Attitude of Ghanaian University Students Towards Online Counselling

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Abstract

Online counselling is a complement to the traditional face-to-face approach to counselling. Experts in counselling, however, strongly believe that before online counselling is introduced, it is necessary to ascertain its potential utilization by clients. This study, therefore, investigated the attitude of Ghanaian students towards online counselling using the descriptive survey design. Two research questions and hypotheses guided the study. The population of the study comprised all regular undergraduate students in the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. A sample of 600 students made up of 360 males and 240 females was used. Proportional stratified sampling and simple random sampling techniques were employed. Two online counselling attitude scales were used to source for data. The data were analysed using means, standard deviations and independent samples t-test. The study revealed that respondents' attitude towards online counselling was both positive and negative. The study also found that although both male and female students expressed positive attitude towards online counselling, females expressed a more positive attitude towards online counselling than their male counterparts. Similarly, both genders demonstrated negative attitude towards online counselling, but males showed a more negative attitude towards online counselling as compared to their female counterparts. However, no significant differences were found in students' attitudes towards online counselling on the basis of gender. A major implication of the findings was that students have the potential to utilise online counselling, since they demonstrated positive attitude towards online counselling. Based on the findings, it was recommended that counsellors should introduce online counselling to complement the traditional face-to-face approach to counselling. Again, counsellors should educate students on the benefits of online counselling so as to reduce their negative attitude towards online counselling.
Keywords: Online counselling; positive attitude; negative attitude; university students

1. Introduction

Counselling is a purposeful, private conversation arising from the intention of one person to reflect on and resolve a problem in living, and the willingness of another person to assist in that endeavour (McLeod, 2013). Traditionally, counselling is a face-to-face encounter. It does not involve relationship conducted through telephone, television, fax, and letters of correspondence or other non-person modes of communication. The physical presence of two people serves to satisfy emotional needs that cannot be met in any other medium of communication (Taylor & Buku, 2006). However, due to technological advancement, another form of counselling has emerged in the developed world such as America and Canada. This form of counselling has been described as online counselling. Online counselling, according to Sanders and Rosenfield (1998), is a process which uses the medium of telecommunication technologies such as telephone, internet and teleconferencing. Barak and Grohol (2011) also defined online counselling as a mental health intervention between a patient or group of patients and a therapist using technology as the modality of communication. Online counselling can be an option to some individuals who cannot physically meet with their counsellors. Others also consider it as a complement to the traditional face-to-face counselling. Sussman (1998) has stated that three primary internet delivery methods are used very often by people of today. They are email, text-based chat and video conferencing. To Attridge (2004), although majority of online counselling are accomplished through email, text-based chat and video conferencing are also gaining grounds. Email counselling involves asynchronous distance interaction between the counsellor and client using what is read via text to communicate (National Board for Certified Counsellors, 2001). Video conferencing is an effective tool for the delivery of online counselling services. Attridge (2004) stated that the system uses personal computer, a webcam and video conferencing software. Currently, a lot of smart phones have this video conferencing feature which is more easy to use. The WhatsApp application which is downloaded and installed on smart phones can also be used for online counselling, since it has quality audio-visual features.

Online counselling has a number of benefits to the client. In a university setting where students are very busy, they may experience scheduling difficulties that affect their ability to engage in the usual traditional office-based counselling sessions. They may find the online counselling more suitable to their fast-paced lifestyle. In addition, some students may prefer the distant form of communication because it allows them to freely express themselves hence, are more comfortable showing their feelings through this medium. Some students may also see online counselling as non-threatening and having an appealing plan (Attridge, 2004).

University students in Ghana are familiar with technological gadgets such as smart phones. A number of

researches in Ghana have stated that students use the Internet a lot (e.g. Brafi & Arthur, 2013; Oluwatimilehin, 2014) and that mobile phones are the most used devices to access the web all the time (Frimpong, 2015). In addition, Dery, Vroom, Godi, Afagbedzi and Dwomoh's (2016) study on the knowledge and use of information and communication technology by health sciences students of the University of Ghana revealed that their knowledge about computer was high and about 83 per cent of the respondents indicated they owned a computer. Thus, Ghanaian students have access to electronic gadgets and could use them for online counselling purposes.

It is, however, important to note that having access to an electronic gadget is one thing and possessing a positive attitude towards online counselling is another. A number of researchers have investigated students' attitudes towards online counselling. Leibert, Archer, Munson and York's (2006) study revealed that their clients rated online counselling favourably, but their satisfaction scores were lower than the scores for clients who attended face-to-face counselling. In addition, the study of Finn and Bruce (2008) discovered that clients appeared to have generally positive attitudes towards online counselling. Their study also reported that client ratings of online counsellors showed a high level of service satisfaction. Furthermore, Skinner and Latchford (2006) concluded that some important factors that motivated online clients were anonymity, convenience and emotional safety of the online environment. Clients, however, indicated concerns about confidentiality and technical difficulties as discomforts to them. In contrast, Chang and Chang (2004) investigated the Asian American and Asian international college students' attitude towards online counselling and found out that students had less favourable attitude towards online counselling as compared to seeking help by traditional face-to-face means. In a related study, Rochlen, Beretvas and Zack (2004) discovered that participants rated face-to-face counselling more positively than online counselling.

