

**ONLINE COUNSELLING IN ANAMBRA STATE: PROSPECTS,
CHALLENGES AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES.**

Paschal Uche Okeke
paschalucheokeke@gmail.com

Prof. Ifeoma Obi
Ifyobi25@yahoo.com

Madubugwu Nathaniel Lotanna
lotanath@gmail.com

All authors from Educational Foundations dept.,
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam.

Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the prospects and challenges of online counseling in Anambra state, Nigeria. Survey research design study was adopted. The population comprised all the 20 Guidance and Counselors lecturers (9 in COOU and 11 in NAU) in Anambra state public universities. They were not sampled. Three research questions guided the study. A 20-item structured questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. The instrument was validated by three experts from the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The instrument was tested for reliability using Cronbach Alpha and overall reliability coefficient of 0.73 was gotten. Data were analyzed using mean. The findings indicated that online counseling in Anambra state had prospects like ease of access, more thoughtful and organized sessions, among others. It was recommended that counselors should utilize online counseling since it can be accessed by people needing the service, among others.

Keywords: Counseling, Online Counseling, Prospect, Challenge, Strategy

Introduction

Counseling is critical in our society today. Denga (2011) defined counseling as a personalized dialogue, interview or interaction between the client or counselee experiencing a problem and the counselor who tries to render help. Assisting someone to resolve a problem is an essential human role which helps in making life meaningful. Providing counseling services therefore makes life meaningful since the counselor helps the counselee resolve a problem during the counseling session. With the advent of internet services, there is now the application of computer and other

technological devices to counseling procedures (Ube *et al*, 2019). Online counseling has therefore been possible. The advent of COVID-19 pandemic further demanded a change in counseling, making way for online counseling. Online counseling is an area of cyberpsychology. Cyberpsychology is a field in psychology that involves studying human experiences (cognitive, emotional and behavioural) related or affected by developing technologies (Richards & Vigano, 2019). Online counseling is a counseling approach that takes the best practices of traditional counseling as well as some of its own unique advantage and adapts them for delivery to clients through electronic means in order to maximize the use of technology assisted counseling techniques (Johnsuler, 2020). It is the provision of professional counseling services through the internet. Online counseling is any delivery of mental and behavioural health services, including but not limited to therapy, consultation and psychology education, by a licensed practitioner to a client in a non-face-to-face setting through distance communication technologies like telephone, asynchronous e-mail, synchronous chat and video conferencing (Mallen & Vogel, 2020). In an online counseling session, a professional counselor talks with a client over the internet to render emotional support, mental health advice or other professional services (Donna *et al* 2020). Online counseling is also known as internet counseling, cyber counseling, online therapy, e-therapy and so on. It is facilitated through a plethora of internet facilities such as peer support groups for specific problems, chat rooms, peer based online discussion, e-mail services, video conferencing, among others. It can take place in real time such as phone conversations or time delayed format like through e-mail messages (Ube *et al*, 2019).

Online counseling has certain prospects. Prospects means a potential opportunity, possibility or future event that is considered desirable. Mulingu *et al* (2024) submitted that online counseling has a promising avenue for intervention because of its advantages in accessibility and efficiency over traditional service

provision. Ube *et al* (2019) noted that online counseling has certain prospects like: convenient and time saving, easily accessible, good for normal people. Mulungu *et al* (2024) explained that online counseling removes certain barriers such as being shy, anxious or busy schedules. Online counseling allows clients to refer to written materials generated as part of counseling process to review and reinforce therapy (Hanley, 2021). Also, a well-designed web-site provides clients with online resources, articles, links with professional organization and support which are not always present in traditional therapy. Reis *et al* (2020) highlighted that online counseling sessions are usually more organized and thoughtful, reaching to those who have difficulties going to therapist's office like those that are ill, agoraphobic or those living in remote areas. According to Johnsuler (2020), Thomas (2019) and Buhari and Ibrahim (2022), online counseling is less stigmatizing than going to an office for therapy; allows clients to easily disclose their problems due to animosity, provides increased flexibility as to time of appointment and method of counseling used, clients can access the services of specialists even when they are far away physically and it is usually less costly than a face-to-face counseling session. The novelty on online communication removes certain barriers such as being shy, anxious or busy schedules that prevent clients from showing up. Bailey *et al*, (2020) added that online counseling is a convenient service because it can be provided at anytime of the day from any part of the world. Bailey *et al*, (2020) further explained that clients can send messages whenever they feel worst in need of or interested in therapy. The foregoing shows that online counseling holds laudable prospects.

