UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

INFLUENCE OF E-COUNSELLING SKILLS, ETHICS, AND LIMITATIONS ON COUNSELLING SELF-EFFICACY AMONG E-COUNSELLORS IN MALAYSIA

ALIA SARAH BINTI ASRI

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By

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August 2022

Chair   **: Zaida Nor Zainudin, PhD**
Faculty   **: Educational Studies**

Consistent with an increased acceptance of e-counselling in Malaysia, there is a need for e-counsellors who have high self-efficacy in carrying out e-counselling-related tasks. However, current studies lack empirical data that identifies counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia. The purpose of this study is to identify the influence of e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations on counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia. A correlational study design was employed, and 233 e-counsellors from various public and private institutions in Malaysia were selected using a simple random sampling procedure. Through emails, respondents were given an access link to an online survey form containing five sections: (i) demographic information, (ii) e-counselling skills questionnaire, (iii) e-counselling ethics questionnaire, (iv) e-counselling limitations questionnaire, and (iv) Counselling Self-Estimate Inventory (COSE). Analysis of the descriptive indicated high levels for all variables except counselling self-efficacy (moderate level). Analysis of inferential using Pearson correlation reported a positive correlation between e-counselling skills and counselling self-efficacy, as well as between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy. E-counselling limitations reported a negative correlation with counselling self-efficacy. Finally, a multiple regression analysis reported that the independent variables significantly influenced counselling self-efficacy. E-counselling skills was reported as the best predictor of counselling self-efficacy, followed by e-counselling limitations. The findings from this study are pertinent to support more research investigating e-counselling in the Malaysian context, and provide suggestions for the professional counselling associations, counselling programme providers, counselling educators and professional counsellors to improve the training and delivery of e-counselling services in Malaysia.

**PENGARUH KEMAHIRAN E-KAUNSELING, ETIKA, DAN LIMITASI
TERHADAP EFIKASI KENDIRI KAUNSELING DALAM KALANGAN E-
KAUNSELOR DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

ALIA SARAH BINTI ASRI

Ogos 2022

Pengerusi : Zaida Nor Zainudin, PhD
Fakulti : Pengajian Pendidikan

Selaras dengan peningkatan penerimaan e-kaunseling di Malaysia, terdapat
keperluan untuk e-kaunselor yang mempunyai efikasi kendiri yang tinggi dalam
melaksanakan tugas berkaitan e-kaunseling. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian
semasa kekurangan data empirikal yang mengenal pasti efikasi kendiri
kaunseling dalam kalangan e-kaunselor di Malaysia. Tujuan kajian ini adalah
untuk mengenal pasti pengaruh kemahiran e-kaunseling, etika e-kaunseling dan
limitasi e-kaunseling terhadap efikasi kendiri kaunseling dalam kalangan e-
kaunselor di Malaysia. Reka bentuk kajian korelasi telah digunakan dan 233 e-
kaunselor daripada pelbagai institusi awam dan swasta di Malaysia telah dipilih
menggunakan kaedah persampelan rawak mudah. Responden diberikan pautan
akses melalui e-mel kepada borang tinjauan dalam talian yang mengandungi
lima bahagian: (i) maklumat demografi, (ii) soal selidik kemahiran e-kaunseling,
(iii) soal selidik etika e-kaunseling, (iv) soal selidik limitasi e-kaunseling, dan (iv)
Inventori Anggaran Kendiri Kaunseling (COSE). Analisis deskriptif melaporkan
tahap tinggi bagi semua pemboleh ubah kecuali efikasi kendiri kaunseling (tahap
sederhana). Analisis inferensi menggunakan korelasi Pearson melaporkan
korelasi positif antara kemahiran e-kaunseling dan efikasi kendiri kaunseling,
dan antara etika e-kaunseling dan efikasi kendiri kaunseling. Limitasi e-
kaunseling melaporkan korelasi negatif dengan efikasi kendiri kaunseling. Akhir
sekali, analisis regresi berganda melaporkan bahawa pemboleh ubah tidak
bersandar secara signifikan mempengaruhi efikasi kendiri kaunseling.
Kemahiran e-kaunseling ditunjukkan sebagai peramal terbaik bagi efikasi kendiri
kaunseling, diikuti oleh limitasi e-kaunseling. Hasil kajian ini adalah penting
untuk menyokong lebih banyak kajian yang menyiasat e-kaunseling dalam
konteks Malaysia dan memberikan cadangan kepada persatuan profesional
kaunselor, penggubal program kaunseling, pendidik kaunseling dan kaunselor
profesional untuk menambah baik latihan dan pelaksanaan e-kaunseling di
Malaysia.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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Declaration by Graduate Student

