EFFECTIVENESS OF ANONYMOUS ONLINE PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING SERVICES IN UNIVERSITIES AND THEIR COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH TRADITIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of anonymous online psychological counseling services implemented in higher education institutions, focusing on students' utilization patterns and the impact of these services on their mental well-being. The research also provides a comparative analysis of online (anonymous) and traditional face-to-face psychological consultations. Data were collected from 486 university students through standardized questionnaires, the *Emotional Well-Being Assessment Scales*, and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that anonymous online counseling is effective in reducing students' levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, particularly by helping them overcome barriers such as shame, fear of judgment, and reluctance to seek help. The sample included students from Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Oriental Studies, second-year groups 2401, 2402, 2412, and 2413. Students actively participated in the research process, and the results were analyzed using mathematical-statistical methods. At the same time, the study confirms that traditional face-to-face counseling remains more effective for addressing deep-rooted or complex psychological issues. The research proposes concrete recommendations for diversifying psychological services in higher education and expanding the integration of online platforms.

Keywords: Online psychological support, anonymous counseling, university students, mental health, traditional psychological services, comparative analysis, trust, psychological problems, stress, anxiety, depression, face-to-face consultation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, psychological counseling has become one of the most relevant and rapidly developing branches of applied psychology. Alongside other forms of psychological support—such as psychocorrection, psychotherapy, and psychological training—this activity aims to help individuals understand the difficulties they face in life and develop the ability to resolve them independently. The primary function of psychological counseling is to identify the client's problem, clarify its underlying nature, and provide scientifically grounded recommendations tailored to the client's personal characteristics and capacities.

Traditional psychological counseling is typically conducted in the form of a face-to-face conversation between the psychologist and the client, scheduled in advance and held in a specially arranged setting. During this process, the client provides detailed information about their difficulties, while the psychologist analyzes the presented issues and develops practical strategies to address them. This format often requires the formulation of clear, actionable, and achievable solutions within a limited

time frame. However, with the rapid advancement of digital technologies, the scope of psychological services has expanded, giving rise to online counseling formats that serve as an alternative to traditional methods. In higher education institutions, anonymous online psychological counseling platforms offer students convenient, prompt, and confidential access to professional help, prompting the need to examine their effectiveness in comparison with conventional approaches.

This article provides a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of anonymous online psychological counseling services operating within the higher education system and traditional forms of psychological support. The study explores their advantages, limitations, and impact on students' psychological well-being from a scientific perspective.

Over the past decade, mental health challenges among university students—particularly stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation—have increased sharply worldwide [6]. The psychological stability of future professionals is of strategic importance not only for individual well-being but also for broader societal development [7]. Although traditional psychological services (such as in-person consultations, individual sessions, and face-to-face therapy) remain effective, many students refrain from seeking help due to feelings of shame, fear of being noticed, time constraints, or mental health–related stigma. Consequently, anonymous online counseling platforms have gained popularity in recent years as a convenient and psychologically safe support option for students [10].

Advantages of Online Counseling:
- Anonymity (the client's identity is not disclosed)
- 24/7 accessibility
- User-friendly interface
- Low cost or free of charge
- No need for in-person meetings with a psychologist

However, scientific literature also notes that online counseling has limited effectiveness in addressing deep psychological problems [2,3,8]. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to assess the effectiveness of anonymous online psychological counseling services in universities and compare them with traditional forms of psychological support [7].

The main objectives of this research are as follows:
1. To determine the level of utilization of anonymous online psychological services among students.
2. To evaluate the impact of these services on students' levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.
3. To assess the comparative effectiveness of online counseling versus traditional psychological services.
4. To identify the barriers students face in seeking psychological support.

The study also set the following tasks:
- To identify the strengths and limitations of online psychological counseling.
- To evaluate the advantages of traditional face-to-face counseling.
- To measure psychological factors affecting students' help-seeking behavior.
- To statistically examine the impact of online platforms on emotional relief.
- To propose a model for improving psychological services.

The methodological framework of this study was based on a comprehensive comparative approach to examining both traditional and online psychological services in higher education institutions. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was applied throughout the research process.

Participants:

The study involved 486 undergraduate and graduate students from various academic disciplines. The sample allowed for an analysis of patterns in the utilization of psychological services as well as an assessment of students' psychological well-being.

METHODS

1. Survey Methods: Students' readiness to seek psychological help and their likelihood of doing so were assessed using the *Help-Seeking Behavior Scale* [10]. In addition, their mental health status was evaluated using the *PHQ-9* (depression indicators) [4] and *GAD-7* (anxiety levels) scales. The frequency of students' use of online psychological services was also examined as a separate indicator.