From the foregoing, it can be realised that online counselling is a modern approach to counselling and if introduced to students in Ghana it would serve a useful purpose. However, little is known about online counselling in Ghana. It is relatively a new approach to counselling. No study is known to have been conducted to find out whether students' attitude towards online counselling is favourable in the country. Moreover, the Counselling Centre of the University of Cape Coast intends to introduce online counselling to serve as a complement to the traditional face-to-face approach to counselling, but there is no empirical study to show whether students of the University have a favourable attitude towards online counselling. There is, therefore, a gap in the literature that needs to be filled. This provides a justification for conducting this current research in the University of Cape Coast. Since students are the main beneficiaries of counselling, it was deemed expedient to elicit responses from them concerning online counselling. The study was, therefore, designed so as to investigate the attitudes of University of Cape Coast students towards online counselling in order to ascertain its potential utilization by students.

2. Research Questions
The research questions that guided the study are as follows:
1. What are the specific attitudes of University of Cape Coast students towards online counselling?
2. What are the attitudes of University of Cape Coast students towards online counselling with respect to gender?

3. Hypotheses
The following hypotheses guided the study.
1. H_0: There is no significant difference in students' expression of positive attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender.
   H_1: There is significant difference in students' expression of positive attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender.
2. H_0: There is no significant difference in students' expression of negative attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender.
   H_1: There is significant difference in students' expression of negative attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender.

4. Methodology
4.1 Research Design
The descriptive survey design was employed for this study. According to Cohen, Morrison, and Manion (2004), in descriptive survey design, researchers gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared. This design was deemed appropriate, since it was going to describe the current attitudes of the University of Cape Coast students towards online counselling.

4.2 Population of the Study

The population of this study consisted of all regular undergraduate students at the University of Cape Coast. The total population was 18,898. This was made up of 11,339 males and 7,559 females for the 2016/2017 academic year (University of Cape Coast Students Records, 2016).

4.3 Sample and sampling procedure

The sample size for this study was 600 students. The study employed the proportionate stratified and simple random sampling techniques to select the participants for the study. The stratification variables were college, faculty/school, academic level and gender. In the first place, proportionate stratified random sampling was used to determine the number of respondents to be selected on the basis of college, faculty/school, academic level and gender. Secondly, the simple random technique was used to select the 600 students which made up of 360 males and 240 females.

4.4 Research instrument

The research instrument for the study was a questionnaire. The study adapted the two Online Counselling Attitude Scales of Rochlen, Beretvas and Zack (2004). They are the dimension of "Value" which deals with students' positive attitude towards online counselling and the dimension of "Discomfort" which relates to students' negative attitude towards online counselling. Both the Value and Discomfort dimensions contained five items each measured on a four-point Likert-type scale. The response options were 4= Strongly Agree, 3= Agree, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree. The cut-off point for determining whether an attitude is positive or negative, is a mean score of 12.5 and 2.5 for a broad scale and a specific attitude respectively. High scores on value indicate a positive attitude towards online counselling. High scores on Discomfort, on the other hand, reflect a negative attitude in relation to online counselling. Face and content validity of the instrument were carried out by experts in Guidance and Counselling at the Counselling Centre of the University of Cape Coast. The instrument was pre-tested on 40 students (20 males and 20 females) in the University of Education, Winneba in Ghana. These students possess similar characteristics with students from the University of Cape Coast who were used for this study. The Cronbach's alpha obtained was 0.85 implying that the instrument was reliable and could be used for research purposes.

4.5 Data collection procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast before the data collection. The researchers obtained permission from the lecturers whose students were selected for the study a week before administering the questionnaire. On the data collection day, the purpose of the study and procedure for responding to the questionnaire was explained to the respondents. They were also informed about the voluntary nature of study. Besides, informed consent from participants was sought before the questionnaire was administered. The researchers administered the questionnaires to respondents during normal lecture hours. We were able to retrieve 581 questionnaires, implying there was 96.8% return rate.

4.6 Data analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in analysing the data. Specifically, mean scores and standard deviations were used to analyse the data relating to the two research questions and the independent samples t-test was used to test the two hypotheses.

5. Results

The results are presented as follows:

Research question 1: What are the specific attitudes of University of Cape Coast students towards online counselling?

