the students' convenience and professional standards such as giving informed consent, confidentiality, emergency responses, referrals, and data security (Hanach et al., 2023).

In the recent times, it has been indicated that students' utilization of digital counseling will increase when the service is provided together with other student services. For instance, academic advising, career counseling, peer mentoring, disability services, and mental health counseling may be combined in one digital student support platform. This will minimize fragmentation and normalize help-seeking. Also, the role of peer ambassadors, student leaders, and mental health clubs should not be ignored in increasing awareness and utilization of digital counseling services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the awareness and utilization of digital counseling platforms among African university students are increasing but are constrained by stigma, limited publicity, digital inequality, low mental health literacy, confidentiality, and questions on the quality of services provided. To enhance the utilization, universities need awareness campaigns, culturally appropriate mental health education, accessible platforms, and student-friendly communication.

Effectiveness of digital counseling services in improving students' psychological well-being

The impact of digital counseling on the psychological well-being of university students has attracted considerable attention within the field of higher education scholarship, especially given the growing prevalence of mental disorders in college students since the onset of the pandemic. Psychological well-being encompasses emotional stability, coping with stress, resilience, self-esteem, social relationships, academic adaptation, and other aspects. The potential contribution of digital counseling can be discussed in terms of the opportunity to ensure rapid access to professional help, psychoeducation, self-help, crisis intervention, and continuous communication between students and counselors (Agyapong et al., 2022; WHO, 2022).

Globally, the positive effects of digital mental health interventions include alleviation of the symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, and psychological distress among college students when implemented appropriately (Torous et al., 2021; Lattie et al., 2022). Types of digital interventions include video counseling, text-based counseling, guided self-help programs, mobile mental health apps, online cognitive behavioral therapy, digital peer support groups, and online psychoeducation. In Africa, digital counseling has the potential to mitigate such problems as the shortage of counselors, large size of university populations, stigmatization, and geographic distance between students and support services (Naslund et al., 2021).

First, digital counseling may increase the accessibility of professional help. Students will be able to receive counseling services from their hostels, from home, from their workplaces, and from remote locations without the need to visit counseling offices. Accessibility is particularly crucial for distance learners, part-time students, students with disabilities, and students who are afraid of public exposure. Moreover, digital services will be

able to provide a quicker response in the case of a crisis, academic pressures, relationship difficulties, financial issues, and trauma experienced by students. Timely intervention and prevention will lead to the improvement of students' coping abilities (WHO, 2022).

Another way in which digital counseling may affect psychological well-being is by contributing to the continuity of care. There are limitations inherent to traditional counseling services provided by universities, such as a restricted schedule, crowded schedule, and long waiting time. With the use of digital platforms, counselors will be able to communicate with students, to send reminders, and to follow up. Psychoeducational material provided through the Internet can teach students how to cope, to relax, to solve problems, and to regulate their emotions. These materials are especially useful in terms of prevention of mental problems, not only the treatment (Lattie et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, certain conditions are necessary for the effectiveness of digital counseling services in African universities. First, counselors should be properly trained in tele-counseling ethics, digital communication, online risk assessment, and crisis management. Online counseling is not simply a transferring of face-to-face counseling into an online format but a specific skill requiring the development of particular competences such as dealing with non-verbal limitations, maintaining confidentiality, documentations of sessions, and responding to emergencies when the student does not visit personally (Hanach et al., 2023). Without such training, digital counseling may become inconsistent, unprofessional, or less effective.

Second, effectiveness depends on the reliability and appropriateness of technology used. Problems with internet connection, poor privacy in students' houses or hostels, high cost of data, and power outages may disrupt the sessions and make counseling sessions less productive. Students who cannot afford to pay for the Internet or buy devices for using services may become deprived of counseling and even more discriminated (GSMA, 2023). Thus, universities should provide accessible and secure technologies if digital counseling is expected to have an impact on psychological well-being of students.

Third, cultural relevance of services is crucial for their success. Digital counseling services are more efficient when they reflect the language, cultural values, religion, family structure, and experience of students. In many African countries, students usually receive counseling from professionals in addition to other types of support such as religious, family, and community-based interventions. Consequently, efficient digital counseling should avoid importing models and should adopt culturally responsive approach respecting the local understanding of distress and promoting evidence-based practices (Naslund et al., 2021).

