

A Qualitative Inquiry on the Experiences of University Counselors on Synchronous Telecounseling Using Video Conferencing

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Abstract— The integration of technology in school counseling services has accelerated due to the mental health challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. As institutions transition into the post-pandemic era, online counseling remains a critical tool in addressing students' psychological well-being. This study explores the experiences of school counselors conducting synchronous telecounseling via videoconferencing in Philippine tertiary institutions during and after the pandemic.

A qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014) was used, with purposive and convenience sampling, and ten (10) licensed counselors from public and private colleges and universities were selected. These participants had at least one semester of full-time online counseling experience or an ongoing client engaged in synchronous telecounseling (Etikan et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2020). Focus group discussions (FGDs) with 2 to 5 participants per group were conducted through a video conferencing platform. Semi-structured interviews provided data for thematic analysis, identifying key themes from their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The study highlighted the benefits and challenges of telecounseling in the post-pandemic setting, emphasizing the need for continuous training, awareness programs, and skill enhancement for school counselors. Findings provided insights into the sustainability of online counseling and its long-term implications for school counseling practices.

Keywords— Counselor Competencies, Online Counseling, School Counseling, Synchronous Telecounseling.

INTRODUCTION

As societies transition into the post-pandemic era, the long-term effects of COVID-19 on mental health and education remain pressing concerns. Research indicates that the mental health crisis continues beyond the pandemic, as individuals struggle to reintegrate into pre-pandemic routines while coping with lingering uncertainties (Batra et al., 2021). The rapid shift from traditional to online learning in higher education posed significant challenges, particularly in student engagement, academic performance, and mental health (Barrot et al., 2021). Although face-to-face classes have resumed, the aftereffects of prolonged isolation and digital learning have led to increased anxiety and stress among students (Chang et al., 2022).

The Philippines' educational system was among the most affected sectors during the pandemic, with schools shifting to online learning to mitigate the spread of the virus (Tria, 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs) implemented various strategies to encourage positive mental health behavior among students (Akan et al., 2010), including telecounseling. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) released CMO No. 8 Series of 2021,

mandating the implementation of flexible student affairs and mental health services. This shift introduced new challenges, as many counseling professionals lacked sufficient training in delivering online counseling services (Sanchez, 2014). Despite these limitations, e-counseling has become an essential tool for addressing students' mental health concerns, utilizing digital platforms such as videoconferencing, private chats, and email sessions (Manhal-Baugus, 2001; Toquero, 2020).

As HEIs navigate post-pandemic recovery, there is a growing need to evaluate the effectiveness of telecounseling in addressing students' mental health concerns. While some institutions have returned to in-person counseling, others continue integrating online platforms into their mental health services (Toquero, 2023). However, studies on school counselors' experiences with telecounseling in the post-pandemic era remain limited, particularly regarding this modality's challenges, benefits, and long-term feasibility.

Technological advancements have enabled school counselors to provide remote counseling through various telecommunication tools, including videoconferencing, phone calls, emails, chats, and social media (Steele et al., 2014; APA, 2013). These tools support synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (delayed) communication methods. Synchronous methods, such as tele-video conferencing and instant messaging, facilitate immediate interaction, while asynchronous tools like email allow flexibility for delayed responses. Among these, videoconferencing is particularly effective, as it allows face-to-face engagement between counselors and clients from different locations, enhancing accessibility and support (ATA, 2009).

The demand for online and telephone counseling has surged, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, as individuals seek accessible mental health support (Smith & Gillon, 2021). While research on technology-assisted therapy remains limited, therapists generally view online counseling positively. Studies comparing online and in-person counseling show mixed results regarding the therapeutic alliance, a crucial factor in effective therapy (Andrews et al., 2011; Vogel et al., 2007). Online counseling has been found to be as effective as in-person therapy for treating anxiety and depression (Andrews et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2014). However, concerns persist about the potential weakening of therapeutic relationships due to the absence of physical presence and visual cues, though increased anonymity may benefit clients dealing with specific mental health challenges (Berger, 2016; Wagner et al., 2014).

