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INFLUENCE OF E-COUNSELING SKILLS, ETHICS, AND LIMITATIONS ON COUNSELING SELF- EFFICACY AMONG E-COUNSELORS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The growing use of e-counseling in various institutions in Malaysia has called for more e-counselors with high self-efficacy to carry out e-counseling responsibilities. However, current studies in Malaysia lack empirical data on counseling self-efficacy among this population. Hence, this study identified the influence of e-counseling skills, ethics, and limitations on counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors in Malaysia. A correlational study design was employed, where 233 e-counselors in Malaysia were selected using a simple random sampling procedure. Through emails, the respondents were given an access link to an online questionnaire. The inferential analysis using Pearson correlation reported a positive correlation between e-counseling skills and counseling self-efficacy, as well as between e-counseling ethics and counseling self-efficacy. e-Counseling limitations reported a negative correlation with counseling self-efficacy. A multiple regression analysis was also conducted, and e-counseling skills was found to be the best predictor of counseling self-efficacy, followed by e-counseling limitations. The findings from this study are pertinent to support research that investigates e-counseling in the Malaysian context. It also provides suggestions for professional counseling associations, counseling program providers, and counseling educators to improve the higher education training and delivery of e-counseling services in Malaysia.

Keywords: challenges, counseling program provider, ethical conduct, online counseling, online therapeutic skills, efficacy expectations

1. Introduction

The integration of technology and the Internet has expanded the method of conducting counseling sessions from telephone and text-based methods to synchronous video calls, which has provided more opportunities for counselors to reach individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In fact, the advancement of e-counseling is necessary for the counseling field to remain relevant in current and future decades (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019; Johnson & Rehfuss, 2020). e-Counseling is convenient as it overcomes transportation difficulties or a fear of stigmatization (Elsharkasy et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2018) and is easily accessible and cost-effective (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019; Wong et al., 2018). The global crisis of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) further rendered online-based mental health delivery as a primary method for one to receive counseling help (Maurya et al., 2020). This development was imperative as a good mental health was found to be linked with higher social support, particularly during the COVID-19 period among university students, according to Hamzah and Athaha (2022). With increased reliance on technology for work and academic purposes, mental health providers must therefore address the need for an online platform for counseling support (Alias et al., 2022). Hence, more studies related to e-counseling practices will help the counseling community (e.g., counselors, counseling program providers, and professional counseling associations) understand what is necessary to provide quality counseling services to clients.

Competent counselors are quick to participate in counseling tasks that are new and challenging; this is an important quality that counselors need, especially as the counseling profession is known to be hazardous in nature (Yusof et al., 2017). Existing studies suggest that work performance, resiliency and commitment to counseling work are highly associated with the development of counseling self-efficacy (Yusof et al., 2017). Counselors with higher self-efficacy have higher adaptability to various counseling tasks, therefore, they have a positive outlook on their abilities to accomplish established goals. However, concerns around technical proficiency and confidentiality of a virtual space often deter counselors in Malaysia from conducting e-counseling competently (Foon et al., 2020). Thus, it is imperative for current research to emphasize on identifying counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors.

In order for counselors to perform counseling tasks effectively, it is crucial that they seek additional trainings that are specific to e-counseling skills (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016). Findings from past studies suggest that counseling skills acquisition is associated with counseling 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 counseling self-efficacy (Noor et al., 2018; Yusof et al., 2017). Hence, the development of skills that

are culturally appropriate with the current transition in counseling delivery will be advantageous for e-counselors to adopt e-counseling services and provide quality care to those who require professional help (Johnson & Reh fuss, 2020). Therefore, the identification of counseling skills that are applicable among e-counselors is important so that adequate information can be obtained on skills that can be incorporated into counseling curriculum and training in Malaysia.

Counseling involves a professional helping relationship that takes place in a private and secure setting; thus, ethics are important counseling components that counselors 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 counseling delivery (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). In fact, several ethical dilemmas have been identified in Malaysian studies, such as maintaining confidentiality and privacy (Foon et al., 2020). Counseling ethical codes are an important source of information for counselors to solve ethical issues that may arise in counseling sessions (Saidi & Hassan, 2018). In Malaysia, the Counselor Code of Ethics that was formed by Malaysia's Board of Counselors (2016) provides ethical guidelines for counselors who choose to adopt e-counseling services. However, these guidelines are far behind those developed by other professional counseling associations outside of Malaysia (e.g., the American Counseling Association) and are inadequate in meeting the current counseling trend in Malaysia. This lack of e-counseling-specific ethical guidelines may have contributed to the dearth of studies in Malaysia on ethical responsibilities and behaviors among e-counselors, which makes the current study critical to address the presence of ethical behaviors among this group.

In addition to ethical concerns, counselors have described major drawbacks in the use of technology in counseling services, including the loss of verbal cues, cybersecurity ambiguity, and the lack of technical skills and training specific to virtual modalities (Foon et al., 2020; Maurya et al., 2020; Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019). Counselors who use e-counseling as a primary medium of counseling services risk being discouraged from doing so if they fail to acknowledge the impact that these limitations have on the efficiency of the counseling services (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019). Counselors must therefore understand what they find problematic when conducting e-counseling sessions, which will be helpful to determine what is needed to improve their ability to provide quality services. Counselors who lack the incentive to update their knowledge or who are not well-trained in the services that they are expected to offer may not be efficient at their work once they are assigned to their respective institutions. Schools in particular struggle with the lack of quality professional counselors who are experts in specific counseling fields, such as career counseling and mental health counseling (Tran et al., 2020). If issues concerning counselors' professionalism persist, it may be difficult for counselors to expand and

maintain the use of e-counseling in their professional setting, especially if they have not received the necessary training.