Fourth, digital counseling should be incorporated into the overall mental health system. Isolated platforms are unlikely to make any serious contribution to the problem because they do not interact with face-to-face counseling, referrals to psychiatrists, academic, disability, emergency, and peer support services. Hybrid models appear to be especially promising as they will provide students with an option to choose between online and face-to-face counseling according to their preferences, severity of distress, and needs (Agyapong et al., 2022). Students experiencing mild or moderate stress can benefit from online counseling and self-help, whereas severe depression, suicidal ideas, psychosis, and trauma should be addressed in person.

Current literature also emphasizes the need to evaluate the outcomes of digital counseling services. Many universities implement digital counseling tools without proper evaluation of their efficiency. Such evaluation should include measures of students' satisfaction, alleviation of distress, improvement of academic functioning, rate of usage, referral outcomes, and access equity. Evidence-based implementation will enable universities to establish the actual impact of digital counseling on the well-being of students rather than creating an illusion of innovation. Overall, digital counseling services can become efficient in terms of improving students' psychological well-being when they are accessible, confidential, culturally appropriate, professionally provided, and embedded in the larger network of student support services.

Barriers limiting students' access to digital guidance and counseling services in universities

With the rise in digital learning and other student services, there has been an increase in the availability of digital counseling in universities. However, student accessibility to digital counseling has not been uniform, especially in African higher learning institutions due to challenges facing the digital transformation. Lack of broadband internet access has been one of the main barriers to digital counseling. Even though the digital

learning and student support platforms have increased since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of students have experienced problems in accessing internet connection, unreliable network in the campuses, and expensive data. Many students from rural or poor backgrounds find difficulty accessing stable broadband internet connection, data plans, laptop, and mobile phones to conduct effective online counseling (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2021, Idhalama, et. al. 2025). The students in many African universities need access to smartphones, laptops, data, and private space to communicate in digital counseling, but not all of them have this access. Therefore, a digital divide exists, and economically privileged students are likely to receive digital counseling compared to disadvantaged students (Afolabi & Adedoyin, 2022).

Low digital literacy of students and counseling personnel has been another barrier to digital counseling. Though many university students regularly use social media, it does not mean that they feel comfortable communicating online through e-counseling portal, online appointment system, learning management systems, and telepsychology apps. Students might fail to register, make appointments online, submit documentation, and maintain professional online communication with counselors (Bond et al., 2021). Similarly, university counselors may not be fully trained in digital counseling ethics, online communication skills, virtual crisis intervention, and data protection (Wind et al., 2021).

Privacy and confidentiality issues have hindered students' adoption of online counseling services. Counseling is very sensitive, and many students might feel uncomfortable with sharing personal information, psychological, academic, or family problems in the insecure platforms (Naslund et al., 2022). The issues have been exacerbated with shared accommodation, devices, and cybercafes, whereby students cannot ensure privacy in virtual counseling sessions. Privacy and confidentiality issues have been made worse with inadequate university policies on data protection, informed consent, documentation, and utilization of third-party digital counseling services (Semo & Frissa, 2022; WHO, 2022). The students may prefer not to access any digital counseling because of this barrier.

Stigma has also hindered digital counseling access. Students often associate mental illness or counseling services with abnormal behavior or weakness, failure, and vulnerability. In most African communities, students often prefer getting assistance from family members, religious figures, and peers rather than counselors due to stigma (Semo & Frissa, 202; WHO, 2022). Digital counseling can solve the problem of stigma by ensuring anonymity of counseling sessions, but at the same time, it causes increased anxiety to students that online systems cannot guarantee confidentiality. Moreover, poor awareness has also prevented utilization of digital counseling since many universities introduce digital counseling portals and helplines with no proper student orientation and integration into academic advisory system (Cranfield et al., 2021).

Other barriers include poor institutional resources. Lack of sufficient number of professional counselors, digital infrastructure, funding, and administrative effort to provide online counseling services can limit their access (UNESCO, 2023). Poor funding to counseling units means that the digital counseling services will remain at a minimum level of communication via emails and social media messages (UNESCO, 2023). Inadequate electricity supply and platform outages also limit the repeated usage of digital counseling. Therefore, barriers to digital guidance and counseling are multifaceted.