Despite its benefits, online counseling presents several challenges, particularly for school counselors who must integrate technology into their practice while ensuring student safety and development (NBCC, 2012). Many counselors lack the necessary technical skills, including typing proficiency and data security knowledge, which can hinder their effectiveness (Barnett, 2005). Privacy and confidentiality concerns are also significant, as digital records of text-based and video sessions pose potential risks to client information (Rummel & Joyce, 2010). Additionally, the lack of nonverbal cues in online interactions may impact the therapeutic process (Mallen et al., 2003). Furthermore, constant access to emails and social media can blur personal and professional boundaries, contributing to stress and reduced job satisfaction among counselors (Van Horn Kerne et al., 2010). Addressing these challenges through improved training and policy adjustments can enhance the effectiveness of online counseling.

In this light, this study aimed to explore school counselors' lived experiences in conducting synchronous telecounseling via videoconferencing with students during and after the pandemic in different colleges and universities in the Philippines. The central research question raised to the participant is "What are the experiences of the college counselors in conducting synchronous telecounseling using video conferencing?". Specifically, to answer the following questions?

1. What are the challenges counselors face when performing synchronous telecounseling?
2. What are the advantages of performing synchronous telecounseling?
3. What are the areas needed to improve by the counselors in doing synchronous telecounseling?

The findings will provide relevant insights into the development of training programs, awareness-raising initiatives, and skill-enhancement interventions for school counselors. Additionally, this study will contribute to the broader discourse on the future of mental health services in higher education, ensuring that counseling remains accessible and effective in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design, aligning with the exploratory nature of investigating the experiences of university counselors with synchronous telecounseling. Qualitative methodologies are well-suited for capturing rich, detailed data that delves into the complexities of human experiences, attitudes, and behaviors, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Creswell's (2014) framework guides the design and execution of the study, ensuring methodological rigor and coherence throughout the research process.

The study utilized a purposive and convenience sampling method to select ten licensed counselors as participants. This sampling approach allows for intentionally selecting individuals with relevant expertise and experience in online counseling services within the university context. The inclusion criteria stipulated that participants must have practiced full-time online counseling for at least one semester or have at least one continuing client engaged in synchronous telecounseling sessions using a video conferencing platform.

Participants must have worked in either public or private colleges or universities and have experience with synchronous telecounseling. Additionally, participants must have engaged in full-time online counseling for a specified duration or have ongoing clients involved in synchronous telecounseling sessions, ensuring firsthand experience with the phenomenon being studied.

The research team first explained the purpose of the study to the participants. The research team also informed the participants that they would use pseudonyms instead of their real names in any publications to maintain confidentiality.

The participants were also asked to sign an informed consent to participate in the study. Four (4) groups with 2 to 5 participants each were scheduled for focus group discussion (FGD) on the agreed date and time through a video conferencing platform. A University Research Ethics Board approved this study.

Semi-structured interviews were the only data source for analyzing the participants' synchronous telecounseling experiences. The semi-structured interview guide was written in English, and those questions were constructed based on the recommendations of the extant literature related to counselors' experiences of online counseling. The interview guide also included information on the participants' demographic details. Concerning validity, three (3) counseling experts ascertained the interview guide's content and face validity.

Sixty to ninety minutes were allotted for the FGD, with 2 to 5 participants in each group. The interviewer asked the participants, "What is the experience of college counselors in conducting synchronous telecounseling using video conferencing?" Afterward, additional questions were asked of the participant in the interview guide.

All interviews were conducted in English and recorded through a video conferencing platform. After conducting the interviews, the video recordings were then transcribed. Finally, a research database utilizing the Excel software program was created to store, coordinate, document, and query the data to be gathered during this study.

The interview responses were subjected to thematic analysis that will reflexively evaluate the major themes as they emerge (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This technique allowed for the structuring, categorizing, and interpreting the transcribed data.

The themes reported in this article will mature from the spontaneous observations recorded in the field notes into general open codes and refined themes summarizing the participants' lived experiences (Choudhuri et al., 2004; Patton, 2002).

In qualitative research, it is essential to triangulate the results coded by the researcher to reduce bias and encourage the transparency of findings (Choudhuri et al., 2004; Patton, 2002).

Again, rigor will be ensured by giving the transcripts to three other experts (inclusion criteria must be specified) not connected to the present study who will ensure that there are no inaccuracies and discrepancies within the transcripts created by the researchers and the intended meaning of the participants' responses for the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study presented key themes, patterns, and findings extracted from the qualitative data that provided a comprehensive overview and offered a clear understanding of the study's outcomes.