However, online counseling maybe bedeviled with lots of challenges. Challenges are difficult or demanding situations, tasks or obstacles that require effort, skill and perseverance to overcome. These challenges undermine its effectiveness and efficiency. According to Hennigan and Goss (2021), Abdallah and Reem (2022) and Fonseca and Osma (2021), some of the challenges facing online

counseling are: lack of awareness, lack of verbal and non-verbal cues, inadequate power supply, computer illiteracy, cyber security crimes and poor network coverage, among others. These challenges hinder the success of online counseling. For instance, most Nigerians are not of online counseling and some have poor perception of online counseling. They are very not likely to use online counseling thereby denying themselves and even others of remedies to their problems. According to Azikiwe (2024) another challenge of online counseling is related to clients' lack of trust and issues of being suspected of being scammers and complex problems owing to challenges with assessment and post-counseling monitoring because there are no physical visits, clients missing scheduled counseling sessions, difficulties scheduling and forecasting the direction of the therapy process because clients may not be fully assessed online (Mulungu *et al*, 2024). Weinberg (2021) also explained that it is more difficult to stay focused during online counseling due to distractions from e-mails, phone messages or other stimuli in the room. Reis *et al* (2020) spotted low levels of preparedness for online counseling by therapists as a challenge. This means that when therapists are not prepared for online counseling, they are not likely to do it well and this poses a challenge.

In order to explore the prospects of online counseling, these challenges ought to be surmounted using certain effective strategies. Strategies are long-term plans or approaches designed to achieve a specific goal or set of goals. Effective strategies are well-planned and well-executed approaches that achieve the intended goals and objectives. Ube, *et al* (2019) submitted that the strategies for improving online counseling are: regular in-service training programmes for counselors to be equipped with requisite skills and knowledge for online counseling, integrating online counseling as a compulsory course in guidance and counseling education programmes, launching an awareness campaign to enlighten people about online counseling, boosting the provision and access to internet services, making internet

services affordable, enhancing interconnectivity, embracing computer literacy and so on. Buhari and Ibrahim (2022) added that online counseling practitioners should think of how to handle potential cyber security crimes like information hacking, unwanted and unsolicited e-mail and other related computer problems. Reis *et al* (2020) explained that online counseling is a relatively new era and counselors are compelled to undergo a learning process. This will equip them with requisite knowledge, skills and competencies to deliver effective online counseling services. It will boost their preparedness for online counselling. To buttress this, Azikiwe (2024) noted that determining the effectiveness of online counseling lies more on the therapist's preparedness for the session because when the therapist is prepared, online counseling is more likely to be efficacious. Again, Buhari and Ibrahim (2022) advocated that counselors must be able to understand the complex characteristics of each client and also have suitable specialized information and certain level of familiarity with errors, miscommunication and working with different societies. This may enable the counselor render effective e-counselling services. Again, Donna *et al* (2020) advised that counselors utilizing e-media ought to have the capacity to sort rapidly, compose expressively and be proficient at online communication, encryption and web-browser administration. Furthermore Kiriakaki *et al* (2022) explained that counselors need to have some technical skills like ability to use softwares and audiovisual equipments to be able to hold sessions online. Another strategy for improving online counseling is by incorporating it in guidance and counseling (G & C) education courses. Dominiku (2020) wondered why e-counselling is not emphasized in (G & C) courses in schools, given that e-counselling is critical in this era. These strategies when implemented will surmount the challenges hindering online counseling and this will lead to unlocking the prospects of online counseling.

