

Universitas Negeri Padang & Ikatan Konselor Indonesia

Editorial Office: Jurusan Bimbingan dan Konseling | Faculty of Education | Universitas Negeri Padang

Jl. Prof. Dr. Hamka Air Tawar Barat, Kota Padang, Sumatera Barat, 25130, Indonesia.

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Volume 14 Number 2 2025



KONSELOR

ISSN 1412-9760 (Print) | ISSN 2541-5948 (Online)

Editor: Afriyadi Sofyan

Publication details, including author guidelines

URL: <https://counselor.pjj.unp.ac.id/index.php/konselor/about/submissions>

Exploring Student Preferences for Counseling Modalities: Online vs. Face-to-Face in Islamic Higher Education Institutions

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Article History

Received: Tuesday, May 20, 2025

Revised: Friday, May 30, 2025

Accepted: Tuesday, June 17, 2025

How to cite this article (APA)

Awad, F. B., Shaleh, M., Rezki, A., & Tonn-Meller, H. (2025). Exploring student preferences for counseling modalities: Online vs. face-to-face in Islamic higher education institutions. *KONSELOR*, 14(2), 124–135. <https://doi.org/10.24036/02025142119-0-86>

The readers can link to article via <https://doi.org/10.24036/02025142119-0-86>

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Exploring Student Preferences for Counseling Modalities: Online vs. Face-to-Face in Islamic Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: This study examines the factors that influence the use of online counselling services and the preferences of students in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) in Kendari City, Indonesia. The research addresses four critical concerns by employing a quantitative method and an explanatory approach: (1) What are the preferences of students regarding online counselling? (2) What is the method by which students and faculty at PTKI implement online counselling? (3) What are the factors that influence students' decision to choose online counselling over in-person counselling? and (4) What are the factors that support and hinder the utilisation of online counselling services? Data were gathered from 214 pupils in three PTKIs using the Online Counselling Attitude Scale (OCAS). The results suggest that students prefer online counselling primarily due to its time efficiency and accessibility. Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding the loss of personal connection with counsellors and the confidentiality of their interactions. These results emphasise the necessity for PTKI to enhance counsellor training and fortify its digital counselling infrastructure to guarantee the ethical and effective deliverance of online services.

Key Words: Online Counseling Services; Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions; Face-to-Face Counseling; Online counseling

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted traditional systems of service delivery, triggering a digital transformation across health, education, and social support sectors (awford et al., 2020; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). In the field of mental health, particularly counseling, this shift gave rise to online counseling as an alternative form of support. Digital platforms have since been integrated into professional practices worldwide, enabling services to reach wider audiences, including those in geographically remote or underserved areas (Samad et al., 2022). The transition from manual to virtual services during the pandemic was not only a response to crisis but also a catalyst for innovation in delivering care and support, especially in higher education settings (Samad et al., 2022). In higher education, the sudden shift to remote learning and online engagement led to the emergence and expansion of digital mental health platforms, including online counseling services (Samad et al., 2022; Wind et al., 2020). The global crisis not only necessitated the adoption of virtual technologies but also revealed long-standing gaps in accessibility, especially in student support systems such as psychological counseling. Online counseling emerged as a response to these challenges by providing flexible, location-independent, and timely support for students experiencing stress, anxiety, and academic pressures during the pandemic (Rochlen et al., 2004; Dowling & Rickwood, 2013).

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Before the pandemic, online counseling was still marginal in most countries. For example, Does et al. (2020) noted that the majority of Portuguese psychologists lacked training and experience in delivering online therapy. Similarly, Norcross & Phillips (2020) found that mental health professionals in various contexts were hesitant to adopt digital platforms due to concerns over confidentiality, effectiveness, and professional boundaries. However, COVID-19 accelerated digital adoption globally, with many counselors reporting rapid upskilling and increasingly positive responses from clients (Srijundaree et al., 2024; Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020). The transformation of service delivery also highlighted new possibilities for hybrid and technology-enhanced counseling models beyond the pandemic (Chen & Huang, 2024; Singh et al., 2021).

