

## **The Need of Online Counselling to Enhance Mental Health among Students in Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania**

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### **Abstract**

*This study aimed to explore the need of online counselling to enhance mental health among students in higher learning institutions. The study employed a qualitative research approach in which 40 participants were involved. These were purposefully selected from two higher learning institutions in Tanzania - 30 were students and 10 were counsellors. In-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussion were used to collect data from the respondents. The findings revealed that through online counselling, it is easy to access psychosocial therapy, maintain privacy, conduct time/cost-friendly therapy, access services, allow freedom of expression as well as allow easy feedback and follow-up. Also, network connectivity problems, bundle challenges, fear of online hacking and failure to understand clients' feelings were revealed to be challenges on the use of online counselling. However, awareness on the importance of online counselling, capacity building on the forms of online counselling, availability of free Wi-Fi in university campuses and halls of residence, reduced cost of bundles and provision of university offers as well as formation of online counselling support groups were earmarked as strategies for enhancing online counselling among undergraduate students as a way of enhancing their mental health.*

**Keywords:** online counselling, mental health, students in higher learning institution

## **Background to the Problem**

Globally, counselling has been a very important service in supporting clients' better understanding of their environments, as well as gaining the ability to adjust to socio-economic issues (Njenga, 2022). The essence of counselling in many settings, such as in educational organizations, industries, businesses, and agriculture is that clients have diverse needs that should be addressed through counselling programmes, to have an impact on their learning or daily life (Omoniyi, 2016). According to Crandall (2020), some clients are unable to adjust to their new environment, and some may engage in antisocial behaviour such as drug abuse and irresponsible sexual conduct which directly affects their mental health. Thus, counselling services are critical in such instances to assist clients in dealing with such challenges (Anyi, 2017). In general, counselling assists clients in adjusting to their settings, developing proper attitude, and setting individual goals that will improve their lives. However, online counselling is still a new phenomenon and a rarely utilized service among students in higher learning institutions despite the problems they encounter, that need immediate counselling services for their socio-academic welfare.

All over the world, the advancement of technology has had significant impact on many aspects of life, including education, business, agriculture, transportation, and communication (Paterson et al., 2019). It is the case that more and more people are now engaging with one another through computers, phones, tablets, emails, and social media in order to solve problems or earn income (Hanley, 2021). To increase learner performance, governments around the world have increasingly incorporated internet knowledge into the teaching and learning processes. According to literature on online counselling, the quality of online therapy is inextricably tied to the methods used and experiences obtained in courses on counselling, implying that online counselling is a very genuine alternative to meeting face-to-face (Brown et al., 2016).

In the United States of America, it has been reported that the web uses various online media that can be used for organizing online counselling, such as social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (now X), personal email, and several chatting application programmes like Skype, Messenger, and mobile phones, as well as other specialized teleconferencing media (Hanley, 2021). In Indonesia, various applications have been developed to support the implementation of counselling, such as the application programme for processing the problem reveal tool, the development task analysis programme, the problem check list programme, and the online counselling service sites (Martin, 2018).

Clients' lack of time and vast distance in Europe has made online counselling increasingly popular although counsellors may interpret and use it differently depending on the nature of the problem clients present (Paterson et al., 2019). The rise of online counselling services in developed countries has brought individuals closer together, allowing for easier sharing of problems and other connected issues (Hanley, 2021). Similarly, it has been established that the advancement of web technology directly supports the process of offering more creative, entertaining, and unique counselling services (Glasheen et al., 2018). Furthermore, it has been stressed that online technology is a critical requirement for supporting more innovative counselling services; thus, innovative counselling services can certainly inspire client motivation to follow the service, and the service goals can be met well (Glasheen et al., 2018). In general, online counselling is becoming increasingly vital in the community and in educational settings (Crandall, 2020). It is also becoming increasingly prevalent in developing countries, which some regard as a positive trend while others are concerned about the quality and ethical implications associated with delivering counselling online (Hanley, 2021).

Traditional practice of counselling involves face-to-face interaction between the counsellor and client, while modern counsellors provide counselling services online, which is not very common in developing countries, such as Tanzania. It is widely assumed that students from elementary schools through higher education have challenges that have an impact on their well-being and educational success and that they should get face-to-face and online counselling in order to achieve their goals (Crandall, 2020).