Linking all findings from past studies, the higher application of e-counseling skills and ethical behaviors is assumed to be associated with more positive beliefs or confidence to do well and strive in e-counseling work. Counselors who perceive many limitations in e-counseling may demonstrate higher anxiety, which may hinder them from overcoming difficult situations in the e-counseling setting. With the focus on the Malaysian cultural setting, this study addresses the link between the aforementioned variables to contribute to existing e-counseling research in Malaysia by identifying how e-counseling skills, ethical behaviors, and potential challenges of e-counseling influence e-counselors' self-efficacy.

1.1. e-Counseling Skills and Counseling Self-Efficacy

In order to deal with clients who have emotional or psychological concerns, it is especially important and useful for counselors to be able to master basic counseling skills. However, as Holmes and Kozlowski (2016) noted, face-to-face counseling skills cannot be automatically transferable and applicable in the virtual space, especially if e-counselors lack online-specific training. Their quantitative study using an exploratory design on online counseling group leaders reported 11 counseling skills that were marked as easy to use 46% of the time upon completion of group counseling sessions. These skills include asking open-ended and closed-ended questions, summarizing, and managing silence. Four and six skills were marked as difficult to use and not used respectively. Both sets of skills include more advanced group-specific counseling skills, such as facilitating communication and helping clients process emotions which are considered difficult, while skills in communicating nonverbal gestures and making eye contact were not used.

Hawke (2017) described the micro-skills model of counseling that was utilized by online counselors in the Kids Helpline Service. The model consisted of three main stages, with each stage covering several components of basic counseling skills, including asking open and closed questions, building rapport, and paraphrasing (stage one); identifying and devising clients' core issues (stage two); and working with clients to strategize a plan of action (stage three). On top of applying these basic counseling skills, it is especially important for counselors to acquire technical skills, such as knowing what applications or tools to use when communicating online (e.g., utilizing various language styles, phrase repetition, and emoticons). This is imperative to ensure that e-counselors can maintain participation in e-counseling services to develop higher confidence to strive in this setting.

Consequently, when linking counseling self-efficacy and e-counseling skills, Adeyemo and Agokei (2019) found that counseling self-efficacy is significantly correlated with skills in emotional intelligence among postgraduate counseling

students. Individuals with higher self-efficacy have the ability to be more emotionally aware and can better cope with overwhelming feelings. Furthermore, Kozan's (2020) qualitative study among school counselors in Turkey reported that with respect to counseling self-efficacy in counseling skills, increased supervisory feedback during undergraduate counseling training is perceived to be the best source and predictor of enhancement in counseling self-efficacy. Through semi-structured interviews, the participants noted that counseling skills development is linked to improved self-efficacy. This coincides with Akçabozan-Kayabol et al.'s (2021) study that found a significant increase in counseling students' self-efficacy after taking Virtual Modelling (VM) counseling skills and technique courses. The students noted that the course provided an opportunity for them to strengthen their knowledge and observe techniques previously learned outside the course, which helped to deepen their understanding of counseling processes and gave them a boost in their self-efficacy.

The link between e-counseling skills and self-efficacy suggested that the period during counselors' formal training as trainees at higher education studies is vital. Counseling skills acquired during this period will be important for supporting their counseling endeavors and improving their ability to adapt to various counseling modalities. As the previous study made apparent, it is assumed that the use of e-counseling skills—which integrate digital skills with basic counseling skills, such as developing rapport, demonstrating empathy, active listening, and problem-solving—is associated with improved self-efficacy or overall perceptions of the counselors' capacity to provide e-counseling. Hence, the following research hypothesis is developed, which was tested in this study:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between e-counseling skills and counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors in Malaysia.

1.2. e-Counseling Ethics and Counseling Self-Efficacy

Ethics is an important aspect of professional counseling services in any setting, whether face-to-face or online. Despite the gap between the ethical issues raised in e-counseling and those raised in face-to-face counseling, ethical and legal counseling policies are not sufficiently clear with regards to legal counseling practice (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). To address online counseling, the Board of Counselors (Malaysia) (2016) included a sub-section in the Counselor Code of Ethics that explains the ethical responsibilities and guidelines in technology-assisted counseling services. In contrast, the American Counseling Association (ACA) (2014) highlights the use of distance counseling, technology and social media in e-counseling services in a separate section, Section H, in its Counselor Code of Ethics. The nature of e-counseling can be challenging for counselors, as they require additional skills and knowledge about digital use and internet features. However, published studies in

Malaysia lack empirical data on ethical behaviors and knowledge among e-counselors.

The counseling law in Malaysia provides a background on how the counselor code of ethics was established. Saidi and Hassan (2018), in their qualitative study using the semi-structured interview technique with a registered counselor in Malaysia regarding the ethical and legal issues in Malaysia, highlighted issues on (1) the implementation of counseling law and ethics that is far behind other western countries and (2) discrepancies between the number of counselors who are registered with the Board of Counselors (Malaysia) and those who have successfully graduated from counseling training. Further findings revealed ethical dilemmas that frequently plague counselors, such as the lack of a site supervisor to consult with when faced with a difficult decision-making process; a hazy professional boundary between counselor and client; difficulty accepting or rejecting referral cases; and maintaining client confidentiality from third parties. Finally, the study found that among the factors that cause ethical dilemmas are the lack of clear understanding of ethical and legal counseling issues and lack of resources such as counseling colleagues and other counseling experts when faced with issues in managing clients. Counseling services require counselors to provide psychological support and guidance to distressed clients. Thus, this lack of awareness and understanding of the ethical protocols and responsibilities of counselors is detrimental to clients, as it will affect counselors' performance and confidence to maintain a good and competent image as a professional.