I hereby confirm that:
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This is to confirm that:
- the research and the writing of this thesis were done under our supervision;
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ACA	American Counselling Association
CASES	Counsellor Activity Self-Efficacy Scale
COSE	Counselling Self-estimate Inventory
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSE	Counselling Self-Efficacy
CSES	Counsellors' Self-Efficacy Scale
CSS	Counsellor Self-Efficacy Scale
EDA	Exploratory Data Analysis
ELICSES	Ethical and Legal Issues in Counselling Self-Efficacy Scale
EQ	Emotional Intelligence
ESS	European Social Survey
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
JKEUPM	Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects in Universiti Putra Malaysia
M	Mean
MANOVA	Multivariate Analysis of Variance
MCKAS	Multicultural Counselling Knowledge and Awareness Scale
MEQI	Malaysian Emotional Quotient Inventory
N	Frequency
NADA	National Anti-drugs Agency
PERKAMA	International Counselling Association of Malaysia (PERKAMA International)
PLATO	Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations
SET	Self-Efficacy Theory
SD	Standard Deviation

SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
TRAPD	Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pre-testing and Documentation
UTAUT	United Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology Model
VIF	Variation Inflation Factor

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background of study

Self-efficacy is individuals' belief in their capability to take required actions and face problematic or challenging situations (Bandura, 1997). The higher one's self-efficacy level, the more likely he or she will persevere to get the results that they desire (Bandura, 1977, 1994). Performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional state are four major sources of information that influence self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994, 1997). Individuals develop higher self-efficacy as a result of successful outcomes, competent social models, constructive feedback, and a positive mood state. They recover quickly and attribute their failures to a lack of effort. Thus, they are convinced that they will succeed if they put extra effort to get stronger. Depressing moods such as anxiety are perceived as motivation to improve performance. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of self-efficacy are constantly immersed in self-doubt and often associate stressful events with their personal vulnerabilities. They are easily discouraged by negative criticism, avoid challenging tasks, and give up easily in the face of adversity (Bandura, 1994).

Larson and Daniels (1998) described counselling self-efficacy as counsellors' beliefs towards their abilities to perform counselling tasks. Counsellors with higher self-efficacy have confidence that the skills and knowledge they possess are adequate to complete desired counselling tasks. As a result of this positive belief, they were able to develop greater perseverance and persistence to deal with various challenges when conducting counselling sessions. Haktanir's (2020) study confirmed that counselling self-efficacy is an indicator to identify the quality of counselling services. Adeyemo and Agokei (2019) indicated that a high measure of counselling self-efficacy is associated with an increased commitment to counselling work. The authors pointed out that counselling self-efficacy is a primary mechanism that links basic counselling knowledge and effective conduct of counselling. With higher levels of counselling self-efficacy, counsellors are certain that they are highly capable of accomplishing required counselling tasks and are more willing to put in additional efforts to succeed.