In the light of the rapid changes in our environment, innovation creates an urgent demand for online assistance and therapy (Andriani & Zikra, 2019). Counsellors must keep up with the digital world, work hard, and be dedicated to success by staying current on science and technological innovation in order to deliver the best services possible. As a result, it adds to client comprehension and awareness, as well as improves their capabilities and tendencies and establishes a pleasant home environment (Amalianita et al., 2017). Crandall (2020) argues that due to the expansion of online services and their implication, counsellors are obliged to use digital tools since such tools enable them to complete daily activities and deliver varied services in a systematic manner. Furthermore, Anni (2018) opines that some of these modifications and criteria are beneficial to counsellors. Simultaneously, additional changes are viewed as obstacles for developing technical competence, having positive training, gaining access to orders, and improving clarity and reliability. Changes are viewed as a huge problem, in particular, because digital learning in the counselling profession is advancing considerably, regardless of anything else.

Online counselling, like face-to-face counselling, assists counsellors to deal with problems and support client progress (Dores et al., 2020). It is centred on dialogue between clients and counsellors as well as assigned readings, such as journals, that will broaden views and provide one with a fresh perspective on old difficulties. As with an office visit, one may receive assistance, criticism or in some cases suggestions to assist with client problems (Anni, 2018). On the other hand, online counselling is carried out by the counsellor in an effort to help alleviate and handle client problems via the internet; in fact, it is carried out by the counsellor to provide the comfort and assistance needed by the counselee when faced with a problem that cannot be dealt with face-to-face (Omoniyi, 2016). Internet counselling services are expanding to provide complete counselling, rather than just counselling (Andriani & Zikra, 2019). Furthermore, it should be noted that it is not only online counselling through the internet that is required, but also all aspects of information and communication technology utilization in counselling arrangements, such as the use and utilization of instrumentation programmes, student data sets, counselling management applications, counselling information systems, media use when providing classical information in class, and the use of telephones for counselling (Hanley, 2021).

Online counselling will be an option in organizing counselling services such as those in educational settings and other contexts (Anni, 2018). Clients in these services use videoconferencing, zoom meetings, and asynchronous email with professional psychologists instead of, or in addition to, face-to-face counselling (Dores et al., 2020). As a result of these circumstances, counsellors will inevitably be required to improve their capacities in e-counselling services in general and online counselling in particular. Otherwise, the state of current guiding and counselling will deteriorate as the counsellor is perceived as technologically illiterate, too rigid, and unwilling to develop (Amalianita et al., 2017). On the other hand, it was discovered that there are still counsellors who are unfamiliar with online services; in fact, some of them are counsellors who have never used a computer for simple purposes, such as supporting the implementation of their duties, particularly in developing

countries such as Tanzania (Haryati, 2020). In such circumstances, it is very difficult for the counsellors to undertake client's check-up regarding their mental health well-being after counselling sessions via online counselling.

Mental health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 2018). Mental health is an integral aspect which enables every human being to have decent socialization. With good mental health, students are likely to study confidently (Kapur, 2020). In the same vein, preventing the onset of diseases and mental health problems, easing various forms of psychological problems and ways to promote mental health mind-set, and ways to promote mental healthy lifestyles are important considerations when offering mental health care counselling (Direktor, 2017). Online counselling is adequate for people with disability as well as those who fail to visit counsellors face-to-face. Hence, online counselling is a ground for maintaining mental health for clients because it rapidly helps clients and provides follow-up contrary to other forms of counselling. Online counselling is an attempt to heal clients, carried out by utilizing information technology, computers, and the internet, wherein client counselling media might be in the form of a website, telephone, email, video, or chat (Haryati, 2020).