Challenges of Synchronous Telecounseling

Results revealed that providing counseling services in real-time through video conferencing comes with its own set of challenges. These challenges can be categorized into two main themes: external concerns and counselor-related concerns.

External concerns in synchronous telecounseling refer to factors originating outside the counseling relationship that may influence the delivery and quality of mental health services via video conferencing (ACA, 2014).

While, counselor-related concerns in synchronous telecounseling through video conferencing encompass challenges and considerations specific to the counselor's actions, competence, and adherence to ethical standards.

These include aspects such as maintaining rapport, ensuring cultural competence, and upholding professional conduct in the virtual therapeutic space (APA, 2017).

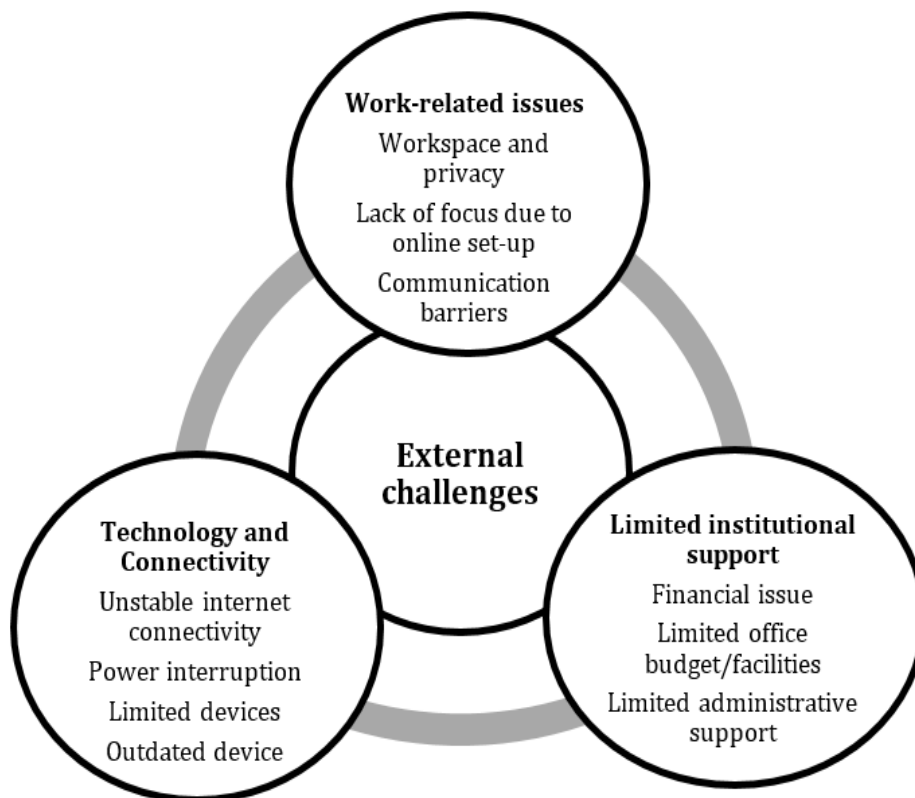


Figure 1. External challenges in synchronous telecounseling.

Figure 1 highlights external challenges in telecounseling, grouped into themes such as technology and connectivity, work-related issues, and limited institutional support.

Technology and connectivity include the hardware, software, and network needed for remote sessions. Issues like unstable internet, power interruptions, and outdated devices hinder effective telecounseling.

The quality of technology directly impacts counselor-client interactions, with high-quality video and audio enhancing communication (Turvey et al., 2013). Work-related concerns focus on counselors' professional roles, work environments, and boundaries. Privacy and safety for both parties are essential, and counselors must consider the client's environment to ensure their well-being (APA, 2017).

Maintaining professional boundaries is also crucial. Distractions and lack of focus, like background noise or multitasking, can undermine session quality. Communication issues, such as poor connectivity or audio glitches, further disrupt the flow (Simpson & Reid, 2014; Turvey et al., 2013).