Many Malaysian studies were conducted to identify counselling self-efficacy. Ooi et al. (2017) identified a significant correlation between the sources of counselling self-efficacy (mastery experience, social persuasion, vicarious learning, and physiological and affective state) and counselling self-efficacy. In contrast, Ooi et al. (2021) reported no significant correlation between vicarious learning and physiological and affective state with counselling self-efficacy. Mastery experience showed similar results, reporting the highest correlation to counselling self-efficacy, followed by social persuasion. Ooi et al.'s (2021) study among Malaysian school counsellors also revealed that access to training and

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supervisor support have a positive correlation with counselling self-efficacy. Yusof et al. (2017) found that school counsellors in a separate study had moderate levels of counselling self-efficacy and high scores for sub-construct microskills, counselling process, and values awareness. The authors revealed that counselling self-efficacy is utilised to initiate action plans, create self-endurance and determine counsellors' career pathways.

E-counselling, also known as online counselling, is a professional counselling practise that takes place between a licenced counsellor and a virtual client from remote locations via technological tools either synchronously, asynchronously, or bidirectionally (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). While synchronous counselling sessions involve both the counsellor and the client communicating in real-time and within the same virtual space (e.g., live chat room and video conference calls), asynchronous counselling allows the counsellor and client to respond at their own time and convenience (e.g., email counselling). Technology-delivered interventions such as e-counselling were introduced along with the development of communication technologies, which allow more rapid transmission of information and communication. Counselling first expanded from traditional to virtual methods through computer software programmes such as ELIZA (named after a fictional character by its original inventor) and Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations (PLATO) (Zainudin & Mohamad Yusop, 2018b). In the 1990s, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) was introduced, which shifted the delivery of e-counselling from automatically generated responses to live communication in a virtual setting between real counsellors and clients.

Prior to the onset of e-counselling services in Malaysia, counsellors were primarily responsible for providing help and guidance for school students with social problems (Thuryrajah, 2017). In the 1980s, counselling in Malaysia began to disperse to various settings such as tertiary educational institutions. E-counselling was more accepted globally in 2006, which encouraged increased delivery of e-counselling in Malaysia through public and private institutions (Zainudin & Harun, 2006) and continued to witness more robust delivery through multiple institutions and agencies. According to the same study, e-counselling was introduced in Malaysia as early as 1997, which was consistent with the passing of the Counsellor Act 1998 (Act 580). Counsellors are subjected to legal action if they behave in a way against the counselling law, such as providing counselling services without counselling credentials. The counselling act also highlights the responsibility of the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) to supervise and oversee professional counselling conduct, including the imposition of relevant ethical codes. These counselling ethical codes were established to provide detailed clarification on the existing laws and policies without replacing the counselling law (Saidi & Hassan, 2018). Therefore, the ethical codes in counselling are central in guiding counsellors to responsibly and competently conduct counselling services, including e-counselling.

There are many reservations reported in past studies regarding the ethical ramifications of e-counselling. Foon et al. (2020) reported that the lack of

confidentiality in cyberspace negatively impacts the Malaysian counsellors' intention to offer e-counselling. Smith and Gillon (2021) indicated the need for robust ethical governance for e-counsellors to ensure the safety of the counsellors and their clients. In response to this, professional counselling associations globally have modified ethical counselling policies to provide proper guidance for e-counsellors and address the relevance of technology-delivered counselling services in the technologically advanced community (Ifdil et al., 2020). Despite the increased acceptance of e-counselling services in the Malaysian community, the counselling ethical codes have not yet been revised to provide clear guidelines for e-counsellors. In contrast, the American Counselling Association (ACA) introduced a separate section in their code of ethics to support the advancement of technology-mediated counselling in the US and safeguard counsellor-client relationships in the virtual space. Section I of ACA's (2014) Code of Ethics was introduced to provide guidelines and clarify counsellors' obligations when conducting distance counselling and applying technology and social media in counselling services. As a result, sub-section A.12 that was previously introduced for guidance in technology application is removed. The Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) (2016), however, is heaviliy reliant on this same sub-section for the implementation of e-counselling and has yet to veer off from the reprinted version of the first counselling code of ethics in 2011.