When linking ethical conduct in e-counseling to counseling self-efficacy, Haktanir (2020) described self-efficacy as an ethical necessity for counseling practices. Self-efficacy was found to improve when counselors had more positive beliefs about their ability to conduct counseling based on ethical conduct. Subarimaniam et al. (2021) identified the factors that predict counseling self-efficacy among Malaysian counselors when addressing ethical perplexities among 148 counseling trainees. The findings reported multicultural competence as the best predictor of counseling self-efficacy. As Subarimaniam et al. (2021) added, the ability of counselors to utilize knowledge, awareness and skills in a multicultural component directly influences their ability to digest ethical and legal perplexities in counseling effectively. Consequently, the Counselor Code of Ethics has highlighted the need for e-counselors to have high multicultural awareness, especially in evaluating the appropriateness of online intervention according to their clients' social and cultural backgrounds. Thus, although there is scarcity in past literatures that linked ethical adherence and counseling self-efficacy, it is implied that higher knowledge and demonstration of ethical behaviors is linked to a higher driving force to do well in counseling tasks, including those related to e-counseling. In other words, counselors' self-efficacy is associated with their ability to provide counseling services as licensed

and righteous counselors, obtain clients' informed consent, and maintain security and confidentiality of the counseling sessions. This study tested this assumption using the following research hypothesis:

H₂: There is a significant relationship between e-counseling ethics and counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors in Malaysia.

1.3. e-Counseling Limitations and Counseling Self-Efficacy

Earlier studies have noted several challenges and disadvantages in e-counseling that have been identified by counselors, such as unfamiliarity with using online tools (Foon et al., 2020) or the loss of non-verbal cues and physical contact as major obstacles to online counseling (Amos et al., 2020; Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). Schlenger et al. (2022) highlighted online counselors' fear of miscommunication and lack of a clear and accurate counseling process when digitalizing counseling services. e-Counseling limitations in this study thus refers to features and issues in e-counseling services that e-counselors perceive as challenging when providing counseling help to clients.

A study by Nagarajan and Yuvaraj (2019) on 11 mental health professionals found that the absence of human contact contributed to a negative attitude towards technology integration in counseling (18.2%). Most respondents (72.7%) reported the loss of nonverbal cues in text-based (email or chat) and telephone counseling as the main disadvantage of online counseling. In addition, several counselors perceived that clients can easily become dependent on counselors, and that the credibility of both clients and counselors can be questioned as they are not in the same physical setting. The analysis also reported that the respondents perceived confidentiality, privacy, and the counselor's competence as major drawbacks in online counseling. The lack of current training specific to technical skills in the virtual space also means that these counselors' concerns go unaddressed, which was also expressed by the participating counselors in this study.

Foon et al.'s (2020) descriptive study identified the deterrent factors to school counselors' intention to offer e-counseling. The study recruited 66 Malaysian school counselors and descriptive analysis showed that most respondents (90%) reported fear of miscommunication due to unfamiliarity with online language skills as the top key deterrent factor to using e-counseling. This was followed by the lack of technical resources and lack of specific training in e-counseling and professional development (89.4%).

When associating e-counseling limitations with counseling self-efficacy, a Malaysian study by Ooi et al. (2021) found that better access to training contributed to higher counseling self-efficacy as counselors can increase their knowledge through adequate e-counseling training, which will prepare and allow them to adjust to different aspects of e-counseling. Kozan's (2020) qualitative study also presented

qualitative findings that explored the influence of challenges that counselors experienced on self-efficacy levels. The study adopted a phenomenological research design to investigate the sources of self-efficacy beliefs and enhancement strategies among 19 school counselors and reported that the lack of undergraduate education and insufficient training were prominent sources of counseling self-efficacy in counseling skills. This suggests that increased counseling knowledge and experience gained through formal training is a source of counseling self-efficacy. Other e-counseling limitations such as the possible communication barrier, security and privacy of conducting counseling virtually, the tools and basic skills needed when setting up the online sessions, and the anonymity of e-counseling may be associated with e-counselors' self-efficacy when providing these services. Thus, to test this, the following hypotheses were developed:

H₃: There is a significant relationship between e-counseling limitations and counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors in Malaysia

H₄: e-Counseling skills, ethics and limitations significantly influence counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors in Malaysia

1.4. Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' expectations of certain skills and capabilities to take a desired course of action while overcoming present obstacles (Bandura, 1977). Individuals with high efficacy expectations or positive judgments on their capability to handle intimidating or risky situations are more likely to participate and endure in the associated activities. A strong sense of efficacy enhances personal accomplishment and well-being in multiple aspects (Bandura, 1994). Highly efficacious individuals can become engrossed and committed to the selected activities and do not become easy prey to setbacks; thus, they are unsusceptible to extreme stress and depression (Bandura, 1994). How people think, feel, behave, and motivate themselves are determined by their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1994). The Self-Efficacy Theory (SET) by Bandura (1977) assumes that one's efficacy mediates the relationship between what one knows regarding what action to take and what they do in a real setting (Larson et al., 1992). However, while perceived personal efficacy is not the sole determinant of a desired behavior or performance, the adequate possession of skills and incentives will make self-efficacy a major determining factor in one's choice of activities and the coping mechanism that follows (Bandura, 1977).

According to Bandura (1977, 1994) and Larson et al. (1992), self-efficacy is developed and influenced by four sources of information. Given that it is based on one's own experiences of outcome successes and failures, "performance accomplishment" demonstrates the highest influence on one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1994). Repeated successes also lead to positive expectations, as

once individuals develop a strong sense of efficacy, they become resilient to setbacks (Bandura, 1994) and are unlikely to be impacted by occasional failures. Additionally, Bandura (1977) indicated that once self-efficacy is established, individuals tend to generalize this belief to other tasks or situations; hence, improvement in behavioral patterns for certain tasks is likely to be transferred to other situations. However, this generalization is more likely to occur for activities or tasks like those associated with established self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 1969, as cited in Bandura, 1977).

