



# A Qualitative Investigation of Concerns Regarding Types of Online Distance Counseling

Mary M. Livingston<sup>1</sup>, Christopher D. Coleman<sup>1</sup>, Guler Boyraz<sup>1</sup> and Margaret L. Hindman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, Louisiana Tech University; Ruston, Louisiana

<sup>2</sup>Department of Counseling Education, University of Arkansas; Fayetteville, Arkansas



UNIVERSITY OF  
ARKANSAS

## Introduction

Distance counseling is a part of the American Counseling Association (ACA) 2014 Code of Ethics. Despite the variety of online counseling approaches including videoconferencing, synchronous chat, and email, online counseling is still most often studied as a unitary phenomenon (Mallen et al., 2005). Little, if any attention has been given to the potential modes and their acceptability to the public or potential clients. In addition, the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of security and confidentiality in online counseling. The public may also have security concerns, which may vary depending on the method of online counseling used. Livingston, Coleman, and Hindman (2015) found differences in attitudes and concerns toward online counseling depending on whether there is video chat such as Skype<sup>1</sup> or FaceTime<sup>2</sup>, chat rooms where the interaction is in an instant messaging format, or counseling conducted through asynchronous email.

Despite these security concerns, several researchers (Burns, Durkin, & Nicholas, 2009), as well as empirical findings (Livingston, Boyraz, Coleman, & Hindman, 2015; Putnam, 1998) have suggested that online counseling might reduce self-stigma associated with help seeking due to greater anonymity associated with online counseling. Individuals' attitudes toward online counseling may also depend on their computer skills. Indeed, findings indicated that greater computer skills and perceived computer efficacy were related to more knowledge of and positive attitudes toward online counseling (Livingston, Coleman, & Hindman, 2016; Mcleod, 2008).

Although these studies provide insights into attitudes toward online counseling, the empirical research in this area is still limited. Further, the limited research that has been performed on the topic typically takes a quantitative approach, which may miss some of the nuances of concerns. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to develop a more in depth understanding of individuals' concerns and attitudes toward online counseling using a qualitative approach.

## Method

Participants were 155 males and 190 females (age range = 19 - 47, M = 34.64, SD = 11.65) recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk). Reported ethnicity was 78.5% Caucasian, 7.1% African American/Black, 5.3% Hispanic, 6.5% Asian, 1.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1.5% other or biracial or multiracial. Approximately 22% had high school education or less, and the majority had some college, a college degree, or graduate work. The only recruitment restriction was a M-Turk satisfaction rating of 90%. Participants were screened for random responding.

In addition to a demographic questionnaire and a quantitative scale, participants responded to the following open-ended questions designed to elicit qualitative responses. The present study has focused on participants' responses to these questions:

- What is your biggest fear or objection to counseling by Skype, FaceTime, or other video approaches to counseling online?
- What is the major advantage to Skype, FaceTime, or other online video counseling?
- What is your major objection to in office counseling?
- What is the major advantage to in office counseling?
- What is the major fear or objection to chat room or instant message counseling?
- What do you see as the major advantage to chat room or instant message counseling?
- What do you see as the major fear or objection to email counseling?
- What do you see as the major advantage of email counseling?

Participants in this study were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. As a result, they are more likely to be what Zur (2012) refers to as "digital natives" or "digital immigrants," and are presumably more comfortable with computers and the Internet than other individuals.

## Summary of Findings

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Online Video Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convenience</li> <li>• Economical</li> <li>• Anonymity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privacy/Security Issues</li> <li>• Poor Therapeutic Relationship</li> <li>• Poor Communication</li> </ul>
In-Office Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private and Confidential</li> <li>• Face-to-face Interaction/ More Personal</li> <li>• No Technology Failures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inconvenient</li> <li>• Embarrassing (Self-stigma)</li> <li>• Financial Expense</li> </ul>
Online Chat Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convenience</li> <li>• Anonymity</li> <li>• Fast Reply</li> <li>• Greater Availability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privacy/Security</li> <li>• Uncertain of Counselor's Identity</li> <li>• Impersonal</li> </ul>
E-Mail Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convenience</li> <li>• Sent Anytime</li> <li>• Flexibility in Responding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privacy/Security</li> <li>• Slowness of Response</li> <li>• Impersonal</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

Overall, technology was seen as being subject to hacking and privacy concerns. On the one hand, some preferred the more personal nature of in office counseling while others felt more comfortable talking online. Video was seen as more interpersonal than written communication (in chat or email). Of particular interest to counselors is the concern expressed particularly in chat or email that the individual on the other side is not a professional counselor. Counselors may wish to spend time addressing concerns that others, of whom the client is unaware, may see the session or be in the room with the counselor. The consent process should address the limits of privacy of the counseling mode utilized by the therapist.

## References

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