Counselling using technology-mediated tools requires different implementation of skills and approaches unique to their setting, which are adaptable from face-to-face counselling skills (Amla et al., 2015). They are necessary in counselling services so that counsellors can provide counselling services effectively (Sipon & Yusof, 2008). Counsellors in Malaysia reported that they are able to establish rapport with clients in email and chat counselling and initiate structuring process (Amla et al., 2015). They also indicated the application of various writing techniques and skills. Noor et al. (2018) reported high multicultural competency skills among Malaysian counsellors, which are associated with high counselling self-efficacy. Multicultural skills include the ability of counsellors to acknowledge the cultural differences between clients and behave appropriately according to their social backgrounds. An Australian study indicated online counsellors' adaptation of the counselling micro-skills model that includes using open and closed questions, paraphrasing, challenging incongruencies, and working towards counselling goals (Hawke, 2017). Counselling skills are crucial components in any counselling process. Thus, it is not surprising that e-counselling and face-to-face counselling share similar skills.

Past studies have shown that counsellors have positive outlooks towards the integration of technology in counselling delivery due to its accessibility, convenience (Maurya et al., 2020), and safety of the online space (Smith & Gillon, 2021). The anonymity factor in internet counselling has attracted more individuals, especially those who fear being stigmatised for having mental health issues (Wong et al., 2018). However, despite increased recognition of e-counselling services, counsellors lack adequate training specific to online-based counselling services (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016; Smith & Gillon, 2021; Zamani et al., 2010). Past studies reported ambiguity in the effectiveness of e-

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counselling for clients with severe psychological and social issues such as suicide and bullying (Haner & Pepler, 2017). Maurya et al. (2020) showed that counsellors find ethical behaviour and maintaining confidentiality as the main concerns in technology-based counselling. Malaysian counsellors reported major drawbacks in their intention to offer e-counselling due to the lack of verbal cues in e-counselling (Foon et al., 2020). The implementation of e-counselling raises several concerns and challenges for e-counsellors, especially as counsellors and clients are meeting virtually instead of face-to-face. Without sufficient knowledge and training, these challenges may limit e-counsellors' ability to conduct counselling effectively.

Therefore, with regard to clients' needs, counsellors may choose to conduct e-counselling as an alternative or supplementary to face-to-face counselling (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). E-counselling in Malaysia has been proven to be effective, particularly in reducing stress levels (Salleh et al., 2015). Many Malaysian studies have explored perceptions among e-counsellors on e-counselling implementation (Foon et al., 2020; Salleh et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2018; Zamani et al., 2010), and their satisfaction with conducting these services (Zainudin & Mohamad Yusop, 2018a). Messina and Loffler-Stastka (2021) indicated that counsellors demonstrate different perceptions towards their performance when working face-to-face as opposed to online. In parallel, Bandura (1997) stated that self-efficacy is subjective and varies across a different range of tasks carried out by individuals. Larson and Daniel's (1998) definition of counselling self-efficacy is used to define e-counsellors' self-efficacy as their beliefs about their capability to execute e-counselling related tasks and cope with challenges in an e-counselling setting. Although there are many studies in Malaysia that investigate e-counselling services from e-counsellors' viewpoints, they have not given enough attention to identifying e-counsellors' self-efficacy to conduct e-counselling.

The growth of e-counselling services suggests an increasing demand for e-counsellors who have high resilience to strive in their profession and acquire adequate skills and knowledge to conduct e-counselling competently. Improvement in beliefs about counselling performance leads to improvement in counsellors' overall performance (Messina & Loffler-Stastka, 2021). Positive self-beliefs, according to Bandura (1977, 1994), improve personal aspiration and willingness to make efforts to achieve successful outcomes. Bandura (1977, 1994, 1997) further explained that self-efficacy is directly influenced by individuals' beliefs about the skills and knowledge that they have and their capability to take actions to overcome obstacles. With this in mind, the purpose of this study is to identify the predicting factors of counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia.