Larson and Daniels (1998) maintained that when Bandura's (1977) definition of self-efficacy is applied to the counseling context, counselors' self-efficacy is defined as the confidence to conduct any counseling-related activities such as individual and group sessions and programs. More specifically, counseling self-efficacy represents counselors' beliefs or expectations of their capabilities to conduct counseling activities with clients (Larson & Daniels, 1998). Many existing studies have shown the applicability of self-efficacy in the counseling setting. Haktanir's (2020) quantitative study on counseling students' self-efficacy noted self-efficacy as an important indicator to identify overall counseling performance. Studies on counseling self-efficacy have also reported its link to multicultural competence (Yusof et al., 2017) and counselor commitment (Adeyomo & Agokei, 2019). These studies, however, are limited to face-to-face counseling services.

Thus, this study utilized the SET to explain the relationships between counseling self-efficacy and its predicting factors (e-counseling skills, ethics, and limitations) among e-counselors in Malaysia. The research objectives were as follows:

- (1) To identify the relationship between e-counseling skills, e-counseling ethics, e-counseling limitations, and counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors in Malaysia.
- (2) To identify the variables which influence counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors in Malaysia.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Framework

The SET (Bandura, 1977) supports the framework of this study by describing how counseling self-efficacy is influenced by e-counselors' perspectives on their ability to perform e-counseling skills and ethics and the challenges they encounter when conducting e-counseling services. Past studies have shown that the ability of counselors to apply counseling skills is linked to higher counseling self-efficacy. Higher ethical behaviors and more positive perceptions toward e-counseling services also suggest higher beliefs in e-counselors' ability to encounter difficult situations in their services. Hence, this study identifies how e-counselors' perspectives toward e-counseling components influence their beliefs or confidence in their ability to strive

for and persist against obstacles that may be present in e-counseling tasks. The research framework for the relationship between these variables is shown in Figure 1.

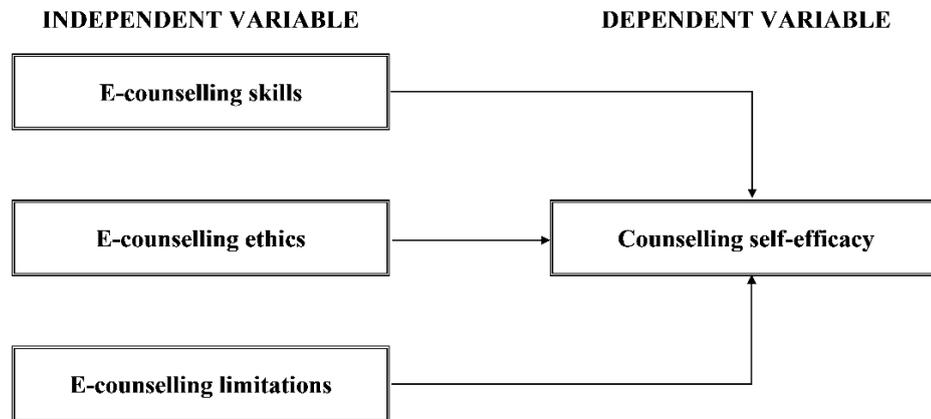


Figure 1: Research Framework Demonstrating the Link between the Variables

2.2. Research Design

This research employed a quantitative method and utilized the correlational study design to achieve this study's objectives. A quantitative study was selected as it was the most appropriate method to achieve the research objectives in this study. This study employed the correlational study design to identify the magnitude, strength, and direction of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable in this study.

2.3. Instrumentation

The researcher utilized a self-report questionnaire as the instrument of this study. This comprised five sections pertaining to the demographic information, e-counseling skills, ethics, limitations, and Larson et al.'s (1992) Counseling Self-Estimate Inventory (COSE).

2.3.1. e-Counseling skills, ethics, and limitations

The available instruments from past studies that measure e-counseling skills, ethics, and limitations have shown a lack of focus specifically for the Malaysian culture; hence, the questionnaire was developed after rigorous review of past literatures and instruments that measured the tested variables. The validation of these questionnaire was achieved by adapting Creswell's (2014) item development procedure. The process includes five main stages as shown in Figure 2.

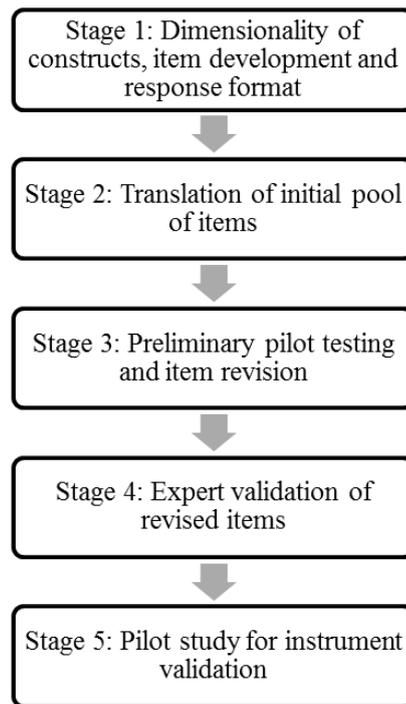


Figure 2: Item Development Process of e-Counseling Skills, e-Counseling Ethics and e-Counseling Limitations Questionnaire (Source: Creswell, 2014)

The initial development of the items began by extensively reviewing existing literature to identify relevant constructs items and appropriate response formats. The suitability of items for each construct was discussed between the research members. Next, the initial pool of items was subjected to a rigorous translation process from English to Malay, especially since most of the literature used were Western-based. Harkness's (2003) Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pre-testing, and Documentation (TRAPD) method, as described in the European Social Survey (ESS, 2018), was used as a guide for the translation process. This process utilized the committee-based approach, which involved all research members and an impartial party who is an expert in both languages and the counseling field. This was to make the adjudication process easier and to produce a more quality item translation. The third stage resumed with a preliminary pilot test on the initial pool of items to identify the feasibility of the questionnaire in the Malaysian context, with the goal to establish the content validity of the scores and improve the questions, formats and scales adopted. Items with Cronbach's coefficient alpha less than .60 were omitted to improve the reliability of items while items with factor loadings of less than .30 were omitted. The items were further revised with respect to their language and sentence structure according to respondents' suggestions and discussions among the research members.