Students in higher learning institutions are leading in the use of online social media all over the world (Kausar et al., 2019). For example, the Global Digital Report of 2020 shows that youths between the age of 18 and 24 years are using more social media than other age groups (Kausar et al., 2019). Also, Getachew (2020) informs that many students in higher learning institutions suffer from stress, anxiety, depression, drug addiction, sexual-related problems, suicide and loneliness. Homesickness as well as lack of interpersonal relationship skills, lack of conflict management skills, violence handling, discrimination, lack of assertiveness and communication skills were the most frequently noticed issues on university campuses. All these psychological challenges affect students' mental health, hence the need for psychotherapy especially in online counselling. The existence of this media in Tanzania can promote widespread sharing of advice and counselling to increase competency and service efficiency while reducing client difficulties (Lubawa et al., 2021).

Studies show that students in higher learning institutions fail to seek guidance and counselling services due to the cultural setbacks rooted in their traditional norms (Rushahu, 2022). This is supported by Sima (2010) who is of the opinion that cultural barriers in terms of lack of openness, lack of community sensitization on guidance and counselling services affect students' lives. It is also possible that differences in cultural norms between the client and counsellor's community lead to counsellors' misinterpretation of the thoughts, feelings, or behaviour of the clients (Chester & Glass, 2006). Students mostly prefer online counselling which is comfortable, affordable and easily accessible.

The Government of Tanzania, through the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST), has made an effort to ensure that counselling services are provided in many settings, including educational settings, through Education Circular Number 11 of 2002 (Otieno & Simiyu, 2020). Similarly, Tanzania has taken steps to ensure that courses in counselling are taught in colleges and universities and the services are delivered face-to-face to clients because there is limited internet connectivity (Lubawa et al., 2021). As a result, the demand for online counselling in Tanzania is new and yet debatable, with few studies focusing on diverse areas such as students in educational settings and teenagers in different contexts in Tanzania.

University students in Tanzania use online platforms for academic and other social uses whereby 84.6% use WhatsApp, 74.4% use Facebook, 40.3% use Twitter, and lastly 23.1% use LinkedIn (Mbegani et al., 2023). Using online platforms helps students to refresh their mind, socialize with others and update themselves in gaining new skills and knowledge. Despite the high involvement in social media, university students are still vulnerable to mental health problems like anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms such as sleeping problems, fatigue, headache, mood disorders, psychotic disorders, narcissism, paranoia and acute stress disorders (Mboya et al., 2020). All these problems need quick counselling to help students maintain their mental health. Therefore, there is a need of exploring the influence of online counselling in enhancing mental health among students in higher learning institutions. The main objective of this study therefore was to explore the need for online counselling, to enhance mental health among students in higher learning institutions.

### **Specific Objectives**

The study has three specific objectives; these were to assess undergraduate students' views on the use of online counselling; to describe challenges facing online counselling among undergraduate students; and to propose strategies that could enhance online counselling among undergraduate students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Cybetherapeutic Theory, as propounded by Suler (2008), looks at the internet as a place where we can take a particular style of individual psychotherapy and translate it into an online mode, as in a chat or e-mail version of a psychodynamic or cognitive therapy. The theory takes the shape of a website, with instructions leading the user through a number of online tasks and exercises that deal with the personal issues. In the theory, almost any problem (divorce, panic attacks, eating disorders, etc.) can be discussed and perhaps treated (Chang, 2005). The theory advocates the merit of developing one's online skills, activities, and relationships as assets to resolve life difficulties. It emphasizes the importance of experimenting with different types of online activities and communication modalities, exploring personal expression and identity in cyberspace, and developing an online lifestyle that can be effectively integrated with one's lifestyle (Suler, 2008). An individual's specific goal is to address the personal problem or issue that he or she brings to the programme, but the more encompassing goal is to become a knowledgeable user of online resources and to develop an online lifestyle as a psycho-educational, therapeutic process.

Cyberspace, in contrast to face-to-face interaction, allows for the option of meeting in or out of real time. Synchronous communication takes place while both the client and the professional are simultaneously seated at computers, engaging (Barak & Buchanan, 2004). However, the professional counsellors and clients do not have to be seated at their computers at the same time in asynchronous encounters. This typically indicates a disconnection between the time frames during which the conversation takes place. E-mail, discussion boards, and the delayed viewing of audio and video transmissions are a few examples of asynchronous interactions. However, some communication channels that are traditionally categorized as asynchronous (such as e-mail and message boards) could really be used synchronously. On the internet, text is typically typed during exchanges. Examples include blogs, discussion forums, e-mail, chat, and instant messaging. Currently, the communication channels that mental health professionals most regularly employ include chat and e-mail. The majority of reports in the literature concentrate on text-based clinical interventions, even if they frequently use words like 'online counselling' and 'internet psychotherapy', to describe their work.