Limited institutional support refers to the lack of resources, guidance, and infrastructure from employers. Without adequate funding or technological resources, telecounseling effectiveness is compromised, leading to technical difficulties and reduced session quality (ACA, 2014).

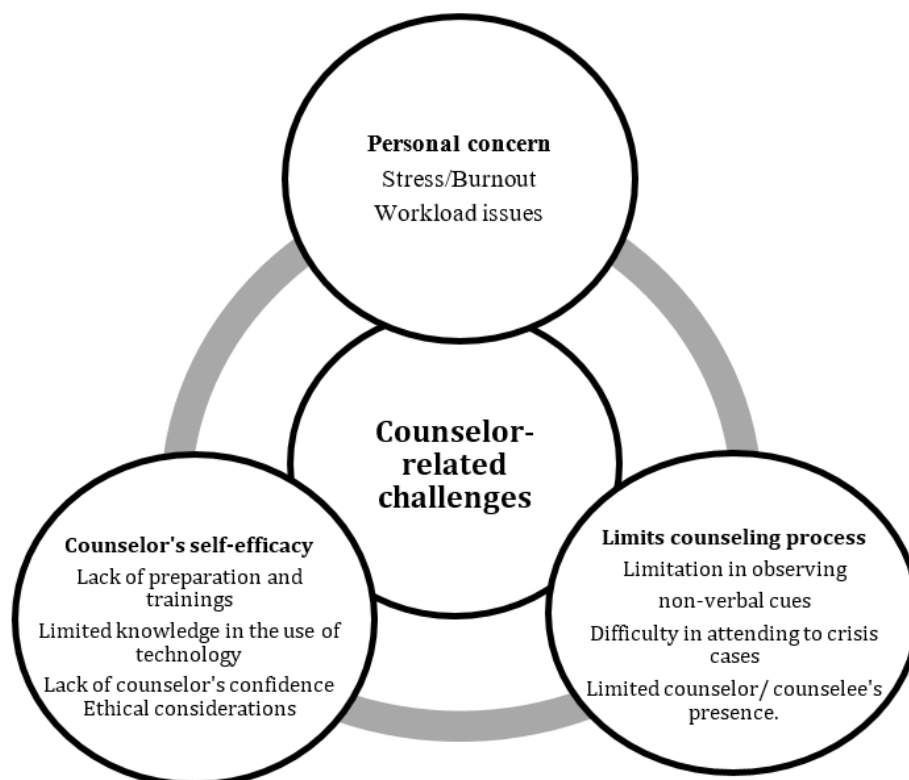


Figure 2. Counselor-related challenges in synchronous telecounseling.

Figure 2 outlines counselor-related challenges in telecounseling, categorized into three subthemes: self-efficacy, limitations in the counseling process, and personal concerns. Self-efficacy challenges refer to obstacles that affect counselors' belief in their ability to deliver telecounseling services effectively.

These challenges include inadequate training and preparation for adapting counseling techniques to the virtual environment (Campbell & Shochet, 2013), limited proficiency in using technology (e.g., teleconferencing software, troubleshooting technical issues), lack of experience in remote sessions, and managing ethical considerations, such as licensure and informed consent (Rummel & Joyce, 2010).

Limitations in the counseling process involve the absence of essential nonverbal communication cues in telecounseling. Counselors may struggle to interpret clients' body language, facial expressions, and gestures, hindering understanding of their emotions (Wagner et al., 2014).

Furthermore, crisis management becomes more complex as counselors lack immediate access to clients' locations or local resources. The physical separation between counselor and client may also reduce emotional engagement and the therapeutic alliance.

Personal concerns highlight the mental and emotional fatigue that counselors may experience from conducting remote sessions, which can affect concentration and the quality of counseling. Counselors working from home may also face blurred boundaries between work and personal life, leading to overwork, burnout, and difficulty managing stress.

Advantages of Synchronous Telecounseling

This research aimed to determine the advantages or benefits of performing synchronous telecounseling. Inquiring from the participants' experiences, the advantages of telecounseling for students and counselors encompass several key benefits that can positively impact their mental health and well-being (see Figure 3).