The fourth stage involved expert validation to provide the final evaluation and validation of the questionnaire. Two experts in the field of counseling, item

evaluation, and Malay and English language were involved to confirm validation and appropriateness of the questionnaire. The item development process concluded with the pilot study, in which all three questionnaires reported high reliability with an alpha consistency that was larger than .60. Table 1 shows the literatures adapted for the item construction and the sub-constructs for e-counseling skills, ethics, and limitation.

Table 1: Sources of item construction of e-counseling skills, e-counseling ethics, and e-counseling limitations

Constructs and sub-constructs	Total items	Original sources
E-counselling skills (overall)	34	
Structuring Skill & Rapport Building	3	Torres Rivera (1995)
Exploration Skill	5	Boylan & Scott (2008)
Communication Skill	13	Lambie, Mullen, & Swank, & Blount (2014)
Goal Identification & Attainment	4	
Problem-solving	3	
Empathy	3	
Multicultural Skill	3	
E-counselling ethics (overall)	30	
Benefit and limitation	3	
Technology-assisted services	5	Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) (2016)
Law and statute	3	
Technology and informed consent	10	
World wide web	9	
E-counselling limitations (overall)	18	
Counsellor-client Presence	2	Banach & Bernat (2000)
Counsellor-client Perception	3	Kasket (2003)
Training Requirement	3	Dubois (2004)
Time Delay	3	Campbell & Glasheen (2012)
Client and Anonymity	2	
Confidentiality an Privacy	3	
Cost	2	

The items for e-counseling skills, ethics, and limitations comprised 34, 30 and 18 items respectively, and utilized a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. e-Counseling skills consisted of 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. An example item is, “express empathy to client.” e-

Counseling ethics contained five sub-constructs: (i) benefit and limitation; (ii) technology-assisted services; (iii) law and statute; (iv) technology and informed consent; and (v) World Wide Web. An example item is, “establish a method for verifying client identity.” Lastly, e-counseling limitations consisted of seven sub-constructs: (i) counselor-client presence; (ii) counselor-client perception; (iii) training requirement; (iv) time delay; (v) client and anonymity; (vi) confidentiality and privacy; and (vii) cost. An example item is, “lack of voice intonation may cause misinterpretation in written discussion.”

2.3.2. Counseling Self-Estimate Inventory

The original author of COSE was contacted to obtain their permission to utilize the inventory in this study. Despite being a foreign inventory, all items were found to be relevant for the sample study. However, to improve the accuracy of the responses and ensure that the language used was both relevant and convenient for the Malaysian setting, both English and Malay languages were used. The inventory was translated from English to Malay after validation process by the researchers using the TRAPD method. The coefficient alpha value of COSE indicated high reliability at .92 during a pilot study among 33 randomly selected counselors offering e-counseling in Malaysia.

The 37-item inventory utilized a 6-point Likert scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” and contained five sub-constructs: (i) micro-skills; (ii) process; (iii) difficult client behaviors; (iv) cultural competence; and (v) awareness of values. An example item is, “I feel confident that I will appear competent and earn the respect of my client.” Table 2 shows the distribution of the items in COSE.

Table 2 : Distribution of Items in the Counseling Self-Estimate Inventory

Constructs	Total items
Counselling self-efficacy (overall)	37
Microskills	12
Process	10
Difficult Client Behaviors	7
Cultural Competence	4
Awareness of Values	4

(Source : Larson et al., 1992)

2.4. Sample

Potential respondents were randomly selected from 799 e-counselors across the states in Malaysia in June 2020. The sampling frame included e-counselors who provided counseling services across the states in Malaysia regardless of their work institutions. They provided e-counseling services at their work settings or were volunteers who had taken part in providing psychosocial support helpline service

during the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia. The researchers derived their information from the Malaysia's Board of Counselors and from counselors who advertised their services online. The means of virtual sessions offered by e-counselors included synchronous (e.g., live chat room, telephone) or asynchronous counseling (e.g., email).

Cohen's (1988) G-power analysis estimated that at least 138 subjects were required for the sample size for the effect size of .30, alpha probability error .05 and statistical power .95. However, rigorous literature review and discussion among the research team members concluded that at least 200 subjects were required for this study. The researchers applied a simple random sampling procedure using the fishbowl method to assign numbers to the members of the population for identification purposes before subjecting them to random selection.

The recorded data identified that females (77.7%) took up the majority of the respondents. Most of the respondents were Malay (73.4%), followed by Others (14.2%), Chinese (6.4%) and Indian (6.0%). The majority were at least 41 years old (36.1%). Only 22.7% of respondents were between the ages of 30 and 35, 21.9% were between the ages of 23 and 29, and 19.3% were between the ages of 36 and 40. The majority of the respondents (53.2%) owned a bachelor's degree, followed by 41.2% who owned a master's degree, and only 5.6% completed a doctoral study. Most of the respondents had short to moderate years of counseling experience: 37.8% had 6 to 15 years of experience, and 36.5% had at most 5 years of experience; the rest had 16 to 30 years of counseling experience (24.9%), and at least 31 years of experience (0.9%). Finally, the majority of the respondents were identified as registered and licensed counselors, taking up about 75.5% and 69.1%, respectively.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects in Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM). The data collection process involved distributing a Google Form link to respondents' respective email addresses or personal contact numbers. Possible respondents were identified by the researchers through a contact list of e-counselors in Malaysia maintained by the Board of Counselors (Malaysia). The respondents were randomly selected and contacted via their email addresses twice throughout the study: first, to inform them of their rights to privacy and confidentiality and explain the research objectives; and second, to provide a follow-up to complete the survey if they decided to participate in the study. The follow-up was necessary to obtain a higher response rate (Creswell, 2014). Despite efforts to increase the response rate, the current study encountered difficulties in reaching out to respondents during the COVID-19 data collection period. Hence, potential respondents who failed to be contacted due to technical errors were contacted via WhatsApp. The data collection concluded when 233

responses were collected. Completed surveys were automatically stored in an online database, which allowed the researchers to access the data for analysis.