However, through this theory, it is difficult to understand people's preferences or emotions especially in auditory and textual ways of counselling. Also, some clients may not respond well in an imaginary environment or may be exacerbated by them as in psychotic conditions. Furthermore, clients may be less expressive when dealing with a realistic face-to-face situation. Lastly, the curative effects of healing human relationship are lost when either the clients or therapist are not present.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which allows in-depth exploration of the client's view from a natural setting. Creswell and Creswell (2023) note that a qualitative research approach tends to collect data in the field, at the location where participants are experiencing the issues or problems under investigation. The approach allowed university students to air their views regarding online counselling, to enhance mental health among students in higher learning institutions.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a case study research design. The researcher employed a single case study which aimed to achieve an understanding of a single phenomenon regarding online counselling. Further, Creswell and Creswell (2018) define a single case design as sophisticated, in-depth data collection involving certain information that investigates a real-life single-bounded system. The researcher employed this design for the sake of obtaining a natural and vivid description of information from the participants who were undergoing online counselling.

### **Study Area**

The study focused on the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) Mwl. Julius Nyerere Campus and the University of Dodoma (UDOM). These are complex institutions to administer due to the large number of students, which calls for committed guidance and counselling services to deal with anxiety, stress, depression, trauma, gender-based violence etc. (Rushahu, 2022). These universities have well-established counselling units to cater for students who are in need.

### **Selection of Participants**

The researcher used purposive sampling for this study. Purposive sampling, according to Creswell and Creswell (2023), is a procedure in which a researcher determines the qualities of an interest group before attempting to find individuals who possess such attributes. The participants selected were aligned with mental health issues and psychological issues that affected students in higher learning institutions. A total of 40 respondents participated in the study: 30 among them were students and 10 were counsellors from two higher learning institutions. Respondents were 16 from University A (07 male and 09 female students), 14 respondents from University B (06 male and 08 female students), and 10 counsellors (06 University A and 04 University B). Respondents were purposefully selected to participate in the study following informed consent and agreement made between the researcher and the respondents.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

According to Christensen and Johnson (2014), data collection methods are techniques for physically obtaining data for analysis in a research study. Information was gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The researcher used an interview guide for students and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for counsellors to elicit the information needed. By using these tools, the researcher gathered respondents' experiences regarding the psychological issues that students have to deal with, and need online counselling.

Thematic analysis was used by the researcher to explore the data from in-depth interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis is a method for methodically identifying, classifying, and analysing patterns of meaning (themes) in a dataset, according to Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis, which focuses on meaning across a dataset, enables the researcher to see and make sense of communal or shared meanings, experiences, and views on online counselling, to enhance mental health among students in higher learning institutions.

### **Discussion of Findings**

During the interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with students from higher learning institutions, respondents were asked to assess students' views, challenges and strategies that enhance online counselling among undergraduate students. Their responses are presented in the subsequent subsection.

#### **a) Students Views on the Need of Online Counselling to Enhance Mental Health**

##### ***An easy way to access psychosocial therapy***

Online counselling facilitates easy access to counselling services, saving clients time and travel expenses. Interviews with university students confirmed that they can readily access psychosocial therapies when needed through online counselling. Without a doubt, this approach is the quickest way to receive assistance, as emphasized by a student interviewee:

*Accessing online counselling is straightforward when you're already familiar with the counsellor who can address your specific issues. It is preferred in situations where our silent culture makes it challenging to discuss our concerns face-to-face. Therefore, it is the most convenient form of counselling, even when I'm away from the university, allowing me continual access (Interview, Student HLI A, June 19, 2023).*

Online counselling enables students to connect with various counsellors to address a wide range of issues. The research underscores the importance of online counselling for students, while they are on campus and when they are away.