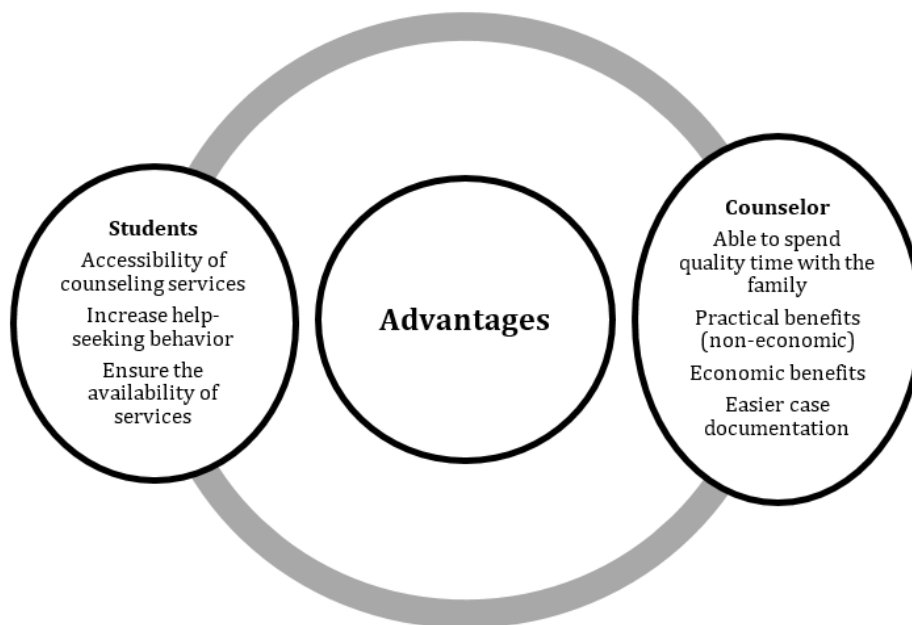


Figure 3. Advantages of synchronous telecounseling for students and counselors.

Telecounseling offers several advantages for both students and counselors (refer to Figure 3). For students, it provides convenient access to mental health services from any location, eliminating the need to be physically present on campus or at a counseling center. This flexibility allows for expanded appointment availability, especially for students in rural or underserved areas, promoting inclusivity (Hilty et al., 2013). Additionally, the remote nature of telecounseling reduces stigma, as students can seek help from the privacy of their homes or dorms, making them more comfortable discussing sensitive issues (Gulliver et al., 2010). Telecounseling also ensures uninterrupted support during disruptions to in-person services, such as transitions or breaks, which enhances the consistency and reliability of care (Maheu et al., 2012).

For counselors, telecounseling offers a greater work-life balance by providing flexible work schedules, reducing stress, and preventing burnout (Turban et al., 2017). Counselors can allocate more time for personal commitments and family, as telecounseling eliminates commuting and rigid office hours. It also enables them to work in a comfortable environment, enhancing job satisfaction. Additionally, telecounseling can lead to cost savings by reducing expenses related to transportation, office space, and work attire (Luxton et al., 2014). Counselors also benefit from digital record-keeping tools, which simplify session documentation, track client's progress, and ensure confidentiality, which is essential for ethical practice (Turban et al., 2017).

Thus, telecounseling offers significant benefits, improving access to care for students and supporting counselors in maintaining a balanced and efficient professional life.

Areas of Improvement in Synchronous Telecounseling

After exploring the external and counselor-related challenges in the delivery of synchronous telecounseling services, this paper also identified various areas of improvement to address these challenges and enhance the quality and efficacy of synchronous telecounseling interventions in university settings, ultimately improving mental health outcomes for students and fostering a supportive environment for counselors.

