



Willingness to Participate in Online Counseling and Computer Security Concerns

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Introduction

Teletherapy (Martin, 2013) or computer mediated counseling (Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005), is a part of the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics. Mallen et al. (2005) point out, many clients employ videoconferencing, synchronous chat, and email instead of or along with in office face-to-face counseling. Much of the focus of ongoing research is on the counselor's views and knowledge. Other research evaluates client attitudes rather than the attitudes and concerns of the general public and potential clients. Little attention has been given to the potential modes of online counseling and their acceptability to the public.

Purpose

It is hypothesized that there are differences in attitudes and concerns toward online counseling depending on the medium used. This study examines the attitudes and concerns of participants towards counseling using mediums such as video chat (e.g. Skype™, FaceTime®), chat rooms and instant messaging, and asynchronous e-mail.

Method

The study included 354 (155 males, 195 females, 3 other, and 1 did not specify sex) recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk). Participants were between 19 and 74 years of age ($M = 31$). Reported ethnicity was 77.4% Caucasian, 6.8% African American/Black, 5.6% Hispanic, 6.2% Asian, 1.1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1.1% preferred not to say, and 1.7% specified other, biracial, or multiracial. Additional data was collected on geographic location, income, educational attainment, and computer experience.

Participants were administered a survey consisting of an informed consent statement, demographic questions, and a research instrument measuring attitudes towards counseling, beliefs about counseling records security, and a variation on a counseling stigma scale (Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007) expanded to include types of online counseling.

Table 2. *t*-test comparing attitudes based on computer concerns

	Groups						<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Less Concern			More Concern					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>			
Seeking Help (In-office)	54.09	13.46	122	50.57	12.08	126	246	2.17	.031
Seeking Help (Video)	51.76	14.3	122	47.27	11.93	126	246	2.69	.008
Seeking Help (Chat)	51.11	13.99	122	44.98	12.42	126	246	3.65	<.001
Seeking Help (e-mail)	50.95	14.15	122	45.74	11.9	126	246	3.14	.002
Positive Online	38.44	14.58	122	35.63	13.22	126	246	1.59	.112
In Office Security	45.73	8.52	122	42.62	8.62	126	246	2.86	.005
Online Security	40.43	9.69	122	36.18	10.18	126	246	3.37	.001

Results

Attitudes and concerns toward online counseling were related to the counseling delivery method. It was determined that there is a significant difference between individuals' willingness to seek help in-office versus seeking help online via a video system, as displayed in the *t*-test results in Table 1.

Table 1. *t*-test comparing willingness to seek help

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
In-office	52.33	12.97	354			
Video	49.5	13.24	354	353	6.74	<.001
Chat	47.88	13.67	354	353	7.82	<.001
Email	47.97	13.71	354	353	7.56	<.001

Computer concerns were found to have a negative correlation with willingness to seek help in any environment. Willingness to seek help in-office had a weak, negative correlation with computer concern, $r(352) = -.134, p = .012$. Willingness to seek help by video $r(352) = -.189, p < .001$ and by email $r(352) = -.188, p < .001$ were more strongly correlated with computer concerns. Willingness to seek help by chat was most strongly correlated with computer concerns $r(352) = -.227, p < .001$. Computer concerns were negatively correlated with computer efficacy $r(354) = -.191, p < .001$ as well as positive attitudes towards online counseling $r(354) = -.151, p = .004$. However, favorable attitudes towards online counseling were significantly positively correlated with computer efficacy $r(354) = .152, p = .004$.

To further examine computer concern, the sample was broken in thirds with participants expressing the highest concern in the top third and the those expressing lowest concern in the bottom third. An independent samples *t*-test was performed comparing the bottom third and top third. No significant difference in attitude towards online counseling was obtained based on computer concern. However, significant differences were found in willingness to seek help and information security beliefs. These results are displayed in Table 2.

Computer concern was significantly correlated with counseling records security beliefs both in-office $r(354) = -.150, p = .005$ and online $r(354) = -.174, p = .001$. This suggests that higher computer concern accompanies the belief that counseling records security will be low. A *t*-test, the results of which are displayed in Table 3, indicated that participants believe counseling in-office to be more secure than online.

Table 3. *t*-test comparing attitudes towards counseling records security

	Groups				<i>n</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	In-Office		Online					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Accountability	5.82	1.43	4.89	1.68	348	347	11.28	<.001
Auditability	5.71	1.37	5.13	1.52	348	347	8.23	<.001
Trustworthiness	5.81	1.31	4.75	1.64	350	349	12.55	<.001
Availability	5.61	1.22	5.31	1.44	350	349	4.25	<.001
Confidentiality	5.61	1.41	4.60	1.70	350	349	12.01	<.001
Integrity	5.51	1.32	4.61	1.59	348	347	11.82	<.001
Non-repudiation	4.84	1.61	4.40	1.75	352	351	4.79	<.001
Privacy	5.51	1.36	4.54	1.65	350	349	11.93	<.001

Age was significantly negatively correlated with favorable attitudes towards counseling $r(354) = -.168, p = .002$. To further examine age, the sample was broken in thirds based on age with the oldest participants in the top third and the youngest participants in the bottom third. A *t*-test was performed on the bottom third and top third of the sample. No significant difference was found between the two groups for positive attitudes towards online counseling, computer concern, counseling records security beliefs, or willingness to seek help through video, online chat, or email. However, a significant difference $t(251) = -2.94, p = .004, d = -.37$ was found in young participants' ($M = 50.33, SD = 12.68$) willingness to seek help in-office versus older participants ($M = 55.1, SD = 13.17$). These results suggest that while older participants are as likely to seek help as younger ones, younger ones may not be as likely to seek help in office.

References

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Discussion

Recruited from the Internet and indicating a high rate of ownership of computing devices, participants in this study may be more comfortable with the online environment than the general population.

Participants' indicated greater willingness to seek counseling in-office than through any of the types of online counseling. Nevertheless, it is notable that willingness to seek help was highest for in-office counseling, and that willingness to seek help varied by medium type (See Table 1).

Age did not appear to be a significant factor in willingness to seek help online, however, it was related to a preference in seeking help in-office. Younger participants demonstrated a statistically significant preference away from in-office. It will be interesting to see if and how this changes as Internet use increases and computing devices become more affordable.

Computer concerns and security beliefs were related to less willingness to seek help in any environment. The relationship between greater computer security concerns and less willingness to seek in-office counseling may be reflective of more general security concerns rather than just those specific to computers. Future research might investigate whether security or privacy concerns restrain willingness to engage in counseling. Future researchers may wish to explore the relationship between types of security concerns and attitudes toward types of counseling.

Participants rating themselves as having greater computer efficacy also had fewer computer privacy or security concerns. These same individuals held more positive attitudes toward online counseling. Future researchers may wish to investigate whether lesser privacy concern in this group reflects a diminished expectation of privacy or greater comfort with and knowledge of the Internet environment.

The good news for counselors is the trend in younger individuals toward a more positive attitude toward counseling and particularly online counseling. For counselors, it is necessary to address security concerns, especially in those potential clients with limited computer efficacy and confidence in computer ability. This research suggests that it is particularly important to discuss a client's concerns regarding access of others to the information shared in online settings.

The type of online counseling delivery method may affect an individual's willingness to participate in counseling. Rather than treating online counseling as a unitary entity, each type of online counseling needs to be addressed individually.

1. Skype™ is a trademark of the Microsoft Corporation. FaceTime® is a registered trademark of Apple, Inc.