This research question sought to find out the specific positive and negative attitudes of University of Cape Coast students towards online counselling. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1- *Students' Positive Attitude towards Online Counselling (N=581)*

Statement	Mean	SD
Using online counselling would help me learn about myself.	2.79	0.87
If a friend had personal problems, I might encourage him or her to consider online counselling.	2.56	0.90
I would confide my personal problems in an online counsellor.	2.42	0.92
It could be worthwhile to discuss my personal problems with an online counsellor.	2.50	0.88
If online counselling were available at no charge, I would consider trying it.	2.88	0.89

It can be seen from Table 1 that with the exception of one specific positive attitude, respondents' scores relating to positive attitudes have met the criterion mean score of 2.5. This means that respondents have positive attitude towards online counselling. From Table 1, it can be realised that majority of the respondents indicated

that if online counselling were available at no charge, they would consider trying it (M=2.88, SD=0.89). Again, respondents stated that using online counselling would help them learn about themselves (M=2.79, SD= 0.87). However, Table 1 indicates that respondents have a less positive attitude towards confiding their personal problems in an online counsellor (M=2.42, SD=0.92).

Table 2- *Students' Negative Attitude towards Online Counselling (N=581)*

Statement	Mean	SD
If I were having a personal problem, seeking help with an online counsellor would be the last option I would consider.	2.64	0.96
I would feel uneasy discussing emotional problems with an online counsellor.	2.53	0.96
I would dread explaining my problems to an online counsellor.	2.51	0.85
I think it would take a major effort for me to schedule an appointment with an online counsellor.	2.62	0.85
I would be afraid to discuss stressful events with an online counsellor.	2.50	0.96

The data presented in Table 2 show that for all the five items, respondents' scores on the specific negative attitudes have met the cut-off point of 2.5. This shows that they have   negative attitude towards online counselling. It can be seen from the table that respondents agreed that if they were having personal problems, seeking help with an online counsellor would be the last option they would consider (M=2.64, SD=0.96). Again, respondents stated that it would take a major effort for them to schedule an appointment with an online counsellor (M=2.62, SD=0.85). Discussing stressful events with online counsellors was also feared by the respondents (M=2.50, SD= 0.96).

Research Question 2: What are the attitudes of University of Cape Coast students towards online counselling with respect to gender?

The purpose of this research question was to find out the students' positive and negative attitudes towards online counselling with regard to gender. The results are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3- *Students' Expression of Positive Attitude towards Online Counselling Based on Gender*

Gender	N	Mean	SD
Male	347	12.93	3.62
Female	234	13.42	3.77

Table 3 shows that the mean scores for the two groups are higher than the cut-off point of 12.5 indicating that both genders have positive attitude towards online counselling. However, the females indicated a more positive attitude towards online counselling (M=13.42, SD=3.77) as compared to the males (M=12.93, SD=3.62).

Table 4- *Students' Expression of Negative Attitude towards Online Counselling based on Gender*

Gender	N	Mean	SD
Male	347	12.91	3.28
Female	234	12.60	3.43

Table 4 shows that the mean scores for the two groups are higher than the cut-off point of 12.5 indicating that both genders have negative attitude in relation to online counselling. In other words, respondents demonstrated negative attitude towards online counselling based on their gender. However, the males expressed a more negative attitude towards online counselling (M=12.91, SD=3.28) as compared to the females (M=12.60, SD=3.43).

Hypothesis one:

H_0: There is no significant difference in students' expression of positive attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender.

H_1: There is significant difference in students' expression of positive attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender.

To determine whether significant difference exists in students' expression of positive attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender, independent samples t-test was conducted. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5- *Independent Samples t-test on Students' Expression of Positive Attitude towards Online Counselling on the Basis of Gender*

Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal	Sig (2tailed)
Male	347	12.93	3.62	579	-1.54	.122
Female	234	13.42	3.77			

Table 5 shows the independent samples t-test performed on students' expression of positive attitude towards online counselling with respect to gender. It can be concluded from Table 5 that there is no significant difference between male and female students' positive attitude towards online counselling (t= -1.54, df= 579, p=0.122, 2-tailed), since the probability value (p-value) of 0.122 is greater than the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, based on the result, the null hypothesis is retained.

Hypothesis two:

H_0: There is no significant difference in students' expression of negative attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender.

H_1: There is significant difference in students' expression of negative attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender.

To ascertain whether significant difference exists in students' expression of negative attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender, independent samples t-test was carried out as found in Table 6.

Table 6- *Independent samples t-test on Students' Expression of Negative Attitude towards Online Counselling on the Basis of Gender*

Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal	Sig (2tailed)
Male	347	12.91	3.28	579	1.093	.275
Female	234	12.60	3.43			

Table 6 shows the independent samples t-test performed on students' expression of negative attitude towards online counselling with regard to gender. It can be observed from Table 6 that there is no significant difference between male and female students' negative attitude towards online counselling (t= 1.093, df= 579, p=0.275, 2-tailed). This is because the probability value (p-value) of 0.275 is greater than the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, based on the result, the null hypothesis is retained.