In other words, global studies show that before the pandemic, online counseling was not a common practice among professionals in many countries. For instance, it was found that a majority of Portuguese psychologists did not offer online sessions and lacked the necessary expertise before 2020. However, the pandemic compelled them to rapidly adapt, and many began using digital platforms with overwhelmingly positive client feedback. In Indonesia, the adoption of online counseling has been comparatively slower. Factors such as limited digital infrastructure, lack of counselor training, institutional readiness, and cultural attitudes toward mental health have posed challenges (Malelak, 2022). While the global context shows rapid adjustment and normalization of online counseling, Indonesia still grapples with foundational issues in integrating technology into psychological services, especially in Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (*Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam/PTKI*) (Sukamto & Suryadi, 2022).

In contrast, Indonesia's adoption of online counseling has been slower and more fragmented. Barriers such as limited internet infrastructure (Chintyasari, 2025; Akhmadi & Supriyati, 2021), digital literacy gaps (Winurbagja, 2024), and cultural stigma surrounding mental health (Noferdya, 2023) contribute to this delay. A study by Haryani et al. (2022) indicated that although university students expressed willingness to use online counseling, institutional systems often lacked the preparedness or policies to support consistent service provision. This gap is particularly evident in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI), where the integration of technology with religious-ethical counseling principles presents additional complexity (Abubakar & Rosita, 2024; Herlinda et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the urgency created by the pandemic has increased awareness and interest in digitizing counseling services among educators and administrators (Sukamto & Suryadi, 2022; Malelak, 2022).

Within the Indonesian context, online counseling offers several potential advantages, particularly for university students. This generation is digitally literate and accustomed to online interaction, making them more receptive to virtual platforms. Online counseling addresses significant barriers faced by students, such as limited time, long distances, and stigma associated with mental health services. It allows students to communicate confidentially and comfortably without the pressure of face-to-face meetings (Wibowo, 2016). Moreover, students in remote or under-resourced areas can access counseling more easily, reducing gaps in support services (Mansyur et al., 2020). Clients tend to be more open and comfortable sharing issues online, overcoming concerns about social stigma. Online counseling can also be a solution for students who are hesitant to consult directly, providing an alternative in the college environment, especially in Kendari City.

University students represent a population particularly suited for online counseling. As digital natives, they are comfortable with virtual communication and increasingly prefer the flexibility that online platforms offer (Best et al., 2014; Rideout et al., 2018). Online counseling mitigates common barriers to help-seeking such as shame, stigma, and limited availability of counselors (Gulliver et al., 2010; Rickwood et al., 2007). Wibowo (2016) emphasized that digital services are especially beneficial in overcoming geographic limitations and time constraints. Students in regions like Southeast Sulawesi, where mental health resources may be scarce, can benefit from such interventions. Additionally, Mansyur et al. (2020) and Rara (2023) observed that students facing emotional distress often feel more secure initiating help-seeking online rather than in person, particularly when anonymity is guaranteed. Considering that the younger generation is more familiar with online communication, online counseling becomes a solution in line with their preferences (Sukamto & Suryadi, 2022; Yurayat & Seechaliao, 2022; Askar et al., 2022). The importance of counseling services in college, as outlined by Fadhilah et al. (2019), includes the personal-social, academic, and professional development of students. Counseling plays a crucial role in supporting students' academic, personal, and professional

development. According to Fadhilah et al. (2019), student guidance services are essential in nurturing personal-social growth and resilience. Digital transformation in this sector, therefore, offers a way to strengthen institutional support mechanisms.

Preliminary interviews with counselors at PTKI in Kendari—such as Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari (UMK) and Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Kendari—indicate limited integration of online counseling. In most cases, technology is only used for student registration or initial appointment scheduling. Full counseling sessions are still typically conducted offline. While this hybrid approach may serve as a transitional model, it underutilizes the potential of digital counseling platforms. Counselors also cited concerns over their own digital competencies and the absence of institutional guidelines for ethical and professional conduct in online settings. These local observations align with broader national patterns, where the shift to digital counseling remains uneven across institutions (Rohayati & Abdillah, 2024).