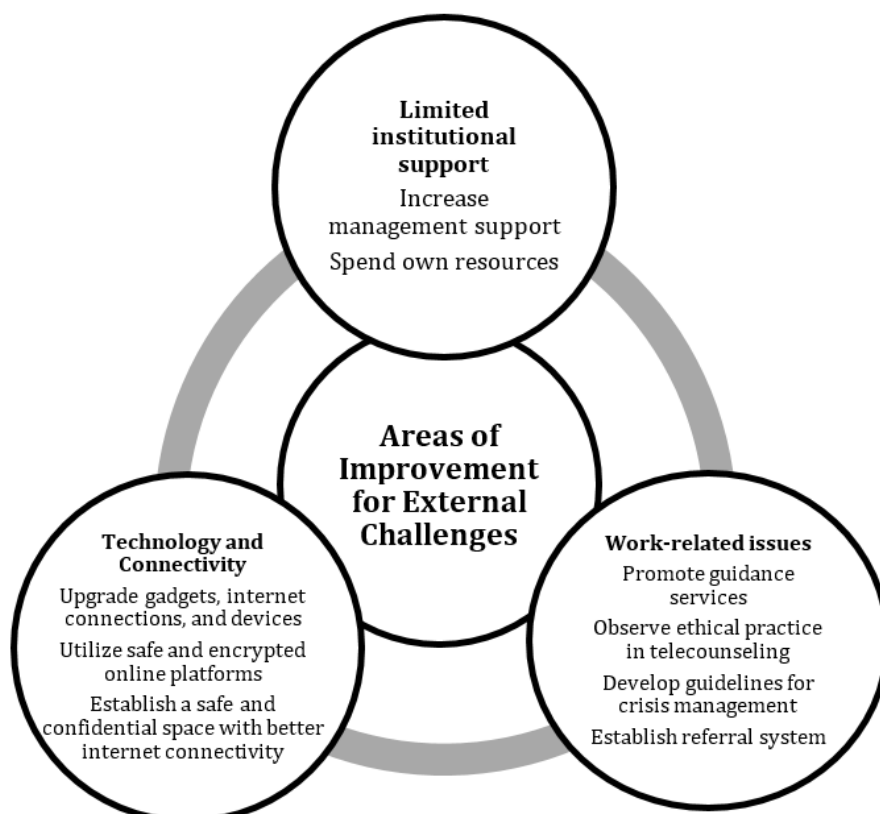


Figure 4. Areas of improvement to address the external challenges in synchronous telecounseling.

Figure 4 identifies strategies to address external challenges in synchronous telecounseling. Ensuring access to updated devices, reliable internet connections, and suitable technology is critical for uninterrupted sessions (Bataineh et al., 2021). High-quality equipment can minimize technical disruptions, improving the telecounseling experience for both counselors and clients. Secure, encrypted online platforms must be used to protect confidentiality and adhere to privacy regulations (Hilty et al., 2013). Counselors and clients should also be encouraged to conduct sessions in safe, private environments with optimal internet connectivity (Turban et al., 2017).

To increase awareness and access to telecounseling services, universities should promote guidance services through communication channels like websites, social media, and newsletters (Harrington et al., 2019). Counselors must follow ethical principles, including confidentiality, informed consent, and boundaries, and regularly undergo training to navigate ethical challenges in telecounseling. Additionally, comprehensive guidelines for managing crises in telecounseling are necessary for ensuring client safety (Turban et al., 2017). A robust referral system that

connects clients to relevant resources enhances care continuity (Hilty et al., 2013), and collaboration with mental health professionals and community organizations is vital for seamless referrals.

Furthermore, securing management support through funding for training, technology upgrades, and staffing can strengthen telecounseling initiatives. Counselors can also leverage personal resources, such as expertise and time, to maximize the effectiveness of telecounseling programs, particularly in the face of limited institutional resources.

