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RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION: PERCEPTION OF SOME SELECTED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ON VIRTUAL COUNSELLING IN LAGOS METROPOLIS, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
In spite of the availability of counselling services in the Nigerian universities, quite a number of university students fail to explore these golden opportunities. They rather endure a lot of psychosocial challenges that would have been ameliorated on a platter of gold through the use of counselling services. Therefore, this study investigated the perception of some selected Nigerian university students on virtual counselling in Lagos Metropolis. Two research hypotheses were explored. The population of the study comprised all undergraduate students in a selected University in Lagos Metropolis. A sample of 334 students (139 male and 195 female) was used. Two Online Counselling Attitude Scales were adapted for the study. The data generated were treated with the use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Independent t-test statistics was used for testing the hypotheses at a .05 level of significance. The findings revealed that the students have positive perception on virtual counselling with the implication that they would use it to corroborate the face-to-face conventional counselling services. It is therefore recommended that university policymakers integrate virtual counselling into educational policies to enhance students' awareness and utilisation of counselling services.
Keywords: Virtual Counselling, Psychosocial Challenges, University students, Well-being, Metropolis.

INTRODUCTION
There has been integration of information and communication technology (ICT) to counselling which is referred to as virtual counselling, e-counselling, cyber counselling, teletherapy or online counselling to address psychosocial challenges and treat mental health issues generally. This involves the use of technology in therapeutic activities in counselling. The means of counselling delivery apart from conventional face-to-face now include the use of phone, chat, e-mail, Internet-voice calls and video conferencing among others. Prior to this time counselling was mainly conventional (face-to-face counselling) between the counsellors(s) and the counsellee(s). Internet and other web resources had really projected counselling beyond the conventional method of face-to-face counselling to electronic based counselling.

According to National Board for Certified Counsellors [NBCC], (2016) Several researchers at international level refer to virtual counselling ("online therapy") in various ways which include computer-mediated counselling, cyber-counselling, online counselling, e-counselling, cyber therapy, e-therapy, web counselling and distance counselling among others. The channel of communication is information technology system, which is categorized into five groups: e-mail based, telephone based, video based, chat based and social network-based services. It must be noted that virtual counselling is not a replacement for a face-to-face counselling but rather additional means of reaching the counsellees. Virtual counselling is set out to compliment and corroborate the conventional face-to-face counselling method.

Interaction between Counsellor and Counsellees/clients could be in two ways which are: asynchronous and synchronous interactions. Asynchronous communication comprises, message boards or forums e-mail and online blogs where communication takes place between the counsellors and the counsellees but not instantaneous. They don't have to be at the computer at the same time but have the choice of time to respond to their discussions. On the other hand, synchronous communication includes the discussion that engage both the counsellors and the counsellee simultaneously, which can be written or verbal; this could be in form of video conferencing and instant messaging (Brown, 2012).

The internet has become a vital channel of delivering mental health services to the youths; it eliminates obstacles that relate to distance/access and it is also anonymous. This might make young people to feel comfortable with the use of internet to seek therapeutic help. Hanley (2006) resolved that virtual counselling has great prospective; nevertheless, there is need for rule of services and models of best practice for the youths. The benefits of virtual counselling for the youths are that the services can be rendered at any location, and to groups that might not access the conventional face- to- face counselling services, it can also enhance early and preventive intervention. Counsellors would have full access to reflect on their virtual practice by accessing the complete text accounts of meetings (Urbis Keys Young, 2003).

In their opinion Rummell and Joyce (2010) stated that virtual counselling has a number of benefits, both for the counsellors and the counsellees. It is a means of reaching populations that are difficult to reach such as the dwellers in remote environment, the disabled or people living with disability, chronically ill or immobile and counsellees who takes care of children or aged parents at home. Access to professionals who might not be within a particular geographical location is also made possible through virtual counselling. Some other clients prefer virtual counselling because of flexibility and convenience. Virtual counselling have some qualities associated with its environment that seems to be more appealing to counsellees.

Mallen,Vogel and Rochlen (2005) stated that those who would not have come to seek face-to-face counselling enjoys an innovative modality that virtual counselling provide to access mental health services that proffer helps for people with psychosocial challenges. Virtual counselling is unique because studies had confirmed that it offers special interpersonal factors that promote change which include protection, anonymity, and openness to oneself. Further researches pin-pointed that virtual counselling is most appropriate for some counsellees with anxiety disorder, social anxiety and agoraphobia because it allows them to have access to counselling services within the comfort and safety of their homes (Alleman, 2002).

Adebiyi, Makinde, Olusakin and Adebiyi (2019) opined that students should be exposed to the benefits of virtual counselling and its mode of operation because emergent needs may arise that require the need of a virtual counsellor where physical contact may not be realistic such as the case of Covid-19. This is supported by Knechtel and Erickson, (2020) virtual counselling increases access to psychotherapy and is particularly appreciated during periods of global pandemic when conventional face-to-face services were inaccessible. In addition, more sensitive matters may be handled better through the help of a virtual professional counsellor with the use of cyber therapy.

