

Enhancing Counselling Services Through Digitalization and Inclusiveness in the 21st Century: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper explored Counselling Services through Digitalization and Inclusiveness in the 21st Century: Challenges and Prospects. The 21st century has witnessed significant changes in mental health service delivery, particularly with the advent of digital tools such as teletherapy platforms, artificial intelligence applications, mobile counselling apps, and virtual reality interventions. Simultaneously, the push for inclusiveness has led to the adoption of multicultural, gender-sensitive, and disability-inclusive counselling approaches. However, challenges persist, including digital illiteracy, uneven internet access, data security risks, and reduced interpersonal connection. On the inclusiveness front, while strides have been made in addressing cultural diversity and minority representation, structural and technological barriers still marginalize some groups. The study concludes that a collaborative, policy-driven approach that merges technology with inclusive values is essential for the future of equitable counselling services. Suggestions include continuous professional development, ethical guidelines for e-counselling, and investments in inclusive digital infrastructure.

Keywords: Digital Counselling Services, Digitalization and Inclusiveness

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the rapid advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) has significantly transformed various sectors, including education, healthcare, and mental health services. Counselling, as a critical support service in educational and therapeutic settings, has increasingly embraced digitalization to meet the evolving needs of clients in a tech-driven world. Digital platforms such as mobile applications, virtual counselling rooms, and artificial intelligence-assisted therapy tools are reshaping the traditional face-to-face counselling approach (Oluwatayo & Adebayo, 2022).

Moreover, the push for inclusiveness in contemporary counselling services emphasizes the need to accommodate individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities, different cultural orientations, gender identities, and socio-economic statuses. Inclusivity ensures that counselling practices are sensitive, adaptive, and responsive to the specific needs of marginalized populations. Digitalization plays a vital role in fostering inclusiveness by providing customized digital tools, language translation services, and accessibility features such as screen readers and captioning systems for persons with disabilities (Okeke & Ezeani, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the digital transformation of counselling services. As physical interactions were restricted, many institutions and mental health professionals resorted to online platforms to continue providing support to their clients. Tele-counselling, virtual therapy sessions, and digital mental health interventions became mainstream, emphasizing the importance of digital readiness among counsellors and clients alike (WHO, 2022). This shift not only highlighted the potential of digital counselling but also exposed digital divides, prompting urgent discussions on equitable access to digital infrastructure and training.

In addition to accessibility, digital counselling improves efficiency and engagement. Tools such as automated appointment scheduling, digital record keeping and client self-assessment apps streamline the counselling process and reduce administrative burdens. Furthermore, interactive digital resources like gamified therapy modules and virtual reality environments offer engaging ways to address complex psychological issues such as trauma, anxiety, and depression (Adeyemo & Yusuf, 2021). However, despite the advantages, digital counselling also presents several challenges. Issues surrounding data

privacy, confidentiality, and ethical considerations in virtual environments raise significant concerns. Additionally, the lacks of digital literacy among some clients and counsellors, as well as infrastructural limitations in rural and low-income regions, hinder the widespread adoption of digital counselling services (Eze & Okonkwo, 2023).

However, enhancing counselling services through digitalization and inclusiveness is not just a trend but a necessary evolution in the face of technological advancement and increasing societal diversity. To maximize the benefits, there must be a holistic approach that combines technological innovation with inclusive practices and ethical considerations. The integration of digital tools into counselling services promises to improve accessibility, effectiveness, and client satisfaction while promoting a more inclusive and equitable mental health landscape for all (UNESCO, 2023).

Counselling, as a professional discipline, is broadly defined as a process through which a trained individual (the counsellor) assists another individual (the counsellee or client) in understanding and resolving personal, social, educational, or psychological challenges. It is a structured, interactive, and goal-directed relationship that emphasizes trust, empathy, confidentiality, and support. According to Gibson and Mitchell (2018), counselling is a dynamic and purposeful relationship aimed at facilitating self-understanding, emotional growth, and positive change in behavior. It allows individuals to explore their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a safe and non-judgmental environment, promoting self-awareness, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.