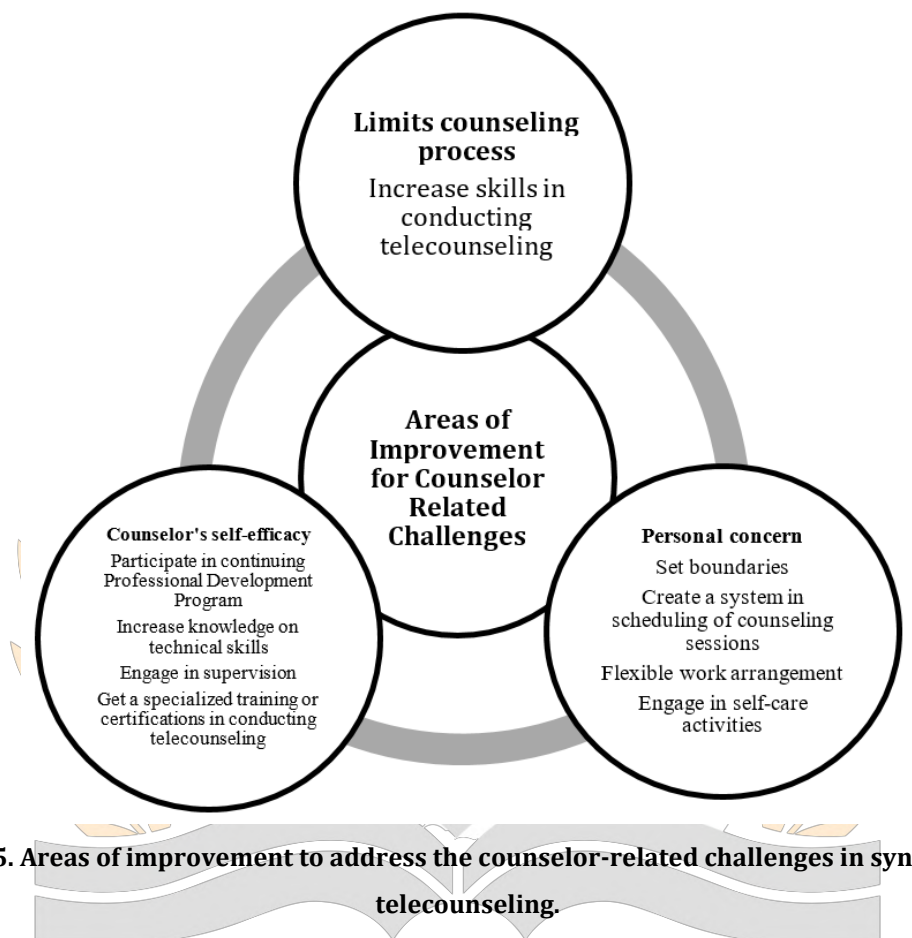


Figure 5 outlines strategies to address counselor-related challenges in synchronous telecounseling. Encouraging ongoing professional development, including telecounseling-specific training, can enhance counselors' confidence and technical proficiency. Regular supervision and feedback from experienced practitioners offer valuable guidance and support. Obtaining credentials from reputable organizations further validates counselors' expertise and strengthens their practice.

To address work-life balance, counselors should establish clear boundaries, such as defined work hours and expectations for availability outside counseling sessions. Implementing structured scheduling systems can help manage workload and prevent overbooking. Offering flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options, promotes balance and reduces stress. Engaging in self-care activities is crucial for maintaining counselors' mental and emotional well-being, enabling them to manage stress and continue providing quality services to clients. Prioritizing these strategies can enhance counselor effectiveness and overall job satisfaction.

Recommendations

Based on this study, several implications have arisen in telecounseling in the Philippine educational system. The study suggests implementing a systematic assessment and evaluation process to monitor and improve the quality of telecounseling services provided by university counselors. This may involve developing standardized assessment tools to measure client satisfaction, counselor performance, and outcomes of telecounseling interventions. Regular evaluations can help identify areas for improvement, address challenges, and ensure that telecounseling services effectively meet students' needs. By gathering empirical evidence on the efficacy of telecounseling, policymakers, administrators, and counselors can make informed decisions about resource allocation, service delivery models, and best practices in telecounseling.

Likewise, as there is a demand to continue the telecounseling services in the hybrid or new normal set-up in the academic system of colleges and universities, upgrading counselors' skills and competencies is highly recommended. A study can be explored to identify the training needs of counselors, including developing specialized telecounseling skills and ethical considerations. This study underscores the importance of providing comprehensive training and professional development opportunities for university counselors to enhance their skills and competence in synchronous telecounseling. Training programs should cover various topics, including telecounseling techniques, ethical considerations, cultural competency, and technology proficiency. Offering ongoing training and support ensures that counselors are well-prepared to navigate the unique challenges and opportunities of telecounseling and deliver high-quality services to students.

Lastly, professional organizations in psychology and counseling should develop and implement clear regulations and standards specific to telecounseling in the Philippines, which all academic institutions shall fully support. These standards should address issues such as informed consent, privacy, technological support, and administrative support to counselors to ensure that the service providers' and the recipients' welfare are considered and prioritized. Clear regulations help protect the rights and confidentiality of clients, establish professional standards of practice, and foster public trust in telecounseling as a viable mental health intervention.

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