Relationship between digital counseling usage and students' academic adjustment outcomes

Digital counseling is becoming more prevalent because it is increasingly associated with students' academic adjustment. The achievement of success in university not only requires students' intelligence but also their emotional well-being, motivation, time management, socialization, career direction, and coping skills. Academic adjustment denotes students' adaptation to the requirements of university learning and involves such aspects as attendance of classes, management of workload, establishment of relationships with professors and peers, coping with stress, and performance. Digital counseling can facilitate these factors by means of timely, flexible, and student-focused interventions (Lattie et al., 2022).

First of all, the usage of digital counseling helps to improve the accessibility of counseling. Many students do not go to counseling due to a variety of reasons like lack of time, embarrassment, distance from the counseling center, and clashing classes (Torous et al., 2021). The usage of digital counseling platforms, chats, video calls, and online scheduling can overcome these obstacles by allowing students to seek assistance from the hostels,

homes, or other distant places. When the students can be provided with counseling in time, it will increase the chance of dealing with academic stress, bad habits of studying, fear of examinations, and academic adjustment problems. It can facilitate attendance of classes, completion of assignments, persistence, and general involvement in academic life.

Secondly, the usage of digital counseling improves students' psychological well-being. Research conducted after the pandemic shows that global students experienced more anxiety, depression, loneliness, financial issues, and uncertainty in academic achievements (WHO, 2022; Wang et al., 2021). These psychological problems are associated with low concentration, lack of motivation, absenteeism, and poor academic performance. Students can receive counseling on these issues by using online counseling platforms. Digital interventions in the area of mental health can decrease symptoms of anxiety and depression among students when they are accessible, structured, and professionally provided (Lattie et al., 2022; Naslund et al., 2022). The improvement in emotional state will increase academic adjustment.

Thirdly, the usage of digital counseling can help in the process of career and academic decisions. Digital counseling platforms can assist students in selection of courses, understanding of academic regulations, career planning, preparation for work, and receipt of information about scholarships and internships. With proper academic and career guidance, the students are unlikely to feel confused, make mistakes in course selection, drop out, or lose motivation (OECD, 2021). The digital system can allow conducting early alert interventions in the case of students' absence at lessons, poor performance, and repeated need for academic assistance. It will allow counselors and academic advisers to intervene and prevent dropouts and failures.

Nevertheless, the use of digital counseling does not mean automatic facilitation of students' academic adjustment. The effectiveness of the counseling depends on the quality of the service, students' trust in the platform, competence of the counselor, confidentiality, responsiveness, and interaction of the system with other university support programs. In the case of poor management of digital counseling, students can experience delayed reactions, impersonal communication, and insufficient follow-up that will affect the level of trust and decrease the impact on adjustment outcomes (Wind et al., 2021). Moreover, the lack of internet access of the students will result in irregular usage of digital counseling and low influence on adjustment.

Some researches claim that the best outcomes in terms of adjustment can be obtained by the application of the blended model of counseling. The blended model combines online appointment booking, online sessions, mental health resources, academic counseling portal, and actual counseling when needed (Torous et al., 2021). It allows to provide flexibility while preserving human touch and intensive support for complicated cases of students. Thus, the usage of digital counseling is positively related to the academic adjustment as it facilitates access, decreases stress, increases academic planning and motivation, and allows connecting students with professional help.

Strategies for improving digital guidance and counseling services in African universities

Improving guidance and counseling services through technology in African universities is possible only through the comprehensive implementation of the following strategies: development of digital infrastructure; staff training; development of policies and guidelines; making the service more inclusive; awareness creation; monitoring and evaluation; integration of guidance and counseling services with academic advising and other areas. To start with, the first step is to ensure the provision of reliable internet infrastructure. This involves installation of the stable internet connection, counseling platform, functional website, online booking and scheduling, data storage systems, and technical support. As connectivity and data charges are among the main obstacles, the university can negotiate discounted data packages with telecommunication companies; expand Wi-Fi coverage on the campus; and arrange separate booths for private online counseling for students who have no confidential places for discussion of sensitive topics (World Bank, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Universities must also provide electricity supply and backup systems to avoid the interruption of online consultations.