2.6. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed according to the research objectives. The respondents' demographic information, including gender, ethnic group, age group, education level, years of counseling experience, counselor registration, and licensure status were analyzed using the descriptive method.

To test the research hypotheses, the Pearson correlation test was employed to determine the relationship between e-counseling skills, e-counseling ethics, and e-counseling limitations towards counseling self-efficacy. The variables demonstrated normal distribution and were measured on interval scales (Talib, 2017). Cohen's (1988) interpretation of magnitude and strength of correlation between variables was employed, which suggested that a correlation coefficient from .10 to .29 is small, .30 to .49 is medium, and .50 to 1.0 is significant.

Finally, the multiple regression test was employed to identify the influence of predictor variables (e-counseling skills, e-counseling ethics, and e-counseling limitations) on the dependent variable (counseling self-efficacy). This test was relevant as it involves several techniques to explore the relationships between a continuous dependent variable and several predictors (Pallant, 2016). The multiple correlation coefficient R resulting from the regression analysis test was useful to identify the relationship between the variables involved (Ary et al., 2010). Without violating the assumptions of multiple regression (sample size, multicollinearity, outliers, and normality), the test was employed to identify the contributing factors toward counseling self-efficacy.

3. Findings

3.1. Relationship between e-Counseling Skills, Ethics and Limitations and Counseling Self-Efficacy among E-counselors in Malaysia

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test the relationship between the sub-constructs of e-counseling skills, ethics, limitations, and counseling self-efficacy. The results of this analysis as depicted in Table 3 show that there was a significant and positive relationship between overall e-counseling skills and counseling self-efficacy ($r = .42, p < .01$). All sub-constructs of e-counseling skills also showed positive relationships with counseling self-efficacy. This means that a higher application of e-counseling skills among e-counselors is associated with higher counseling self-efficacy.

Table 3: Results of Pearson correlation analysis between e-counseling skills and counseling self-efficacy (N=233)

E-counselling skills and sub-constructs	Correlation coefficient (r)	p
E-counselling skills (overall)	.42**	.000
Structuring skill and rapport building	.22**	.001
Exploration skill	.34**	.000
Communication skill	.40**	.000
Goal identification and attainment	.42**	.000
Problem-solving	.35**	.000
Empathy	.37**	.000
Multicultural skill	.34**	.000

Note: *p* =p-value; ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The Pearson correlation analysis also showed that there was a significant and positive relationship between overall e-counseling ethics and counseling self-efficacy ($r = .16, p < .05$). Among the sub-constructs of e-counseling ethics, "technology-assisted services", "technology and informed consent" and "law and statute" showed positive relationships with counseling self-efficacy (Table 4). This means that e-counselors who reported greater ethical practices in e-counseling had a greater tendency to demonstrate higher counseling self-efficacy.

Table 4: Results of Pearson correlation analysis between e-counseling ethics and counseling self-efficacy (N=233)

E-counselling ethics and sub-constructs	Correlation coefficient (r)	(p)
E-counselling ethics (overall)	.16*	.017
Benefit and limitation	.10	.140
Technology-assisted services	.18**	.006
Law and statute	.31**	.000
Technology and informed consent	.13*	.045
World wide web	.06	.336

Note: *p*=p-value;** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Finally, the Pearson correlation analysis showed that the overall e-counseling limitations had a significant and negative relationship with counseling self-efficacy ($r = -.35, p < .01$). Additionally, all sub-constructs except "time delay" and "cost" showed significant correlations to counseling self-efficacy (Table 5). These findings indicated that e-counselors who perceived fewer limitations in e-counseling were more likely to demonstrate higher counseling self-efficacy.

Table 5: Results of Pearson correlation analysis between e-counseling limitations and counseling self-efficacy (N=233)

E-counselling limitations and sub-constructs	Correlation coefficient (r)	(p)
E-counselling limitations (overall)	-.35**	.000
Counsellor-client presence	-.30**	.000
Counsellor-client perception	-.34**	.000
Training requirement	-.19**	.003
Time delay	-.11	.105
Client and anonymity	-.25**	.000
Confidentiality and privacy	-.25**	.000
Cost	-.10	.124

Note: *p*=*p*-value; ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

3.2. Influence of e-Counseling Skills, Ethics and Limitations on Counseling Self-Efficacy among E-counselors in Malaysia

The ability of e-counseling skills, ethics, and limitations to predict the variance in counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors was tested using the analysis of multiple regression. The data was fit for the multiple regression test after a successful preliminary analysis. The enter method was used for the analysis, and the results revealed that the variables significantly predicted counseling self-efficacy ($R^2 = .275$, $F [3,229] = 29.02$, $p < .001$). The independent variables explained 27.5% of the variance in counseling self-efficacy, as reported in Table 6.

Table 6: Results of multiple regression (enter method) between e-counseling skills, ethics and limitations towards counseling self-efficacy (N=233)

	R square	B	Beta	t	p
Model	.275				
Constant		3.709			
E-counselling skills		.432	.366	5.33	.000
E-counselling ethics		.056	.051	.72	.471
E-counselling limitations		-.430	-.328	-5.41	.000

Note: B=Unstandardized coefficients; Beta=Standardized coefficient Beta; t=t-value; *p*=*p*-value

The results showed that e-counseling ethics did not contribute to a significant variance in counseling self-efficacy. Additionally, e-counseling skills had the highest Beta value ($\beta = .366$, $t = 5.33$, $p < .001$), followed by e-counseling limitations ($\beta = -.328$, $t = -5.41$, $p < .001$). This implies that e-counseling skills were the best predictors of counseling self-efficacy among e-counselors in Malaysia.