To Attridge (2004) University students with busy schedule may have difficulties in scheduling sessions to participate in the traditional face-to face office-based counselling routing services. The virtual counselling services may proffer a better option to their fast-paced way of life. For free expression and a more comfortable way of expressing their feelings some students prefer distant system of communication. Some other students see virtual counselling as stress free, threat free and it is an interesting method of counselling for busy students.

Statement of the problem
It is worrisome that in spite of the availability of counselling services in the Nigerian universities, quite a number of University students fail to explore these golden opportunities. They rather endure a lot of psychosocial challenges, problems in relationships, they face academic pressure and suffer mental health issues, yet many fail to seek professional help in confronting such challenges that would have been ameliorated on a platter of gold through the use of counselling services. No doubt, University students' perception is indispensable to effective counselling.

It is also disturbing that University students do not seek appropriate and efficient helps through the conventional face-to-face counselling services readily available. However, the challenges face by university students calls for suitable counselling strategies to be implored. For University students to achieve self-actualization goal, there is need for counsellors to embark on suitable, appropriate and convenient counselling services for them to corroborate and compliment the readily available conventional and traditional counselling services. It is therefore pertinent to find

out the perception of university students on virtual counselling. This study is therefore set out to determine the perception of university students on virtual counselling in Lagos metropolis, Nigeria.

Purpose of the study
This study seeks to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of virtual counselling, specifically examining the **differences between male and female students in their positive and negative perceptions**, to provide insights into how gender may influence students' attitudes toward virtual counselling.

Research Hypotheses
1. There is no significant difference in the male and female university students' perception of positive attitude on virtual counselling.
2. There is no significant difference in the male and female university students' perception of negative attitude on virtual counselling.

METHODOLOGY
The researcher investigated the **"**Perception of University students on virtual counselling**"** using the descriptive survey design. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in data analysis. Two hypotheses were formulated and tested in the study. The population of the study comprised all undergraduate students in a selected university in Lagos Metropolis. A sample of 334 students (139 male and 195 female) was used.

Participants were selected using a simple random sampling technique administered online. The study was conducted in one public university in Lagos Metropolis. To ensure representativeness, students were drawn from five faculties, with two departments randomly selected from each faculty. A list of students in the selected departments across all levels (100–400 level) was obtained. Students were then invited to participate in the online questionnaire, and responses were collected until the required sample size of 334 was achieved, ensuring that every student in the selected departments and levels had a chance of being included while maintaining practical feasibility.

The research instrument was a two-part questionnaire tagged 'Perception of University students on virtual Counselling'. Section A elicited demographic data of the participants, while Section B elicited students' perception of virtual counselling. Two Online Counselling Attitude Scales of Rochlen, Beretvas, and Zack (2004) were adapted for the study: students' positive attitude towards online counselling (Value, 5 items) and students' negative attitude towards online counselling (Discomfort, 5 items), measured on a four-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). The instrument was pretested on 30 students from another university, and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.82 for Value and 0.79 for Discomfort indicated that the questionnaire was reliable.

A total of 334 questionnaires were properly filled and usable. The researcher administered the questionnaires to undergraduate students from various departments online after seeking their consent, instructing participants not to include their names to ensure honest responses. The completed instruments were retrieved electronically to ensure a 100% response rate. The researcher scored the instrument manually, and the data generated were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Independent t-test statistics was used for testing the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

Hypothesis One
There is no significant difference in the male and female university students' perception of positive attitude on virtual counselling.

Table 1: Perception of University students on positive attitude on virtual counselling

Virtual Counselling	Mean	SD	Remark
The use of virtual counselling would help me to have a better understanding of myself	2.97	.75	Agree
I could refer my friend to consider virtual counselling un handling his problems.	3.05	.71	Agree
I would prefer virtual counsellor as a confidant to handle my personal problems	2.72	.87	Agree
It could be sensible to discuss my academic problems with a virtual counsellor	3.02	.76	Agree
If virtual counselling were made available at no cost, I would consider	3.30	.74	Agree

 The result in Table 1 shows that most of the respondents agreed that the use of virtual counselling would help them to have a better understanding of themselves, they could refer their friend to consider virtual counselling in handling their problems, they would prefer virtual counsellor as a confidant to handle their personal problems, it could be sensible to discuss their academic problems with a virtual counsellor, and they would consider virtual counselling if it were made available at no cost.

 Hypothesis Two
There is no significant gender difference in university students' perception of negative attitude on virtual counselling.