1.2   Problem statement

The integration of technology and the Internet in counselling has expanded from telephone and text-based to synchronous video calls, providing more

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opportunities for counsellors to reach individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The advancement of e-counselling is necessary for the counselling field to remain relevant in the current and future decades (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019; Johnson & Rehfuss, 2020). E-counselling was not only convenient for those who do not seek counselling help due to transportation difficulties or a fear of stigmatisation against mental health (Elsharkasy et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2018), but also for those who value convenience, accessibility, and cost reduction in help-seeking (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019; Tirel et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2018). The global crisis of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) further renders online-based mental health delivery a primary source of counselling help for the community (Maurya et al., 2020). With an increasing number of counsellors in Malaysia demonstrating a favourable attitude towards e-counselling (Foon et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2018), more studies are needed to help the counselling community (e.g., counsellors, counselling programme providers, and professional counselling associations) understand what is necessary to provide quality counselling services to clients.

Competent counsellors are quick to participate in counselling tasks that are new and challenging; this is an important quality that counsellors need, especially considering the hazardous nature of the counselling profession (Yusof et al., 2017). Existing studies suggest that work performance, resiliency, and commitment to counselling work are highly associated with the development of counselling self-efficacy (Sulen, 2015; Yusof et al., 2017). Counsellors with higher self-efficacy have higher adaptability to various counselling tasks, therefore they have a positive outlook on their abilities to accomplish established goals. Concerns around technical proficiency and confidentiality of the virtual space often deter counsellors in Malaysia from conducting e-counselling competently (Foon et al., 2020). Thus, it is imperative that the current research puts more emphasis on identifying counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors so that they are informed on how to maintain confidence and competency to achieve e-counselling goals.

In order to perform counselling tasks effectively, it is crucial that counsellors improve their counselling competency and seek additional training specific to e-counselling skills (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016; Mahomed et al., 2020). Findings from past studies suggest that counselling skills acquisition is associated with counselling self-efficacy (Crowe et al., 2022). In Malaysia, several studies have shown that high multicultural competency and emotional intelligence are correlated with increased levels of counselling self-efficacy (Noor et al., 2018; Yusof et al., 2017). Developing skills that are culturally appropriate with the current transition in counselling delivery will be advantageous for e-counsellors to adopt e-counselling services and provide quality care to those who require professional help (Johnson & Rehfuss, 2020). Therefore, the identification of counselling skills that are applicable among e-counsellors is important so that adequate information is obtained on skills that can be incorporated into the counselling curriculum and training in Malaysia.

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Counselling involves a professional helping relationship that takes place in a private and secure setting; thus, ethics are important counselling components that counsellors need to resolve social issues within a community (Saidi & Hassan, 2018). Nevertheless, researchers from previous studies have indicated a lack of ethical clarity in the use of technology in counselling delivery (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). Several ethical dilemmas were identified in Malaysian studies, including maintaining confidentiality and privacy (Foon et al., 2020). The Counsellor Code of Ethics that was formed by the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) (2016) provides ethical guidelines for counsellors who choose to adopt e-counselling services. However, these guidelines are far behind those developed by other professional counselling associations outside of Malaysia (e.g., the American Counselling Association). The counselling ethical codes are an important source of information for counsellors to solve ethical issues that may arise in counselling sessions (Saidi & Hassan, 2018); thus, the slow adaptability of the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) to revise these ethical codes to meet the current counselling trend may further limit counsellors' ability to provide e-counselling competently. The dearth of studies in Malaysia that address ethical responsibilities and behaviours among e-counsellors may have also resulted from the lack of ethical guidelines specific to e-counselling, which proves vital for the current study to address the presence of ethical behaviours among e-counsellors in Malaysia.

In addition to ethical concerns, counsellors have described some major drawbacks in the use of technology in counselling services, including the loss of verbal cues, cybersecurity ambiguity, lack of technical skills and training specific to virtual modality (Foon et al., 2020; Maurya et al., 2020; Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019; Okun & Nimrod, 2020). Counsellors who use e-counselling as a primary medium of counselling services risk being discouraged from doing so if they fail to acknowledge the impact that these limitations have on the efficiency of the counselling services (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019). Counsellors must therefore understand what they find problematic when conducting e-counselling sessions, which will be helpful to determine what is needed to improve their ability to provide quality services. In order to address this topic and expand existing research in Malaysia, this study sought to identify how skills applicability, ethical behaviours, and potential drawbacks of e-counselling services influence e-counsellors' self-efficacy levels to conduct e-counselling competently.