Counselling services refer to the wide range of professional interventions and support systems provided to individuals or groups to address specific issues related to mental health, education, career development, relationships, trauma, and social well-being. These services can take place in schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, workplaces, or community settings and may include academic advising, career counselling, marital therapy, grief counselling, and substance abuse rehabilitation. According to Omoniyi (2016), counselling services are essential in educational institutions as they aid students in adjusting to school life, managing academic stress, and making informed career choices. In the broader community, such services play a critical role in addressing mental health concerns and promoting overall well-being.

Furthermore, counselling services are guided by ethical principles, cultural sensitivity, and professional standards to ensure the dignity, privacy, and

welfare of clients are upheld. With the increasing complexity of modern life, the scope of counselling has expanded to include digital or e-counselling, crisis intervention, group therapy, and psychological first aid. As noted by Corey (2017), effective counselling services require not only technical skills but also a deep understanding of human development, personality theories, and interpersonal communication. The incorporation of evidence-based practices and continuous professional development ensures that counsellors remain effective in meeting diverse client needs in an ever-changing society.

Digitalization refers to the integration and application of digital technologies into various aspects of human activities, transforming traditional processes and services into more efficient, accessible, and automated formats. In the context of counselling and mental health services, digitalization involves the use of tools such as online platforms, mobile applications, virtual reality, artificial intelligence (AI), and tele-counselling to enhance communication, diagnosis, therapy, and follow-up services. According to Bharadwaj et al. (2022), digitalization enables real-time access to counselling services, bridging geographic and time-related gaps, and offering convenience to both clients and practitioners. It improves data management, enables remote intervention, and allows for scalable service delivery, particularly vital in resource-limited settings. The increasing dependence on digital technologies in the 21st century has made digital literacy and infrastructure essential components of modern professional counselling practice (OECD, 2023).

Inclusiveness is the practice of ensuring equal access, participation, and representation of all individuals, regardless of their background, abilities, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. In counselling services, inclusiveness means designing and delivering interventions that are culturally sensitive, linguistically appropriate, and accessible to people with disabilities or marginalized identities. According to UNESCO (2022), inclusiveness involves the deliberate removal of systemic barriers that hinder participation in social services, including educational, psychological, and health-related interventions. Inclusive counselling practices ensure that every individual regardless of location, language, or condition—can benefit from support systems that respect their dignity and context. When combined with digitalization, inclusiveness can be scaled up to accommodate diverse needs through adaptive technologies, translation tools, and user-friendly digital interfaces (Smith & Adepoju, 2023).

The Role of Digital Technologies in Modern Counselling Services

Digital technologies have revolutionized the way counselling services are delivered, accessed, and managed in the 21st century. Traditionally, counselling relied heavily on face-to-face interactions within designated professional settings. However, the advent of digital tools has expanded the scope of service delivery, allowing counsellors to reach clients remotely, personalize support, and improve efficiency. According to Eze and Ajayi (2023), digital technology has introduced innovative platforms that support therapeutic interactions, assessment, diagnosis, and follow-up, making counselling more flexible, timely, and client-centered. These technologies not only enhance access to services, especially for clients in remote or underserved areas, but also facilitate ongoing support beyond the traditional office setting.

Some of the major digital technologies that are transforming counselling services include:

- I. **Tele-counselling and Video Conferencing Tools:** Platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet are now commonly used to deliver real-time virtual therapy. These tools allow for face-to-face interaction without physical presence, breaking geographical barriers and enabling continuous therapy sessions regardless of location (Afolabi & Usman, 2022).
- II. **Mobile Applications and Chatbots:** Digital mental health apps like *Wysa*, *Better Help*, and *Youper* offer AI-driven counselling interfaces, journaling features, guided self-help exercises, and mood tracking. These tools support clients between sessions and promote mental well-being in a discreet and accessible manner (WHO, 2023).
- III. **Online Assessment and Screening Tools:** Web-based platforms now host digital versions of psychological tests and diagnostic tools, allowing clients to complete self-assessments remotely. This enables counsellors to gather timely data and monitor progress over time with greater convenience and accuracy.
- IV. **Digital Record-Keeping and Case Management Systems:** Counsellors use secure electronic systems to store, retrieve, and update client

records. These systems improve documentation, confidentiality, and collaborative care among professionals.