Given the context, the primary objective is to understand students' preferences and behaviors regarding counseling services in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) in Kendari City, focusing on both online and face-to-face modalities. This includes identifying which types of counseling students prefer and examining how these services are currently utilized by students and faculty. The study also aims to explore the key motivational factors driving students to choose online counseling, such as convenience, affordability, and psychological comfort, as well as to understand the barriers which is the technical, institutional, and psychological that influence their engagement.

By focusing on these areas, the research seeks to provide actionable insights into how online counseling services can be optimized to better meet student needs. This is particularly important in the post-pandemic context, where flexibility and accessibility remain crucial for effective mental health support. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the development of hybrid counseling models that accommodate diverse preferences, ensuring that mental health services remain inclusive, accessible, and responsive to student realities.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, which integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The study was conducted in two distinct phases. The first phase involved quantitative data collection through a structured questionnaire, while the second phase consisted of qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews. This design was selected to allow the researchers to first identify general patterns and trends through survey data and then gain deeper insight into those patterns through qualitative exploration. According to Cresswell & Cresswell J.D (2018), sequential explanatory design is particularly useful for explaining and elaborating quantitative results by following up with qualitative data, thereby enriching the overall interpretation and validity of the findings. This approach was especially appropriate for understanding the complex preferences and motivations underlying students' choices regarding online counseling.

Participants

A total of 408 undergraduate students from three Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) in Kendari were initially invited to participate in the quantitative survey. The distribution of the initial respondents by institution and gender is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Prior Respondent Distributions

Name of Universities	Total of Respondents	Male	Female
Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Kendari	220	90	130
Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari (UMK)	146	58	88
Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Sultra (UNUS)	42	16	26
Total	408	164	244

After reviewing the survey responses, 194 responses were excluded due to invalid multiple answers on single-choice questions. The final valid sample consisted of 214 students, distributed as shown in Table 2, with gender breakdown included.

Table 2. Final Respondent Distribution

Name of Universities	Total of Respondents	Male	Female
Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Kendari	133	54	79
Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari (UMK)	54	22	32
Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Sultra (UNUS)	27	10	17
Total	214	86	128

These final respondents came from diverse faculties including Tarbiyah, Syariah, and Ushuluddin, with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years. For the qualitative phase, 12 participants (8 students and 4 counselors) were purposively selected based on their experience with online counseling and willingness to participate, ensuring diverse perspectives and rich qualitative insights.

Instrumentation

The main instrument used in the quantitative phase was the Online Counseling Attitude Scale (OCAS), developed to assess students' attitudes, perceptions, and preferences regarding online counseling services. The OCAS consists of 20 items grouped into four main dimensions: Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, Confidentiality Concerns and Behavioral Intention to Use. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was adapted and validated in the local context with expert judgment from two counseling professionals. Reliability testing produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, indicating high internal consistency.

Procedures

Data collection for the quantitative phase was carried out over a six-month period, from May to October 2023. The survey was administered using Google Forms, and the link was distributed via student WhatsApp groups to ensure wide accessibility. Each participant received an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the research and their rights as respondents, which they agreed to before completing the questionnaire.

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted either in-person or via Zoom, depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Verbal consent was obtained before audio recording the sessions. These interviews were intended to deepen understanding of the students' and counselors' views on online counseling and to clarify patterns found in the quantitative data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the OCAS questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics—such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies—were used to summarize participant responses and highlight trends in attitudes toward online counseling. Qualitative data were analyzed through manual content analysis, which involved the following steps: Transcribing each recorded interview in full, open coding of meaningful statements or recurring ideas, grouping codes into themes related to student preferences, barriers, motivations, and counselor experiences and interpreting themes in the context of the research objectives to support and elaborate the quantitative findings. This integrated analysis allowed the researchers to not only identify general patterns but also to understand the contextual and psychological nuances influencing students' engagement with online counseling services.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 summarizes students' responses to ten questionnaire items assessing attitudes toward online counseling. The descriptive analysis highlights both positive perceptions and areas of concern.