4. Discussion

First and foremost, it should be understood that the sample study under consideration

included Malaysian e-counselors without regard to the specifics of their work environments. This suggests that different work cultures and client social pools are involved, indicating the possibility that respondents' varying levels of engagement with digitizing counseling may have impacted to these findings.

4.1. Principal Findings

Findings from this study showed that e-counseling skills and e-counseling ethics had positive correlations with counseling self-efficacy, while e-counseling limitations had a negative correlation with counseling self-efficacy. Among the independent variables, e-counseling skills predicted counseling self-efficacy the best, which was followed by e-counseling limitations. All hypotheses were therefore accepted. These findings were discussed as follow:

4.2. e-Counseling Skills and Counseling Self-Efficacy

These findings support Kozan's (2020) study who found that counseling skills development led to improvements in self-efficacy among school counselors. Crowe et al. (2022) also showed consistent findings as they reported significant improvement in counseling trainees' self-efficacy after the completion of counseling skills courses. Additionally, Akçabozan-Kayabol et al.'s (2021) study also supported these findings and reported the contribution of the acquired counseling skills in increasing self-efficacy levels. An increased knowledge and application of counseling skills in e-counseling may thus contribute to higher self-efficacy among e-counselors. Positive correlations between self-efficacy and skill acquisition with respect to emotional intelligence were also reported by Adeyemo and Agokei (2019), which is consistent with the current findings that indicated positive correlations between the sub-constructs of e-counseling skills (empathy and communication skills) and counseling self-efficacy. The ability of e-counselors to be aware of self and others and have the knowledge to express understanding of clients' emotions are associated with higher counseling self-efficacy. In contrast, their inability to communicate emotional language can deteriorate rapport-building with clients, which can have a negative effect on their self-efficacy in any counseling setting.

4.3. e-Counseling Limitations and Counseling Self-Efficacy

The e-counseling limitations sub-construct such as counselor-client perception (e.g. lack of non-verbal cues) and inadequate training that is specific to e-counseling showed negative correlations with counseling self-efficacy. In other words, the perception among e-counselors that e-counseling is limited by the lack of physical cues and training in e-counseling corresponds to lower self-efficacy. The possible difficulty to incorporate communication skills that are crucial in face-to-face counseling into e-counseling may clarify why e-counselors find it challenging to conduct e-counseling, particularly when they perceived that these limitations exist. Johnson and Refhuss (2020) and Amos et al. (2020) concurred that e-counseling

lacks physical presence and nonverbal cues, which are obstacles to effective counseling conduct as they cause inaccurate understanding and miscommunication between counselors and clients. However, adequate training can allow e-counselors to improve their self-efficacy. As suggested in the current findings, e-counselors perceived sufficient training in digitalizing counseling to overcome limitations in e-counseling, which consequently increases self-efficacy in counseling settings. Continuing training and education in e-counseling is therefore necessary to equip counselors with the required skills and techniques to overcome drawbacks in e-counseling (Foon et al., 2020). Hence, counseling supervisors play a crucial role as social models for trainees to gain e-counseling knowledge. Adequate and appropriate training experiences will also enable counselors to find previously intimidating limitations more manageable, which can have a positive influence on their counseling self-efficacy.

4.4. e-Counseling Ethics and Counseling Self-Efficacy

Finally, the current study found that despite the positive correlations with counseling self-efficacy, e-counseling ethics did not significantly influence counseling self-efficacy. As professionals, counselors are bound by the Counselor Act 1998 (Act 580) to complete counseling training and register with the Board of Counselors (Malaysia) to provide counseling services. In e-counseling, counselors are responsible for ethical obligations such as informing clients of possible confidentiality issues and evaluating clients' readiness to receive e-counseling. Saidi and Hassan (2018) stressed that the negligence of the counseling law may tarnish the image of counselors as professionals. Subarimaniam et al. (2021) reported that counseling self-efficacy in addressing ethical and legal perplexities is directly influenced by multicultural competency. Higher awareness and the ability to acknowledge clients' unique cultural values contribute to higher counseling self-efficacy in ethical components, which contradicts the current findings. A possible explanation for the current findings could be the lack of understanding and awareness among e-counselors in Malaysia about the applicability of the current ethical policy to conduct e-counseling competently. For example, the professional boundary between counselor and client in e-counseling is unclear, as clients can easily become dependent on the counselor due to high accessibility and frequent contact (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019). The credibility of e-counselors as professionals is also in doubt, as there are not many counselors who are registered as members of the Board of Counselors (Malaysia) (Saidi & Hassan, 2018). To complicate matters, the current situation in Malaysia does not properly enforce legal action against counselors who violate this law (Saidi & Hassan, 2018). This is unfair to counselors who have professional qualifications but are not recognized by society due to ethical negligence on the part of non-qualified counselors.