- V. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR): In more advanced settings, VR and AR are used for exposure therapy, especially in treating phobias, PTSD, and social anxiety. These immersive environments simulate real-life scenarios, enabling clients to confront and manage their anxieties safely (Ifeanyi & Obasi, 2023).

Furthermore, digital platforms have created opportunities for counsellor training, supervision, and peer support through webinars, online workshops, and collaborative platforms. As noted by Nwachukwu and Bello (2022), digital technologies have significantly enhanced the scalability and responsiveness of counselling services, especially during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical access to therapy was severely restricted. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of these technologies requires proper infrastructure, digital literacy, and adherence to ethical standards to protect client confidentiality and ensure the effectiveness of interventions.

Promoting Inclusiveness in Counselling Practices

Promoting inclusiveness in counselling practices involves ensuring that counselling services are accessible, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs of all individuals, regardless of their background, ability, gender identity, religion, culture, or socioeconomic status. Inclusiveness in counselling is rooted in the principles of social justice and human rights, aiming to dismantle systemic barriers that hinder participation and engagement in mental health services. According to UNESCO (2022), inclusive counselling ensures that every client is treated with dignity, respect, and cultural sensitivity. It involves understanding the unique experiences and challenges faced by marginalized populations and adapting counselling approaches to accommodate these differences effectively.

In practice, inclusiveness can be promoted through several strategies. First, counsellors must undergo continuous training on cultural competence, disability awareness, gender sensitivity, and anti-discriminatory practices to build their capacity for inclusive engagement. Second, counselling settings must be physically and digitally accessible—for instance, offering services in

multiple languages, providing sign language interpreters, and ensuring compatibility with assistive technologies such as screen readers and captioning tools (Okonkwo & Abubakar, 2023). Furthermore, counsellors must create safe spaces where clients feel free to express themselves without fear of judgment or bias. This includes using inclusive language, respecting diverse family structures, and acknowledging non-traditional spiritual or cultural beliefs.

Digital technology also plays a significant role in promoting inclusiveness by breaking down barriers related to geography, mobility, and communication. Online platforms allow clients in rural or underserved areas to access professional support. Mobile apps can provide anonymous, stigma-free access to mental health tools, especially for youth, LGBTQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities. However, promoting inclusiveness also requires bridging the digital divide ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their economic status, have access to the necessary digital infrastructure and literacy (Adepoju & Oladipo, 2023).

Challenges of Digital and Inclusive Counselling in the 21st Century

Despite the numerous advantages of digital and inclusive counselling practices, several significant challenges hinder their effective implementation in the 21st century. One of the foremost issues is the digital divide, which refers to the unequal access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and technical literacy among populations, especially in low-income or rural communities. In many developing countries, a substantial portion of the population still lacks the infrastructure or skills needed to benefit from digital counselling platforms (Adebayo & Musa, 2023). This digital inequality creates disparities in service delivery, where only tech-savvy or urban clients can effectively utilize online counselling tools, thereby excluding the very populations that inclusive practices aim to support.

- I. Data privacy, confidentiality, and ethical concerns. Digital counselling involves the storage and transmission of sensitive client information through electronic platforms, making it vulnerable to cyber threats, data breaches, or unauthorized access. Counsellors must adhere to strict ethical standards and data protection regulations, which are either weakly enforced or poorly understood in some contexts. According to Nwankwo and Salami (2022), many digital platforms used for counselling in Africa lack end-to-end encryption and proper user

authentication, raising questions about the safety of clients' personal data. In addition, clients may be reluctant to discuss intimate issues in digital settings due to fears of surveillance or misuse of their information.