Table 3. Student Responses to Online Counseling Attitude Items (N=214)

Item	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Using online counseling will help me learn about myself.	4 (1.9%)	10 (4.7%)	16 (7.5%)	112 (52.3%)	72 (33.6%)
2	I might encourage a friend with personal issues to consider online counseling.	2 (0.9%)	16 (7.5%)	33 (15.4%)	109 (50.9%)	59 (27.6%)
3	I would share my personal problems in online counseling.	2 (0.9%)	45 (21%)	27 (12.6%)	81 (37.9%)	50 (23.4%)
4	Discussing personal issues with an online counselor is beneficial.	4 (1.9%)	30 (14%)	29 (13.6%)	93 (43.5%)	61 (28.5%)
5	I would consider trying online counseling if it were free.	1 (0.4%)	6 (2.8%)	20 (7%)	93 (43.5%)	97 (37%)
6	Seeking help from an online counselor would be my last option.	50 (23.5%)	110 (51.6%)	28 (13.1%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)
7	I feel uncomfortable discussing emotional issues with an online counselor.	44 (20.6%)	115 (53.7%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	53 (24.8%)
8	I am afraid to explain my problems to an online counselor.	56 (26.3%)	118 (55.4%)	10 (4.7%)	2 (0.9%)	2 (0.9%)
9	Scheduling appointments with an online counselor would require great effort.	63 (29.6%)	102 (47.9%)	7 (3.3%)	5 (2.3%)	0 (0%)
10	I am afraid to discuss stressful events with an online counselor.	10 (4.7%)	118 (55.1%)	28 (13.1%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0%)

The findings show strong positive attitudes toward online counseling's utility. Specifically, approximately 85.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that online counseling helps them learn about themselves (Item 1). Similarly, 78.5% would encourage friends facing personal issues to consider online counseling (Item 2). Openness to sharing personal problems online was also notable, with about 61.3% agreeing to do so (Item 3). A large majority (85.6%) viewed discussing personal issues with an online counselor as beneficial (Item 4). The financial accessibility factor was evident, with 79% willing to try online counseling if it were free (Item 5).

Despite these positive views, reservations exist. Over 75% disagreed that online counseling would be their last resort when facing personal problems (Item 6), reflecting some preference for face-to-face counseling. Discomfort discussing emotional issues (Item 7) and fears related to sharing problems online (Item 8) were reported by approximately 24.8% and 26.3%, respectively. Most respondents did not view scheduling appointments as particularly difficult (Items 9 and 10), but concerns about fear and discomfort remain.

Overall, 64.3% preferred face-to-face counseling compared to 42.7% who favored online counseling, indicating the need for diverse service options tailored to varying student preferences. Responses from some students who feel more courageous during online counseling sessions indicate that they see online counseling as a safer and more comfortable environment to discuss their personal issues. They feel that using instant messaging apps like WhatsApp makes it easier for them to initiate conversations without fear or tension that might arise in face-to-face sessions. Some students also express that in online sessions, they feel freer to share their problems without hesitation or shame. This suggests that online counseling can provide psychological safety for them, making them more willing to talk about their personal issues without the constraints that may arise in face-to-face interactions. In this regard, online counseling becomes a viable option for students who want to feel more comfortable and confident in sharing their experiences.

Interview Results

The qualitative findings from student interviews complement the quantitative data and are organized according to the four dimensions of the Online Counseling Attitude Scale (OCAS): Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, Confidentiality Concerns, and Behavioral Intention to Use. Students widely recognized online counseling as a useful tool for self-understanding and personal growth. Several participants emphasized the convenience and accessibility of online platforms, especially familiar apps like WhatsApp, which made communication less stressful and easier to initiate. However, concerns about technical issues and privacy were also raised, leading some students to prefer face-to-face counseling due to greater trust and comfort. These diverse perceptions influenced students' behavioral intentions regarding counseling mode preferences, underscoring the need for flexible counseling options.