1.3   Research objectives

1.3.1   General objectives

The general objective of this research is to identify the influence of e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations on counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia.

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1.3.2 Specific objectives

The specific objectives of this study are as follow:

1. To identify the level of counselling self-efficacy, e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations among e-counsellors in Malaysia.
2. To identify the relationship between e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics, e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia.
3. To identify the variables which influence counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia.

1.4 Research questions

This study was conducted to answer a series of research questions as below.

RQ_1: What is the level of counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia?
RQ_2: What is the level of e-counselling skills among e-counsellors in Malaysia?
RQ_3: What is the level of e-counselling ethics among e-counsellors in Malaysia?
RQ_4: What is the level of e-counselling limitations among e-counsellors in Malaysia?
RQ_5: Is there a significant relationship between e-counselling skills and counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia?
RQ_6: Is there a significant relationship between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia?
RQ_7: Is there a significant relationship between e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia?
RQ_8: Is counselling self-efficacy influenced by e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations?

1.5 Research hypotheses

The research hypotheses are as follow:

H_{a1}: There is a significant relationship between e-counselling skills and counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia.
H_{a2}: There is a significant relationship between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia.
H_{a3}: There is a significant relationship between e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia.

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H~a4~:   There is a significant influence of e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations on counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia.

1.6   Research significance

Higher levels of self-efficacy indicate that counsellors are confident in their ability to participate in various counselling tasks in order to provide high-quality counselling to clients. Self-efficacy ensures that counsellors maintain beneficence to clients and avoid maleficence, which are both components of the ethical principles of counselling. This study identified the factors of skills applicability, ethical conduct, and limitations of e-counselling services in influencing Malaysian e-counsellors' self-efficacy. These findings are important to provide relevant information for counsellor educators and counselling programme providers to revise the content of counselling training that incorporates required counselling skills and ethical knowledge into e-counselling implementation. Some major drawbacks that prevent e-counsellors from providing effective counselling will be valuable information for counsellor educators to design counselling course content that encourages exposure among trainee counsellors to the use of technology and the internet in counselling practises. Through proper education and training, more competent counselling graduates are produced who have high confidence, resiliency, and positive counselling aspirations as they have acquired adequate knowledge and prior experience of how e-counselling can be provided in an ethical and competent manner.

Continued professional counselling training is necessary for counsellors who are currently offering e-counselling services so that they can improve whatever skills and knowledge they are lacking. This study identified skills, ethical knowledge, and limitations found in e-counselling, which is important information for professional counselling associations such as the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) and the International Counselling Association of Malaysia (PERKAMA International) to devise more online-specific training and professional development workshops for counsellors. In addition to improving their ability to deal with diverse clients and improve competency, the integration of e-counselling into counselling training is required to prepare counsellors for the coming decades (Johnson & Rehfuss, 2020). The lack of training among e-counsellors may ultimately undermine their qualification to provide counselling support to clients online. Therefore, this study is critical to encouraging the Malaysian counsellors to be progressive in making the counselling profession relevant in the changing society.

Despite the recognition of e-counselling in Malaysia, the Counsellor Code of Ethics has yet to be revised to provide clear guidelines and responsibility among counsellors on the integration of technology in counselling services. The presence of ethical codes in counselling is crucial to defend counsellors from allegations in court (Saidi & Hassan, 2018) and provide strict punishment for

ethical misconduct in e-counselling. Therefore, the lack of clarity in the ethical codes to assist counsellors in their e-counselling work may be detrimental to their ability to counsel competently, tarnishing society's perception toward the counselling profession. The current study's identification of a correlation between ethical counselling conduct and counselling self-efficacy is necessary to expand more research on this topic and increase awareness among counsellors of the dire need for improved ethical guidelines in Malaysia. Therefore, the findings from this study are vital in bringing the attention of the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) to the need for more coherent ethical codes that emphasise the responsibility and guidelines for ethical conduct in e-counselling services.