5. Implications of the Study

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The current findings provide a new theoretical explanation for Bandura's SET with regards to its applicability in e-counseling. Self-efficacy is a thought pattern that connects one's knowledge of certain tasks with their actions to succeed in these tasks. An increase in the repertoire of counseling skills and the ability of counselors to apply these skills can significantly improve previous bias and judgement towards counseling services, thus leading to higher resiliency and confidence levels to engage in counseling activity. On the other hand, lower self-efficacy is caused by higher perceptions among counselors regarding the lack of nonverbal cues, client confidentiality and appropriate training that limit e-counseling services. Counselors who are uncertain about how to operate in an unfamiliar setting, such as e-counseling, may become hesitant and anxious due to the lack of expertise and experience. This corresponds with Ooi et al.'s (2017) study, who found that psychological and affective states such as anxiety and stress have a direct influence on counseling self-efficacy. Likewise, e-counselors who dismiss ethical conduct when conducting e-counseling are likely exposed to failed counseling attempts that can harm both the counselor and client. This is associated with lower counseling self-efficacy, as the current findings suggest. In accordance with this, based on Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is a major determining factor in an individual's course of behavior when they have acquired adequate relevant skills and knowledge. Hence, the current findings support skills acquisition and lack of expertise and experience in self-efficacy. In addition, the findings also adds to the relationship between good ethical behavior and self-efficacy and offer a new explanation for the self-efficacy theory from the perspective of Malaysian e-counselors.

5.2. Implications towards Higher Education Training

Counseling is a therapeutic practice that enables clients to find support and guidance for any issue, including psychological, career, academic, family, or social. Hence, it is important for counselors to strive to be competent by acquiring adequate knowledge and receiving quality training to provide quality support and help to clients in any setting, including e-counseling. That said, the present findings suggest that training specific to providing e-counseling must be provided consistently for counselor at all levels, especially during their trainee period. Self-efficacy for work- or professional-related aspects is developed as a result of adequate training and education. Basic counseling skills, ethics, and exposure to various counseling case studies are developed early in counselors' formal training periods. The experience and exposure obtained during this time enhance counselors' future professional endeavors. Resilience and the capacity to adapt effectively and pro-actively to the dynamics of the counseling workforce follow. To cope with this concern, it will be

crucial to consider the formal training that was acquired in higher education institutions and approved by Malaysia's Board of Counselors, which acts as the accrediting body for counselor qualifications in Malaysia. This training suggests that e-counselor training components should be incorporated into the counseling syllabus assessment process.

The time counselors have spent receiving formal education and training prior to entering the workforce suggest the pivotal role of higher education institutions when providing counseling programs that fulfill the expectations of the counseling profession today. In Malaysia, counselors complete their bachelor's degree from counseling programs in universities recognized by the Board of Counselors (Malaysia). This qualifies them as licensed counselors. While the counselling curriculum was successful by far in preparing counselling trainees entering the professional field and directing professional counselors entering the academic field, formal training focusing on e-counseling is almost absent, which further renders counselors unprepared to provide e-counseling effectively (Mercadal & Cabré, 2022). While it is true that counselors may receive e-counseling training from professional development workshops and seminars outside the formal education period, it is questionable whether they are sufficient compared to receiving an independent course on e-counseling during counselors' training period. This implies that the authorized counseling curriculum and syllabus now in use need to be reviewed to meet the shifting demands of the counseling profession. As such, Malaysia's Board of Counselors ought to collaborate with providers of counseling programs in order to regulate the curricula and courses that counselor trainees must complete in order to get their degrees. The mutual cooperation of the Ministry of Higher Education will be vital to accomplishing this improvement and the upholding of counseling ethics.

The present study found that the best predictor of self-efficacy was e-counseling skills, indicating that training focusing on skills in e-counseling is crucial (Johnson & Rehfuss, 2020). Through counseling skills course provided in higher education institutions, counselor educators and supervisors hold play a key role to guiding, facilitating, and encouraging students to practice both face-to-face and online counselling. With this knowledge and skills developed, internship programs offered to the students must consider collecting counseling hours specifically for e-counselling as opposed to only face-to-face counseling. The involvement of various work industries in this effort will be beneficial so that higher education institutions' counseling program providers can connect with suitable internship settings that provide trainee counselors with a wealth of learning and development possibilities.

6. Conclusion

The findings from this study revealed that e-counseling skills, ethics, and limitations

have significant correlations with counseling self-efficacy. In addition, e-counseling skills have the best influence on counseling self-efficacy. This implies that higher counseling self-efficacy is associated with a greater ability to apply e-counseling skills and ethical conduct, as well as fewer perceived limitations in e-counseling. This study supports previous findings on the correlation between counseling ethics, skill acquisition and counseling self-efficacy, and provide alternative explanations for the SET from the perspective of Malaysian e-counselors. Through this study, the researchers suggest for counseling program providers to actively provide a learning platform for counseling trainees across various fields of expertise to gain e-counseling skills and knowledge on the integration of ICT in counseling services. However, due to the inadequacy of the current counseling ethical codes to guide e-counselors on online counseling, initiatives must first be taken by the Board of Counselors (Malaysia) to improve counseling policies and curriculum. Practical implications of the present study were discussed, highlighting the role of various stakeholders, such as counselor educators and counseling course providers.

7. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

There were several limitations from this study. First, cultural and social backgrounds such as ethnicity, years of counseling experience, and work institutions were not explored in the relationship between the variables. The said factors could result in significant variations in perceptions between counselors. Similarly, the sample group did not correspond to their operational work environment, which may have caused variations in associated variables. Counselors at different operating work environments deal with an array of clients and have access to different resources when putting e-counseling services into practice. It is suggested that future studies investigate the constructs of the current study among counselors in their respective sub-populations, such as their work institutions. This will be essential to improving generalizability of the research findings and directing more research efforts toward understanding e-counselors' unique challenges and factors of self-efficacy in their respective settings and professional backgrounds.

Additionally, the researchers did not differentiate between respondents' primary medium of e-counseling services, which may be either synchronous or asynchronous. Some skills that are relevant in a videoconferencing setting, for instance, may not have the same applicability in text-based settings. Thus, future researchers may consider replicating this study to identify the mediating effect of e-counselors' cultural and social factors on the relationship between the variables and establish one form of communication for the e-counseling service offered by e-counselors. The findings will provide more depth to the current findings and minimize possible bias in the population.

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