##### ***It maintains privacy***

Online counselling ensures higher levels of privacy compared to other forms, such as face-to-face counselling. Consequently, maintaining online counselling services can attract new university students seeking support. Insights from interviews with university students further support this notion:

*It is important that nobody knows whether I have decided to access counselling. It helps to maintain privacy because nobody should overhear what we are discussing between me and my counsellor in the office, since even secretaries and other staff who work within the counselling centres should not know what is going on between me and the counsellor (Interview, students HLI A: 19<sup>th</sup>June, 2023).*

There were additional findings from respondents:

*Whatever is discussed in the counselling session will remain a secret between me and the counsellor because services are undertaken via online. Hence, the level of privacy is very high (Interview, students HLI B: 10<sup>th</sup>June, 2023).*

The replies from respondents suggest that clients choose online counselling for its assurance of maximum privacy. They know that when they seek online counselling, their personal information is kept confidential and secure.

### ***It reduces labelling and phobia***

The findings revealed that online counselling is very helpful for people with phobias, especially those who are shy to see and talk to people face-to-face within the counselling centres. There is negative attitude associated with approaching the service physically:

*We actually feel good once our problems are handled with maximum privacy especially for issues relating to relationships. As a couple, we feel shy to access services because everyone will know we have psychological problems. Our intention is to keep secret our sexual relationship and we opted to seek online counselling to maintain our privacy (Interview Students HLI A: 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2023).*

Furthermore, the results indicate that online counselling is a fitting option for addressing sensitive topics such as homosexuality and sexual relationships for couples. As a result, online counselling serves as an effective means to ensure privacy, minimize fear, and prevent stigmatization.

### ***It is convenient, time friendly and easy to access therapy***

Respondents were happy about the accessibility and availability of online counselling. Clients were able to access services and engage with online counselling practitioners whenever they needed assistance, making it more beneficial compared to other counselling methods. This accessibility encourages more clients to maintain their mental health and psychosocial support;

*I can access counselling services any time, unlike other services. This is to say that, I can be attended to in the morning, afternoon, evening and even midnight because of its accessibility. Moreover, those who are living far away geographically from counsellors can still receive services (Interview, Student HLI A: 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2023).*

Additionally, FGD with a counsellor added the following:

*Online counselling eliminates the need for clients to physically follow a counsellor, which saves them time. Clients and counsellors can engage in sessions from their respective locations, streamlining the process (FGD, Counsellor HLI B, June 10, 2023).*

Online counselling is a convenient service readily available and allowing clients and counsellors to communicate from their respective locations during sessions, increasing the accessibility of mental health support and the likelihood of improved well-being.

### ***It is an affordable therapy***

Online counselling service can lead to a reduction in cost to the client. Unlike other therapies, online counselling allows counsellors to help clients wherever they are located. The findings reveal that many students find it difficult going to the counsellors' office as they have to incur travel expenses. Thus, this therapy is cost-friendly, as one respondent admitted:

*Instead of travelling to the counsellor's office I actually opt to stay at home and access counselling services online. It reduces the cost of travel and I can get the same services (Interview, student HLI B: 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2023).*

### ***It allows freedom of expression***

It was revealed that online counselling allows autonomy for clients due to the absence of face-to-face interaction. Face-to-face can result in clients being shy and unable to express themselves due to their personality. There is greater freedom of expression for clients possessing shy or quiet personalities when using online counselling:

*I often express myself more openly in online counselling because there is no interference between myself and the counsellor. Some individuals may feel shy*



*discussing sensitive issues like relationships or impotence, face-to-face. However, online counselling significantly enhances the freedom of expression for me (Interview, Students HLI B, June 20, 2023).*

The personality of clients significantly influences their ability to express themselves freely. Some clients feel too shy to discuss personal matters with counsellors, which can be an obstacle to effective diagnosis and problem exploration. The research indicates that sensitive topics like relationships and impotence often lead to client shyness in expressing their concerns. However, online therapy encourages clients to open up and discuss their problems more openly.