Table 2: Perception of University students on negative attitude on virtual counselling

Virtual Counselling	Mean	SD	Remark
Seeking help with a virtual counsellor would be the last option I would consider if I were having a personal problem	2.32	.87	Disagree
I would not feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues with a virtual counsellor	2.45	.86	Disagree
I would be skeptical explaining my personal problems to a virtual counsellor	2.57	.84	Agree
I think it would be my last option to schedule an appointment with a virtual counsellor	2.34	.86	Disagree
I would be scared to discuss disturbing issues with a virtual counsellor	2.37	.88	Disagree

 The result in Table 2 shows that most of the respondents disagreed that seeking help with a virtual counsellor would be the last option they would consider if they were having a personal problem, they would not feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues with a virtual counsellor, they thought it would be their last option to schedule an appointment with a virtual counsellor, they would be scared to discuss disturbing issues with a virtual counsellor, while most of them agreed they would be skeptical explaining their personal problems to a virtual counsellor.

Table 3: t-test for gender difference in university students' perception of positive attitude on virtual counselling

Gender	N	Mean	Sd	df	t-value	Sig.
Male	139	14.87	2.96			
				332	.99	.59
Female	195	15.19	2.97			

p > 0.05

Table 3 shows the perception of male students (Mean = 14.87, SD = 2.96) and female students (Mean = 15.19, SD = 2.97) on positive attitude on virtual counselling. The difference between the perception of male and female students were not significant (t = .99, p = .59). This shows that both male and female University students have same perception of positive attitude on virtual counselling.

Hypothesis Two
There is no significant gender difference in university students' perception of negative attitude on virtual counselling

Table 4: t-test for gender difference in university students' perception of negative attitude on virtual counselling

Gender	N	Mean	Sd	df	t-value	Sig.
Male	139	12.11	3.28			
				332	.24	.23
Female	195	12.01	3.45			

p > 0.05

Table 4 shows the perception of male students (Mean = 12.11, SD = 3.28) and female students (Mean = 12.01, SD = 3.45) on negative attitude on virtual counselling. The difference between the perception of male and female students were not significant (t = .24, p = .23). This shows that both male and female University students have same perception of negative attitude on virtual counselling.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to ascertain the perceptions of selected undergraduate students on virtual counselling with regards to gender in one public university. This was examined through the testing of two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant difference in the male and female university students' perception of positive attitude on virtual counselling.

The findings revealed that students generally had a positive perception of virtual counselling. Many respondents agreed that virtual counselling could help them better understand themselves, serve as a confidant for personal issues, allow them to discuss academic problems, and refer friends to use it. The results indicated **no** significant difference between male and female students in their positive perceptions, supporting the hypothesis.

This finding suggests that students, regardless of gender, are receptive to virtual counselling as a complement to conventional face-to-face counselling services. These results are consistent with the findings of Finn and Bruce (2008), which reported a positive client disposition toward virtual counselling, and Leibert, Archer, Munson, and York (2006), which found that students held positive attitudes toward online counselling. However, this finding differs from Rochlen, Beretvas, and Zack (2004), who reported a preference for face-to-face counselling over virtual services. The difference may be due to increased awareness and accessibility of online services among contemporary university students.

Hypothesis 2:

There is no significant difference in the male and female university students' perception of negative attitude on virtual counselling.

The results showed that students had minimal negative perceptions of virtual counselling, and there was no significant difference between male and female students regarding these negative attitudes. Most students did not express discomfort or mistrust toward virtual counselling, indicating that gender did not influence negative perceptions.

This finding implies that virtual counselling is generally acceptable to both male and female students and may be successfully integrated into university support systems. It aligns with the study by Tannous (2017) on University of Jordan students, which reported positive perceptions of online counselling among undergraduates.

Conclusion

The study was carried out among undergraduate students in a public University in Lagos metropolis, Nigeria. The outcome of the study revealed that the students have positive disposition towards the virtual counselling. There is no significant gender difference on university undergraduate students' perception on virtual counselling. This implies that the students have the prospect of using virtual counselling to corroborate and compliment the traditional face-to-face counselling. To enable the effective use of virtual counselling a number of recommendations had

been enumerated. This study would be an asset to university counselors and other stakeholders in the University policy making.

Recommendations
Based on the findings of this study, the following key recommendations are proposed:
1. University policymakers and management should promote and integrate virtual counselling into educational policies and programs to enhance students' awareness, acceptance, and utilisation of counselling services, thereby improving their psychological well-being, coping skills, and academic success.
2. Government and university authorities should invest in and upgrade infrastructural facilities for virtual counselling to ensure students have uninterrupted, efficient, and accessible mental health support, which will help address psychosocial challenges and encourage active participation in virtual counselling services.
3. University counselling units and counsellors should provide professional virtual counselling services and be well-versed in relevant information and communication technologies (ICT) to maintain high-quality service delivery comparable to face-to-face counselling, ensuring that students effectively benefit from these services.

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