6. Discussion

The study discovered that students showed positive attitude towards on online counselling so far as the specific attitudes are concerned. Stated differently, respondents have positive attitude towards online counselling. The current result is consistent with the finding of Leibert, Archer, Munson and York (2006) which revealed that their clients rated online counselling favourably. Similarly, the current finding agrees with the result obtained by Finn and Bruce (2008) that clients had a generally positive attitude towards online counselling. The current finding also confirms the finding of Tannous (2017) who explored the perceptions towards online counselling among University of Jordan students and found that students had a positive attitude and a high level of preference for online counselling. The current finding is not surprising. This is because the busy schedules of students would not permit them to frequently honour their appointments with counsellors physically as compared to online counselling where they sit in the comfort of their hostels and receive counselling via the Internet. This would save a lot of time and other resources. The current result implies that students have the potential to utilise online counselling.

The study also found that students demonstrated negative attitude towards online counselling in terms of specific attitudes. For instance, they indicated that if they were having personal problems, seeking help with an online counsellor would be the last option they would consider. Again, respondents stated that it would take a major effort for them to schedule an appointment with an online counsellor. The current finding is consistent with the study of Chang and Chang (2004) who found that students had less favourable attitude towards seeking help online as compared to seeking help by traditional face-to-face means. The current finding also tallies with the results obtained by Rochlen, Beretvas and Zack (2004) that respondents preferred the traditional face-to-face counselling to online counselling. Perhaps respondents in the current study are used to the traditional face-to-face counselling where they meet counsellors physically and share their concerns with them. Another reason that could account for this finding is that in online counselling, trusting and confidential relationships are more difficult to establish than in the traditional face-to-face counselling. Therefore, confiding in somebody who they do not have a physical contact could be a barrier to online counselling.

With respect to gender, the study revealed that although both males and females showed positive attitude towards on online counselling, females had a more positive attitude towards online counselling than their male counterparts. This agrees with the finding of Tsan and Day (2007) who found that women had a more positive attitude towards all the modes of seeking professional psychological help. The current study also found that respondents demonstrated negative attitude towards online counselling based on their gender, but males expressed a more negative attitude in relation to online counselling as compared to their female counterparts. This finding agrees with the views of Addis and Mahalik (2003) that males of all ages, ethnicities and nationalities tend to seek help on a small scale as compared to females. The possible reason for the current finding may be due to the fact that in Ghanaian society females are encouraged to seek help. Men, on the other hand, are encouraged to deal with their own problems independently.

However, the study revealed that there was no significant difference in the positive attitude of respondents towards online counselling based on their gender. This finding is consistent with the study of Glasheen, Shochet and Campbell (2016) that there was no significant difference between male and female secondary school students in terms of their positive attitude towards online counselling. The current finding also supports the study of Brown (2012) who explored the attitudes and potential utilization of online counselling by college students and discovered that there was no significant gender difference in using online counselling as compared to face-

to-face counselling. Possibly, both genders in the current study have considered online counselling as a modern approach to counselling and hence the no significant difference in the result. Similarly, the present study showed that there was no significant difference in students' negative attitude towards online counselling on the basis of gender. This current finding is inconsistent with a number of studies (e.g. Chang, Yeh & Krumboltz, 2001; Tsan & Day, 2007) who discovered that males and females differed significantly in terms of their negative attitude towards online counselling. Maybe in the current study both genders share similar level of discomfort towards online counselling and this accounts for the no significant difference in the result.

7. Recommendations
Based on the findings, the following recommendations are hereby made:
1. Counsellors should introduce online counselling to complement the traditional face-to-face approach to counselling.
2. Counsellors should educate students about the benefits of online counselling so as to reduce their negative attitude towards online counselling.
3. Online counselling services should be offered to both male and female students without any variation, since there were no significant differences in students' attitude towards on online counselling on the basis of gender.

8. Directions on future research
The current study was conducted in one public university in Ghana. It is expected that the findings of this study would motivate other researchers to explore the attitude of students towards online counselling in other educational institutions. Consequently, it would enable many students to have access to counselling in order to address their academic, career, social, physical and psychological needs in a timely manner.

9. Conclusion
The study explored the attitude of students towards online counselling in one Ghanaian public university. The findings showed that students have a favourable attitude towards online counselling, although they also expressed discomfort about some aspects of online counselling. With respect to gender, students did not differ significantly in their attitudes towards online counselling. An important implication of the findings for counsellors is that students have the potential to utilise online counselling, since they demonstrated positive attitude towards online counselling. A number of recommendations were made to facilitate the provision of online counselling services to students. Directions on future research were also provided. The paper would be useful to counsellors, information and communication technology experts and school administrators.

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