Table 4. Interview Coding Table

Name	Raw Data	Coding	Categorization (OCAS Dimension)	Theme Interpretation	Theme
Student 1	"Online counseling will help me learn about myself in an easy way, simply by using a smartphone."	Online counseling supports self-growth	Perceived Usefulness	Students perceive online counseling as a useful tool that enhances self-understanding and personal development.	Perceived Usefulness
Student 2	"Online counseling is more affordable and convenient. We don't need to spend money on transportation... access anywhere."	Affordability and convenience	Perceived Ease of Use	Financial and logistical convenience increase students' likelihood to use online counseling services.	Perceived Ease of Use
Student 3	"Using WhatsApp because it is easier and not afraid to start a conversation and not stressful."	Familiar platforms reduce stress	Perceived Ease of Use	Familiar and low-pressure digital channels encourage ease of communication and engagement in counseling.	Perceived Ease of Use
Student 4	"I feel that I would prefer to undergo counseling in person... it might make me more comfortable and provide freedom."	Preference for in-person counseling	Confidentiality Concerns	Concerns about privacy and comfort lead some students to prefer face-to-face counseling over online sessions.	Confidentiality Concerns
Counselor 1	"Using Zoom or face-to-face... problems are resolved more efficiently in person... face-to-face is better."	Technical and communication barriers	Perceived Ease of Use	Technical limitations and communication quality issues reduce perceived ease and trust in online counseling.	Perceived Ease of Use
Student 5	"I strongly prefer face-to-face because I feel more open and comfortable with counselor presence."	Greater openness in physical presence	Behavioral Intention to Use	The physical presence of counselors positively influences intention to engage in face-to-face counseling.	Behavioral Intention to Use

Name	Raw Data	Coding	Categorization (OCAS Dimension)	Theme & Interpretation	Theme
Student 6	"In-person feels more comfortable due to lack of network issues and disruptions."	Technical constraints discourage use	Perceived Ease of Use	Network reliability concerns act as barriers, impacting behavioral intentions to use online counseling.	Perceived Ease of Use
Counselor 2	"Face-to-face meetings foster better trust and allow counselors to respond more effectively."	Relationship building enhances effectiveness	Behavioral Intention to Use	Stronger counselor-client rapport in face-to-face settings promotes preference for traditional counseling modes.	Behavioral Intention to Use
Counselor 3	"Some students feel online counseling lacks privacy and emotional safety compared to face-to-face."	Privacy concerns limit online counseling	Confidentiality Concerns	Privacy and confidentiality remain critical barriers for broader adoption of online counseling.	Confidentiality Concerns
Student 7	"I feel more comfortable sharing my problems when no one is watching, so I prefer online sessions."	Psychological safety in online setting	Perceived Ease of Use	Online platforms provide a less intimidating environment that encourages openness and sharing.	Perceived Ease of Use
Counselor 4	"Digital literacy varies among students; some struggle with technology which affects their engagement."	Digital literacy challenges	Perceived Ease of Use	Varying digital skills among students can influence their ease and willingness to use online counseling.	Perceived Ease of Use
Student 8	"I would encourage friends to try online counseling if they are hesitant about face-to-face."	Peer encouragement of online counseling	Behavioral Intention to Use	Social influence and peer support can positively affect students' intentions to use online counseling services.	Behavioral Intention to Use

Table 4 presents key qualitative data from interviews with eight students and four counselors, organized within the four dimensions of the Online Counseling Attitude Scale (OCAS). **Perceived Usefulness:** Students expressed that online counseling serves as an effective tool for self-understanding and personal development, reinforcing the perceived benefits captured in the quantitative survey. **Perceived Ease of Use:** Convenience and accessibility, particularly through familiar platforms like WhatsApp, were emphasized as major facilitators. However, both students and counselors identified technical barriers such as unstable networks and varying digital literacy levels as challenges that may reduce the usability and appeal of online counseling. **Confidentiality Concerns:** Concerns about privacy and emotional safety emerged strongly, with some participants expressing a preference for face-to-face counseling due to the greater trust and confidentiality they perceive in physical settings. Counselors echoed these concerns, highlighting confidentiality as a barrier to wider online counseling adoption. **Behavioral Intention to Use:** The intention to engage with counseling services was shaped by a complex mix of these factors. While many students showed willingness to use online counseling for its convenience and accessibility, others preferred face-to-face interaction for comfort and openness.