- II. Lack of professional preparedness and digital competence among counsellors: Many practising counsellors, especially older professionals, may not be adequately trained to use digital tools effectively or deliver inclusive services that address the needs of culturally diverse or marginalized groups. This gap often results in miscommunication, misdiagnosis, or inappropriate interventions.
- III. Absence of inclusive digital content, such as counselling materials in local languages, platforms compatible with assistive technologies for persons with disabilities, or culturally relevant therapeutic frameworks (Okeke & Bakare, 2023). The rigidity of existing digital counselling platforms sometimes excludes clients who do not fit dominant cultural or linguistic norms.
- IV. Institutional and policy-related obstacles also pose challenges to digital and inclusive counselling. Many institutions lack comprehensive guidelines or standardized protocols for online counselling, resulting in inconsistent service delivery and limited accountability. Government support for inclusive mental health services is often weak, with inadequate funding, poor regulation, and limited investment in training programs. Additionally, the stigma associated with both mental health and digital help-seeking in some societies further discourages people from using these services, especially among older adults or traditional communities (UNDP, 2023). To address these challenges, there must be deliberate efforts to build digital infrastructure, improve counsellor training, and enforce ethical standards that uphold both digital security and inclusivity.

Prospects and Strategic Suggestions for Sustainable Integration

The prospects for enhancing counselling services through digitalization and inclusiveness in the 21st century are promising, especially as societies become more interconnected and technology-driven. One of the major prospects lies in the potential to expand access to underserved populations, including

individuals in rural areas, people with disabilities, and marginalized communities. With the increasing availability of mobile devices and internet penetration, even in remote regions, digital platforms can be used to deliver mental health services at scale. According to Oyetunde and Chukwu (2023), the continued integration of digital technologies into national mental health policies has the capacity to close service delivery gaps, promote early intervention, and support continuous care across diverse populations. This can reduce the burden on traditional in-person counselling systems, particularly in countries with a shortage of qualified professionals.

Another prospect is the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, and big data analytics to personalize and optimize counselling services. These technologies can be employed to monitor client progress, predict risks, automate scheduling, and provide real-time self-help interventions. Additionally, cloud-based platforms and mobile applications are enabling 24/7 support services, offering flexible and on-demand access to mental health resources. As counsellors become more digitally competent, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and gamified mental health tools will further enhance therapeutic engagement, especially for children, adolescents, and trauma patients (Adegbite & Nwachukwu, 2023). These innovations open up new frontiers for client-centred, efficient, and proactive mental health care.

Suggestions

To ensure sustainable integration, the following strategic suggestions are essential:

- I. **Strengthen ICT Infrastructure:** Governments and stakeholders must invest in robust digital infrastructure, especially in low-income and rural areas, to ensure equitable access to online counselling platforms.
- II. **Capacity Building and Training:** Continuous professional development programs should be established to train counsellors in digital skills, inclusive practices, and ethical guidelines for online service delivery.
- III. **Policy and Regulatory Frameworks:** National policies should include clear protocols for digital counselling, addressing data privacy, professional accountability, and quality assurance mechanisms.

- IV. User-Centred Design: Developers of digital counselling tools must engage a diverse user group in the design process to ensure content is culturally relevant, language-sensitive, and accessible to people with disabilities.
- V. Public Awareness and Advocacy: Campaigns should be launched to reduce stigma around both mental health and digital help-seeking, encouraging clients to embrace innovative counselling methods.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, enhancing counselling services through digitalization and inclusiveness has become not only a necessity but a transformative approach to mental health and psychosocial support. The integration of digital technologies has significantly expanded the reach, flexibility, and responsiveness of counselling, making services more accessible to diverse populations across geographical and social boundaries. Simultaneously, embedding inclusiveness into counselling practice ensures that individuals from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds such as those with disabilities, language barriers, or limited economic resources are not left behind in the provision of support. Together, digitalization and inclusiveness provide a powerful framework for delivering equitable and effective mental health interventions in a rapidly evolving world. However, this transformation is not without its challenges. Issues such as digital illiteracy, infrastructural deficits, data privacy concerns, and lack of professional preparedness continue to hinder widespread adoption and equitable implementation. Many clients, particularly in rural or underserved areas, still face barriers to accessing digital counselling tools due to poor connectivity or technological exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated and strategic effort from governments, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and counselling professionals. Looking forward, the prospects are encouraging. With proper investment in digital infrastructure, training, inclusive design, and policy development, the counselling profession can fully leverage the potential of technology to offer client-centered, culturally sensitive, and ethically sound services.

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