1.7 Research limitations

There are several limitations present in this study. The study measures counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia regardless of their locations and places of service. E-counselling services were defined without identifying whether they are provided synchronously or asynchronously. Thus, the scope of this study is general among the Malaysian population without identifying the smaller counsellor groups across shared characteristics. The main constructs in this study were also identified only from e-counsellors' perspectives. Since the counselling process involves two-way communication between counsellor and client, this study is limited as it excludes clients' points of view. Additionally, this study employed the use of an online survey form that required respondents to complete in order to participate in the study. Since the measures adopted are self-reported, the respondents may provide answers based on their personal judgement and interpretation of the aspects highlighted in the questionnaire. They may provide responses which they perceive as the correct answers; therefore, there is a high likelihood that the data collected is skewed. Lastly, the research instrument employed is limited to identifying only the available constructs. Different sets of research instruments may yield different responses and data sets pertaining to other constructs. Hence, this study should not be generalised to other studies that employ a different set of research instruments.

1.8 Definitions of terms

The important terms and main variables utilised throughout this study are defined as follows:

1.8.1 E-counsellor

The Counsellor Act 1998 (Act 580) defines counsellors as those who provide counselling services for a fee or for other reasons. Counsellors who wish to provide and charge clients for counselling sessions need to be registered with the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) and meet the set requirements. To date, no

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definitive statement has been issued and found to distinguish e-counsellor from counsellor. Counsellors who conduct e-counselling often provide face-to-face counselling interchangeably as convenient and preferable to them and the clients (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018; Maurya et al., 2020). Hence, e-counsellors are essentially counsellors who are responsible for abiding by the Counsellor Code of Ethics when conducting counselling services using any online means.

In the context of this study, e-counsellors are counsellors in Malaysia who provide e-counselling services in any private or public institution. These services include a wide range of e-counselling modalities, either paid or unpaid. E-counsellors, as identified through this study, are not limited only to counsellors who are certified by the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia); they, however, have academic qualifications at least at the bachelor's level to voluntarily provide counselling help to distressed individuals. In short, e-counsellors are counsellors in Malaysia who have or are actively providing e-counselling services during the time of this study.

1.8.2   E-counselling

E-counselling is defined as a professional counselling practise that takes place between a licensed counsellor and a virtual client from remote locations, via any technological tool either synchronously, asynchronously, or bidirectionally (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). E-counsellors may conduct e-counselling sessions using email, instantaneous chat and video-conference call sessions.

In the context of this study, e-counselling refers to technology-mediated counselling services that e-counsellors provide to clients, including text-based (e.g., email, live-chatroom), visual-based (video-conferencing call), or telephone-based sessions. These sessions can include any counselling type, ranging from individual, group, and career counselling. They are conducted by e-counsellors across the states in Malaysia, who offer e-counselling in their respective counselling units (e.g., private and public institutions).

1.8.3   Counselling self-efficacy

Counselling self-efficacy was described by Larson and Daniels (1998) to represent counsellors' own beliefs or perceptions of their capability to counsel clients. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory stated that self-efficacy pertains to the likelihood of an individual to sustain in the face of adversities in order to complete the desired tasks.

In the context of this study, counselling self-efficacy is defined as e-counsellors' beliefs in their own ability to exhibit desired e-counselling related tasks and activities. Larson et al.'s (1992) Counselling Self-estimate Inventory (COSE) was

employed to measure counselling self-efficacy based on five sub-constructs: (i) microskills, (ii) process, (iii) difficult client behaviours, (iv) cultural competence, and (v) awareness of values.