The next step is to provide professional training for the counselors. Online counseling requires the acquisition of additional skills beyond the translation of face-to-face counseling into a video call. The counselors need to know how to build rapport online, deal with emergencies, record the sessions, maintain confidentiality, perform referral to other specialists, protect privacy, and communicate in a culturally competent way (Wind et

al., 2021). Universities must offer continuous professional development for the counselors who work via digital tools. Also, the universities should train counselors to properly use AI and chatbot technologies as they become an essential part of modern student-support services (UNESCO, 2023). Yet, digital counselors cannot substitute professional human counselors.

The third important step is to develop institutional policies and ethical guidelines for digital counseling. Policies should contain the following provisions: informed consent, confidentiality, response in case of emergencies, data protection and storage, session recording and its confidentiality, security of the platform, counselor availability, referral options. Students have to be provided with guarantees that the information they share with the counselors will be protected. If there are data protection laws in force in the country, the university counseling service should conform to them. The protocols are especially important when dealing with high risk cases of suicidal thoughts, gender-based violence, substance abuse, and severe psychological problems (WHO, 2022).

The next step is to make digital counseling inclusive and student-friendly. It means that the platform should be compatible with mobile phones as many African students use them to go online rather than laptops. The platform should also consider students with disabilities: it should have screen reader compatibility, captions, text-based counseling. There may be need for multilingual support in countries where students prefer to express their emotions in local languages. Also, digital counseling should be free or cheap for students (Afolabi & Adedoyin, 2022).

Awareness creation is another important step to take. Many students do not use counseling services because they are not aware of their existence or because they misinterpret their function. Universities can advertise the service through orientation programs, student portals, social media, learning management system, residence halls, lecturers, student unions, peer educators. Anti-stigma campaigns should promote counseling as a regular part of student's success rather than an assistance program for students in troubles (Naslund et al., 2022). Peer support ambassadors could facilitate connection between the students and professional counselors and reduce students' fears.

Finally, universities should integrate digital counseling with academic advising, health services, disability support, financial aid, career services, and so forth. Student's problems are usually interconnected: poor academic performance could be a result of financial problems, anxiety, family problems, or unclear career goals. So, it is good for the student to access several types of assistance using one platform. Monitoring and evaluation are also required. Universities should collect feedback from students about user experience, speed of response, confidentiality, accessibility, and academic outcomes.

4. Conclusion

There is immense potential for digital counseling and guidance services in helping students with their mental health problems in Africa. Most of the students in African universities are stressed, anxious, depressed, pressured by academics, faced with financial problems, societal pressures, and uncertain about the future. The current form of counseling provided at African higher learning institutions lacks enough staff members, faces stigma, has lengthy waiting periods, and lack of awareness about counseling. Some forms of digital counseling include the use of mobile applications, tele-counseling, online peer groups, mental health websites, chat-counseling, and virtual seminars among others. These forms of digital counseling offer an easy and convenient way for students to get help. This kind of counseling will be especially beneficial in places where access to face-to-face counseling is hard. It is important to remember that the success of digital counseling requires Internet access, professionally trained counselors, ethical handling of personal information, sensitivity of cultural differences, university backing, and students' trust. This paper has concluded that digital guidance and counseling should not fully substitute face-to-face counseling; it should complement existing forms of counseling.

5. Recommendations

African universities need to establish safe and user-friendly virtual counseling sites to cater to the varied mental health needs of their diverse student population. The administration of the universities must allocate sufficient funds and resources towards making the virtual counseling sites dependable and inclusive. Counselors and student affairs professionals must continually be trained on the various aspects of virtual counseling such as crisis management, virtual counseling ethics, confidentiality and culturally sensitive mental health care. Awareness campaigns must also be carried out to make students comfortable using these counseling services without experiencing any stigmatization. Because Internet access has always been a problem for most students, universities must allocate funds to make Internet access cheaper, set up digital help desks and implement hybrid counseling sessions. It is also important to develop policies that govern the protection of student data, ethical practice of counseling professionals and service delivery. Collaboration between other stakeholders including government authorities, health professionals, technology firms and mental health organizations is equally important. Regular monitoring and evaluation of digital counseling services by universities based on the feedback of students, usage statistics and mental health status of students must be implemented.

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Corresponding Author: Flora Enotiemwonmwan Egbadon, Department of General Studies/ Guidance & Counselling, College of General Studies, Wellspring University, Benin City, Edo State.

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