#### ***It allows rapid feedback and follow-up***

The research findings demonstrate that online counselling excels in enabling feedback after counselling sessions. Clients share any update with their counsellors more readily, contributing to their ongoing mental health improvement. Simultaneously, counsellors actively engage in following-up with their clients to assess their well-being:

*Whenever I face a challenge, I promptly reach out to my counsellor via my phone. Additionally, my counsellor consistently follows up on me to ensure I'm on the right track and tries to determine whether I require additional support for my mental health. I am happy as it helps me put my daily mental health in an excellent condition (Interview with Student HLI A, June 19, 2023).*

Counselling involves a dynamic exchange that requires feedback and follow-up to assess a client's health and make any necessary adjustments. The research findings indicate that clients highly value the quick feedback provided. This frequent contact with clients has a significant positive impact on their psychological health.

### **b) Challenges of Online Counselling**

#### ***Unreliable internet connection***

Network issues frequently pose challenges in accessing reliable and consistent online counselling services. The research suggests that clients encounter complications due to network problems. Furthermore, the findings indicate that even when students are not on campus and have returned to their remote hometowns, they are unable to access online counselling services:

*Connectivity issues disrupt the delivery of online counselling services, particularly when they depend on network stability. Unfortunately, our dormitories and halls of residence often experience network instability, creating a communication barrier. These obstacles prevent us from accessing online counselling (Interview, Students HLI B, June 10, 2023).*

There is significant challenge to online counselling due to poor network connectivity, which students often encounter in their dormitories and halls of residence. The research also submits that this challenge has likely resulted in a reduced number of university students using online counselling services.

#### ***Cellular data plan challenges***

The effectiveness of online counselling depends on students' ability to afford cellular data plans when there are no wireless services in the area. The research found that students who cannot afford these data plans are unable to access the service, which ultimately restricts the number of students who can benefit from the counselling service:

*Some of us do not have enough money to buy cellular data plans to access online counselling services. While some of us may purchase a cellular internet data plan,*

*usually megabytes or gigabytes, it often provides only limited time which isn't enough for a full online counselling session (Interview with Student HLI A, June 19, 2023).*

The research emphasizes that the absence of cellular data plans is tantamount to inability to access online counselling services. Furthermore, data plans are often prohibitively expensive for the majority of university students, and even when obtained, they typically provide only limited time or megabytes hindering the availability of online counselling.

### ***Fear of online hacking***

Advancements in science and technology have led to concerning issue of online hacking. This raises worries about the potential breach of maximum privacy and confidentiality, which could compromise clients' sensitive information. As a result, many higher education students are hesitant to embrace the use of online counselling, despite the challenges they may be experiencing:

*Online counselling falls short in ensuring maximum security, primarily because of the risk of online or phone hacking during counselling sessions. This uncertainty regarding the security of the conversations between clients and counsellors has led to our doubts about entertaining online counselling (Interview, Student HLI B, June 20, 2023).*

In one of the Focus Group Discussion with counsellors, the latter gave the following revelation:

*At times, students are apprehensive about adopting online counselling due to concerns that government authorities may easily access their information. They also have reservations about using online counselling for more sensitive matters, fearing potential hacking. Lastly, trust issues pose a challenge in utilizing online counselling because of the perceived ease of hacking and potential disclosure of their private communication (FGD, Counsellors HLI B, July 10, 2023).*

Students fear accessing online counselling due to privacy concerns. Their concern arises from the belief that authorities, like the government, can readily access individuals' private information. This is part of the reason why many higher education students are reluctant to consider online counselling, even when they have issues that could benefit from such services.

### ***Inadequate human and physical resources***

Online counselling within universities requires both human resources and physical infrastructure. Counsellors have noted that the increased number of students necessitates a higher number of online counsellors and sufficient resources:

*There is a need to put emphasis on the need for universities to invest in online counselling services to support students in managing mental health issues. To achieve this, they stressed the importance of increasing the number of counsellors and strengthening connectivity. Additionally, counsellors recommended that the university management should invest in capacity building programmes to equip counsellors with the skills needed for online therapy (FGD, Counsellors HLI A, June 19, 2023).*

## **c) Strategies to Enhance Online Counselling for Students**

### ***Awareness on the importance of online counselling***

Online counselling is a relatively new service, primarily because many individuals have prior experience with traditional, group, and community counselling. Given this background, there is a pressing need to raise awareness among higher learning students about the benefits of online counselling and encourage them to use their smartphones for this purpose. During the interview, one respondent gave the following admission:

*As a relatively new service, most of us are unfamiliar with online counselling services. Honestly, we tend to basically spend most of our time on social media, entertainment, and other purposes, rather than seeking help for mental health issues (Interview, student HLI A, 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2023).*

A counsellor gave the following comment:

*Time has come to underscore the presence and ease of access to online counselling services within our university. It's essential to post notices on hostel and cafeteria bulletin boards to spread awareness about the availability of online counselling at our university. This action will ensure that the university community is informed about the existence of online counselling and can utilize it (FGD, Counsellor HLI B, June 10, 2023).*

Online counselling is not popular among university students and they often remain ignorant of the benefits it can provide. There is a crucial need to actively promote the availability of online counselling in places where students frequently gather, such as in hostels and cafeterias.

### ***Capacity building and forms of online counselling and uses***

Students do not use online counselling because they do not have the knowledge as to how to access the online platform. During the FGD with counsellors, the following was revealed:

*Not all students are well-informed about how to access online counselling services. To bridge this gap, there's a need to enhance capacity-building programmes. These training sessions will educate higher learning students on how to effectively utilize various devices for counselling, including cybertherapy, telemental health, and other relevant tools. Counselling centres must take the initiative to provide capacity-building, seminars, and workshops for students to familiarize them with the use of online devices for counselling purposes (FGD, Counsellors HLI A, June 19, 2023).*

A considerable number of students lack proficiency in accessing online counselling. Thus, it is imperative for counselling centres to offer capacity-building programmes to empower higher learning students in effectively navigating online counselling services.

### ***Availability of free Wi-Fi on campus and on halls of residence***

Online counselling relies on personal access to the internet for service accessibility. Failing to secure a cellular data plan means being unable to access these services. Students do not always have access to data plans when they encounter issues that require online counselling. Therefore, the availability of free Wi-Fi throughout the university campus and halls of residence would facilitate increased utilization of online counselling. This would create a conducive environment for students to access these services seamlessly, extending from the campus to their residential halls. There was the following testimony:

*The availability of free Wi-Fi would greatly enhance and encourage the utilization of online counselling in our setting. It would be especially beneficial for individuals like me who may not always have the means to purchase cellular data plans. With free Wi-Fi accessible to everyone, it would be much easier for people to consider online counselling whenever they encounter issues that require such service (Interview, Student HLI A, June 19, 2023).*

Wi-Fi will accelerate the use of online counselling simply because some of the students fail to access the services because they do not have any access to data plans, since there are varying socio-economic setbacks among students, including those from underprivileged families.

Having Wi-Fi portals in residential halls and within the university campus would be very beneficial for those seeking mental health counselling.

### ***Decreasing bundle expenses and expanding the range of university offerings***

Depending on online counselling can be expensive due to the high cost of cellular data plans. To access online counselling, one requires sufficient megabytes, gigabytes, and airtime. Lowering data costs could benefit university students, enabling them to access counselling and academic resources. Providing affordable university-specific data plans scan also help students to access online services off-campus. Counsellors supported this view:

*The university administration should explore the possibility of engaging in discussions with telecommunication companies to negotiate for cheaper data plans. Furthermore, the idea of the university providing students with cost-effective data plan options can significantly enhance counselling services. This was a key point discussed in the focus group discussion with counsellors (FGD, Counsellors HLI A, June 19, 2023).*

Lowering the cost of cellular data plans for students is a method to encourage a greater number of university students to use online counselling. Additionally, the research findings underscore the fact that initiating or expanding the range the university offers is another effective strategy that enhances students' access to online services.