1.8.4 E-counselling skills

"Skill" is defined by Sulaiman (2003) as one's unique ability to execute a certain action by applying the knowledge they have. McLeod (2007) defines 'counselling skills' as a concept that reflects professional counsellors' attempt to carry out activities pertaining to basic human competences for specific purposes. No specific definition was found, to date, for 'e-counselling skills'; however, past studies (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016; Okun & Nimrod, 2020) have suggested that e-counsellors utilize and make proper adaptations of counselling skills from the face-to-face counselling to the online setting (e.g., build rapport, maintain confidentiality, manage silence).

The context of this study defined e-counselling skills as an online-specific counselling skills that e-counsellors applied throughout e-counselling sessions with clients. The e-counselling skills questionnaire was employed to identify e-counsellors' abilities to apply various types of e-counselling skills. This questionnaire was developed to measure e-counselling skills variable based on seven sub-constructs: (i) structuring skill and rapport building, (ii) exploration skill, (iii) communication skill, (iv) goal identification and attainment, (v) problem-solving, (vi) empathy, and (v) multicultural skill.

1.8.5 E-counselling ethics

"Ethics" and "ethical conduct" are defined separately by Jaladin and Lau (2013), such that the former refers to a moral system held by a group of individuals monitored by professional organisations, while the latter refers to one's ability to comply with the professional standards in practise through ethical decision-making process. Freeman (2000) described ethics as a means to guide a good course using value systems and standards which are tied together coherently and reasonably. The available information suggests that the concept of 'e-counselling ethics' can be defined as professional standards and ethical codes that counsellors must follow when conducting counselling sessions via virtual space. The Counsellor Code of Ethics by the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) (2016) describes the ethical obligations and guidelines that counsellors must follow when choosing to conduct technology-mediated counselling services.

The context of this study defined e-counselling ethics as the ethical practises among e-counsellors when conducting e-counselling sessions. The e-counselling ethics questionnaire was employed to identify the extent that e-counsellors take part in ethical e-counselling practises. This questionnaire was developed by the researcher to measure the e-counselling ethics variable based

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on seven sub-constructs which were derived from the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia)'s (2016) Counsellor Code of Ethics: (i) benefit and limitation, (ii) technology-assisted services, (iii) law and statute, (iv) technology and informed consent, and (v) world wide web.

1.8.6   E-counselling limitations

Houser and Thoma (2013) described several concerns regarding the practise of online counselling that hinder counsellors from choosing to engage in online-based counselling. Mejah et al. (2019) noted that limitations in online counselling implementation include the ethical aspects and nonverbal communications that could cause professional misconduct. The concept of 'e-counselling limitations' was not defined specifically in existing studies; however, several challenges in the features of e-counselling services were highlighted by e-counsellors.

The context of this study defines e-counselling limitations as e-counsellors' perceived limitations of e-counselling features and provisions. The e-counselling limitations questionnaire was employed to identify the extent that e-counsellors agree with the limitations found in e-counselling. This questionnaire was developed by the researcher to measure the e-counselling limitations variable based on seven sub-constructs: (i) counsellor-client presence, (ii) counsellor-client perception, (iii) training requirement, (iv) time delay, (v) client and anonymity, (vi) confidentiality and privacy, and (vii) cost.

1.9   Chapter summary

This chapter discussed the history of e-counselling services in Malaysia and the concept of counselling self-efficacy. A brief background on e-counselling skills and ethical e-counselling conduct was discussed, as well as the limitations or challenges present in conducting e-counselling as highlighted in significant studies. The problem statement and research significance were discussed to provide vital information on the importance and practical as well as theoretical benefits of carrying out this research. Research questions and objectives were described in detail, with the general objective being to identify whether e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations significantly influence counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia. The research hypotheses were formulated from the research problems to predict the relationship between the variables. Some of the limitations presenting the scope of this study were discussed, and the definition of terms for e-counsellor, e-counselling and the variables involved were described both conceptually and operationally. Existing studies that highlight the relationship linking these variables and a major theory that supports this relationship are discussed in the next chapter.

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