Observations of the online counseling scenario in Anambra state suggests that despite the prospects of online counseling, people appear not to utilize it. One therefore wonders if this could be as a result of the challenges of online counseling. If this be the case, there is also the need to explore effective strategies to surmount these challenges, making it possible for the prospects of online to be maximally unleashed. This forms the trust of this study on online counseling in Anambra state: prospects, challenges and effective strategies.

Despite the growing need for counseling services in Anambra state, online counseling seems to be underutilized. The lack of awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and limited digital literacy among counselors and clients may hinder the effective use of online counseling. This gap in service delivery may cause mental health issues, particularly among rural and hard-to-reach populations. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the prospects, challenges, and effective strategies for improving online counseling in Anambra state.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to determine online counselling in Anambra state: Prospects, challenges and effective strategies. Specifically, the study sought to determine:

1. Prospects of online counseling in Anambra state.
2. Challenges facing online counseling in Anambra state
3. Effective strategies for improving online counseling in Anambra state

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the prospects of online counseling in Anambra state?
2. What are the challenges facing online counseling in Anambra state?
3. What are the effective strategies for improving online counseling in Anambra state?

Research Methodology

A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. This was done by seeking the opinions of Guidance and Counselors lecturers on the problem of the study. The study was carried out in the two public universities in Anambra State namely; Chukwuemeka Odumegwu University, Igbariam (COOU) and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (NAU). The population was made up of 20 Guidance and Counselors lecturers (9 in COOU and 11 in NAU) as gotten from the HOD of the respective departments from each school. The whole population was studied without sampling because the size was not too large.

The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire constructed by the researchers based on specific objectives and research questions. A structured questionnaire titled “Online Counseling: Prospects, Challenges and Strategies Questionnaire (OCPCSQ)” was used to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire was made up of 20 items and was divided into three parts 1, 2 and 3. Part 1 with 6 items to elicit information on prospects of online counseling; part 2 has 7 items which covered challenges facing online counseling and part 3 has 7 items which covered effective strategies for improving online counseling. The instrument was validated by three experts from the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The instrument was pilot tested to ensure its reliability and the data collected was analyzed using internal consistency method using Cronbach Alpha and reliability coefficient values of 0.74, 0.73 and 0.72 for the three parts respectively and overall reliability coefficient of 0.73. The questionnaire was administered by the researchers using direct administration method. Out of the 20 copies of the questionnaire administered only 18 copies were used for analysis representing about 90% return rate. The other 2 copies were either not duly filled or not retrieved.

The data obtained were analyzed using mean and standard deviation based on the 4-point scale ranging from strongly agree of 4 points to strongly disagree of 1 point. Any item with a mean response of 2.50 and above was considered ‘agreed’ while anyone with a mean response below 2.50 was considered ‘disagreed’.

Results

The results from research questions are presented in the tables below

Research Question 1: What are the prospects of online counseling in Anambra state?

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Respondents on the Prospects of Online Counseling in Anambra state

S/N	ITEMS	MEAN	SD	REMARK
1	easily accessible	3.17	0.75	Agreed
2	time saving	3.33	0.82	Agreed
3	less stigmatizing than going to an office for therapy	3.33	0.52	Agreed
4	allows clients to easily disclose their problems	3.33	0.82	Agreed
5	Flexible scheduling of sessions	3.00	0.63	Agreed
6	Facilitates continued therapy for clients	3.67	0.52	Agreed
	Cluster mean	3.03	0.53	

Table 1 shows that the mean rating for all the 6 items listed as prospects of online counseling in Anambra state are above the cut-off mean of 2.50, the cluster mean of 3.03 is also above the cut-off point. This shows that they are all prospects of online counseling in Anambra state. The standard deviation of .53 shows that the data points are closely clustered around the mean, suggesting low variation in the opinion of respondents.

Research Question 2: What are the challenges facing online counseling in Anambra state?