### ***Formation of online counselling support groups***

In higher learning institutions, online counselling support groups can facilitate information sharing among students, enhancing collaboration in various activities. Students use platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp to communicate both on and off-campus, connecting with peers in the same programme, courses, and departments within the university. This was alleged by one student:

*These groups will help us to be updated with online counselling services that are likely to be provided at the university. The groups will enable us to get enough knowledge, skills and understanding of the problems that are hindering us from increasing the pace of seeking online counselling (Interview, student HLI B:10<sup>th</sup> June, 2023).*

Another student had this to say:

*In our university, we have a mental health club and every week counsellors post different topics related to our mental health, through our WhatsApp group and it's very helpful. Students get the opportunity to ask questions, and counsellors hold discussions with us (Interview, student HLI A: 19<sup>th</sup> June 2023)*

The testimonies strongly suggest that online counselling groups will increase understanding and pace of seeking online counselling services because through such groups students can get to understand their personal issues.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study sought to investigate the need of having online counselling in improving the mental health of higher learning institution students. Online counselling is a service that bridges the gap between counsellors and clients without being affected by geographical constraints (Agathokleous & Taiwo, 2022).

In line with the first objective, study participants expressed their views on online counselling, highlighting its attributes such as its ease of maintaining psychological well-being, preserving privacy, being time-friendly and accessible, reducing stigma and fear, being cost-effective,

enabling freedom of expression, and facilitating rapid feedback and follow-up. These findings align with those from prior research by Lerardi et al. (2022), which indicated that online counselling interventions were highly effective in reducing psychological distress among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Lau et al. (2013) established that online counselling creates a supportive environment for counsellors and clients to prepare for their online sessions. Finally, Zamani et al. (2010) demonstrated that individuals continue to turn to internet counselling as a valuable resource for addressing their mental health concerns. Therefore, students of higher learning institutions are likely to experience mental health improvement by conveniently accessing online counselling, regardless of time or location constraints.

As for the second objective, the study found out that despite the merits of online counselling, it presents several challenges for higher learning students, preventing them from utilizing the service to maintain their mental health. These challenges include poor network connectivity, shortage of human and physical resources, difficulties related to data bundles, concerns about online security, and challenges in understanding clients' emotions. These findings align with previous research, as Lau et al. (2013) noted, that online counselling may limit the interpretation of nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, posture, and eye contact, which are valuable in communication during counselling sessions. Additionally, Bekes et al. (2021) and Kiriakak et al. (2022) emphasized that online counselling faces challenges related to internet accessibility, especially for lower socioeconomic classes, and that the costs associated with conducting online meetings, along with issues like poor connections and network quality, can restrict communication between counsellors and clients. Moreover, Rushahu (2022) argued that a culture of silence sometimes leads individuals to believe that seeking help from a professional counsellor signifies weakness and inability to cope with one's own life challenges. Consequently, these challenges hinder higher learning students from accessing the necessary mental health services.

The results of the third objective revealed that several strategies enhance the mental health of students in higher learning institutions. These include raising awareness about the significance of online counselling, providing capacity-building initiatives on various forms of online counselling, ensuring the availability of free Wi-Fi in university campuses and residential halls, and establishing online counselling support groups.

These findings align with previous research by Adebowale (2022), who found that capacity-building programmes on the benefits of online counselling provide students with a diverse skills set and knowledge to assist them handle life challenges. Additionally, Zhu and Stephens (2019) found that perceived social support and information support are essential in making services comprehensible to all members of groups. Moreover, due to concerns about being labelled when seeking traditional counselling services, students have opted for online counselling as a more comfortable alternative (Rushahu, 2022). Lastly, Ukwueze (2018) underscored the fact that alternative measures such as providing free data for students and counsellors, along with the establishment of computerized counselling labs with internet access, enhance counselling services at higher learning institutions.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has established that although online counselling is a relatively new service in higher learning institutions, it is gaining importance given students' extensive use of online platforms for both academic and non-academic purposes. Those who have utilized online counselling have enjoyed its benefits such as enhanced privacy, convenient scheduling, reduced stigma and

fear, and easy accessibility, among others. However, the service faces significant challenges, including network instability, issues with cellular data, and difficulty in perceiving clients' emotions during online sessions, which can impact its effectiveness. To encourage the adoption of online counselling, it is crucial to cultivate a culture of its use among higher learning students. Additionally, the establishment of Computerized Counselling Laboratories (CCL) and the integration of Online Counselling Artificial Intelligence (OCAI) within higher learning institutions can help students embrace the practice of online counselling as a swift and effective service that supports their academic journey and mental health.

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