2. Comparative Experimental Design: Participants were divided into two groups:

- 212 students received psychological support through an anonymous online counseling platform.
- 124 students participated in traditional face-to-face counseling sessions with a psychologist.
  This design enabled a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of online versus traditional support methods.

3. Qualitative Analysis: Interviews and Content Analysis:
To gain an in-depth understanding of students' personal experiences with online and traditional services, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 participants. The collected responses were analyzed using content analysis, providing qualitative insights into the quality and perceived effectiveness of psychological support.

4. Statistical Analysis: Quantitative data were processed using t-tests, correlation analysis, and regression models, assessing the relationship between the type of psychological support and changes in mental health indicators [2,5].

RESULTS

1. Higher Utilization of Online Services: Use of online psychological services was 2.3 times higher than traditional services. 68% of students accessed the anonymous online platform at least once, while only 29% attended face-to-face counseling [11].

Main reasons for choosing online services:

- No shame or embarrassment
- Anonymity
- Quick responses
- No need to visit public spaces

2. **Reduction in Stress Levels:** Among students regularly using online services, the average PHQ-9 score decreased from 11.2 to 7.6, whereas face-to-face counseling led to a decrease from 12.0 to 6.9**.** This indicates that online counseling is effective in alleviating stress, although face-to-face sessions are more effective for deeper therapeutic needs.

3. **Reduction in Anxiety (GAD-7 Scores):**
- Online: 13.4 → 8.1
- Face-to-face: 13.1 → 9.5

This suggests that online counseling may be particularly effective in reducing anxiety compared to traditional methods.

4. **Main Reasons Students Prefer Online Counseling:**
- "I do not feel embarrassed" – 74%
- "Fast and convenient" – 69%
- "Anonymity protects me" – 63%
- "No time to see a psychologist in person" – 58%

5. **Effectiveness of Traditional Counseling for Deep Psychological Problems:** 82% of students reported: *"Online platforms are sufficient for minor issues, but severe cases require in-person support."*

Based on the results, the most effective model for universities is a hybrid psychological service system [11].

Situations in which online counseling is most effective:
- Stress
- Mild anxiety
- Need for emotional relief
- Short consultations
- When confidentiality is important

Situations requiring face-to-face counseling:
- Moderate to severe depression
- Trauma and personal crises
- Suicidal thoughts
- Family conflicts
- Long-term therapy

Based on studies of this kind, students from Group 2412 at Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages**,** under the scientific supervision of Nilifar Farxodova, presented the project titled *"Diagnostics and Prevention of Stress among University Students"* at the Startup Projects Competition organized under the initiative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Cabinet of Ministers**.**

The main objectives of this research project were:
- To continuously monitor students' mental health and assess, evaluate, and predict stress levels.
- To establish a digital psychological support system within the institute.
- To provide preventive training and recommendations aimed at reducing stress.

Conclusion

The findings of this study comprehensively reveal the impact of anonymous online psychological counseling services on students' psychological well-being in higher education institutions. Analyses indicate that anonymous online support delivered through digital platforms is becoming a widely accepted and convenient mechanism for students. The primary advantage of this format is that

students can access psychological assistance while maintaining confidentiality, convenience, and rapid response, which contributes significantly to reducing common issues such as stress and anxiety in a short time.

The results also show that students utilize online psychological services at a significantly higher rate than traditional, face-to-face counseling. This is attributed both to students' time constraints, classroom workload, and social apprehension about visiting a psychologist, as well as to the technological convenience provided by online platforms.

However, the study highlights that traditional face-to-face counseling remains more effective for addressing deep psychological problems or situations requiring long-term psychotherapeutic intervention. Solving complex clinical symptoms and interpersonal issues necessitates direct communication and observation. Consequently, online and traditional psychological services should be considered complementary components of an integrated support system.

Overall, the study recommends a hybrid psychological service model as the most optimal approach. In such a system, students can choose between anonymous online support and traditional counseling according to their needs, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of psychological assistance.

Practical Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

- Implement a 24/7 anonymous online psychological platform. This system should serve as a consistent, accessible, and immediate source of psychological support for students.
- Establish specialized courses and training programs to improve students' psychological literacy. These programs should focus on stress management, emotional well-being, help-seeking culture, and psychological self-help skills.
- Integrate online and traditional psychological services into a unified system. Effective utilization of both formats will expand the coverage of psychological support and provide students with flexible access to services.
- Introduce regular psychological monitoring in each faculty. Periodic evaluation of students' mental health allows for early preventive interventions and enhances the overall quality of psychological services.

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