Table 2: Mean Ratings of Respondents on the Challenges Facing Online Counseling in Anambra state

S/N	ITEMS	MEAN	SD	REMARK
1	lack of awareness	3.6	0.55	Agreed
2	inadequate power supply	3.2	0.45	Agreed
3	Dearth of digital skills	3.8	0.45	Agreed
4	poor network coverage	3.4	0.55	Agreed
5	clients' lack of trust on the ecounselor	3.2	0.45	Agreed
6	Difficulty in post-counselling monitoring	3.4	0.47	Agreed
7	low levels of preparedness for online counseling by therapists	3.2	0.45	Agreed
	Cluster mean	3.3	0.46	

Table 2 above shows that the mean rating for all the 7 items listed on challenges facing online counseling in Anambra state are above 2.50 which is the cut-off point. The cluster mean of 3.3 is also above the cut-off point. This means that they are all challenges facing online counseling in Anambra state. The standard deviation of .46 shows that the data points are closely clustered around the mean, suggesting low variation in the opinion of respondents.

Research Question 3: What are the effective strategies for improving online counseling in Anambra state?

Table 3: Mean Ratings of Respondents on the Effective Strategies for Improving Online Counseling in Anambra state

S/N	ITEMS	MEAN	SD	REMARK
1	regular in-service training programmes for counselors	3.4	0.55	Agreed
2	integrating online counseling as a compulsory course in guidance and counseling education programmes,	3.2	0.84	Agreed
3	launching an awareness campaign to enlighten people about online counseling	3.0	0.63	Agreed
4	boosting the provision and access to internet services	3.2	0.71	Agreed
5	Acquiring digital skills	3.1	0.65	Agreed
6	making internet services affordable	3.3	0.84	Agreed
7	Counselors ensuring that they understand the complex characteristics of each client	3.5	0.56	Agreed
	Cluster Mean	3.2	0.64	

Table 3 above shows that the mean rating for all the 7 items on effective strategies for improving online counseling in Anambra state are above the cut-off point of 2.50,

the cluster mean of 3.2 is also above the cut-off point. This shows that they are all effective strategies for improving online counseling in Anambra state. The standard deviation of .64 shows that the data points are closely clustered around the mean, suggesting low variation in the opinion of respondents.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that online counseling has several prospects in Anambra state. The respondents agreed that online counseling is easily accessible, time-saving, and less stigmatizing than traditional face-to-face counseling. These findings align with previous studies that have reported similar benefits of online counseling (Mulingu *et al.*, 2024; Reis *et al.*, 2020; Ube *et al.*, 2019). The study also found that online counseling allows clients to easily disclose their problems, which is consistent with the findings of Johnsuler (2020) and Thomas (2019). Additionally, the respondents agreed that online counseling is convenient, which supports the findings of Bailey *et al.* (2020).

However, the study also identified several challenges facing online counseling in Anambra state. The respondents agreed that lack of awareness, inadequate power supply, and poor network coverage are significant challenges. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have reported similar challenges in Nigeria (Ube *et al.*, 2019) and other developing countries (Fonseca & Osma, 2021).

The study also found that effective strategies for improving online counseling in Anambra state include regular in-service training programs for counselors, integrating online counseling into guidance and counseling education programmes, and launching awareness campaigns to enlighten people about online counseling. These findings support the recommendations of previous studies (Ube *et al.*, 2019; Reis *et al.*, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that online counseling has several prospects and challenges in Anambra state. The study has also identified several effective strategies for improving online counseling in the state. Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals take steps to promote online counseling and address the challenges facing it.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following are recommended:

1. Since online counseling has great prospects, counselors should utilize online counseling since it can be accessed by people needing the service.
2. Given that most people are not aware of online counseling, it is recommended that awareness campaigns should be launched by association of counselors to enlighten people about online counseling and its benefits.
3. Counselors should strive to implement the effective strategies for improving online counseling for instance, they should keep updating their digital skills to be well equipped for online counseling.

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