Counselors noted that peer encouragement and relational trust influence students' choices, underscoring the importance of offering diverse counseling modalities to meet varied student needs. This integrated qualitative analysis complements the quantitative findings and offers a comprehensive understanding of students' attitudes and behaviors regarding online counseling services.

Factors Influencing Students to Use Online Counseling

Based on the results of the questionnaire and interviews conducted, several key factors influence students' decisions to use online counseling services, which align closely with the dimensions of the Online Counseling Attitude Scale (OCAS). Perceived Ease of Use emerges prominently as students perceive online counseling as an accessible and straightforward option. The availability of user-friendly platforms such as WhatsApp enables them to schedule appointments and communicate with counselors without the need for physical presence on campus. This flexibility allows students to arrange sessions according to their own schedules, reducing barriers to access. Affordability and Convenience relate strongly to both Perceived Ease of Use and Perceived Usefulness. Many students view online counseling as a cost-effective alternative because it eliminates expenses related to transportation and accommodation. Additionally, the convenience of accessing counseling services from comfortable, familiar environments like their homes increases their willingness to engage with these services. This convenience also supports students' psychological comfort and privacy, which ties into Confidentiality Concerns, as students feel safer sharing personal issues in less public settings. Together, these factors—ease of use, affordability, and convenience—are instrumental in shaping students' Behavioral Intention to Use online counseling. They reflect how technological advancements and evolving student preferences impact the adoption of digital counseling services, underscoring the importance of optimizing online platforms to meet individual needs effectively.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed diverse preferences among students in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) in Kendari regarding counseling modalities, with a generally positive attitude toward online counseling as a viable option. While many students favored online services due to perceived benefits, a notable portion preferred face-to-face counseling, highlighting a complex landscape of counseling needs and preferences (Prabowo et al., 2023; Java et al., 2021; Dores et al., 2020; Mansyur et al., 2020).

Online counseling appeals primarily because of its accessibility, time efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. The convenience of connecting via familiar digital platforms like WhatsApp or Zoom aligns with digital-native behaviors, emphasizing flexibility and immediacy (Best et al., 2014; Rideout et al., 2018; Hastuti & Tyas, 2021). As one student explained, "Online counseling is cheaper and more convenient... we can access it from anywhere, making it very practical and cost-effective." These findings align with previous studies that identify ease of use and affordability as significant factors enhancing online mental health service adoption. (Mulungu et al., 2024), Daulay et al., 2022); Barak et al., 2008).

However, some students still prefer face-to-face counseling due to the emotional connection and trust fostered in direct interactions (Andersson, 2016). Nonverbal communication—such as facial expressions and body language—plays a critical role in building rapport and accurately interpreting clients' emotions, which can be limited in online formats (Daulay et al., 2022; Sari & Herdi, 2021)). One participant noted, "I feel more comfortable in person because I can express all my issues without constraints like network problems." This preference underscores inherent limitations of online counseling, consistent with findings by Moudatsou et al., 2024;(Listiyani, 2021) Glueckauf et al., 2018, and Stoll et al., 2020)

The PTKI context influences these preferences through its sociocultural and religious frameworks, where values around privacy, emotional expression, and interpersonal trust are particularly salient (Sukamto & Suryadi, 2022). Institutional readiness and technological infrastructure also impact the acceptance and quality of online counseling services. These factors may explain the mixed reception observed and highlight the necessity for culturally sensitive and contextually tailored counseling models.

Survey data indicated that although many students perceive online counseling as a convenient alternative, hesitancy remains due to unfamiliarity, stigma, and doubts about effectiveness, echoing findings by Gulliver et al. (2010) and Rickwood et al. (2007). This ambivalence points to the need for educational efforts to raise awareness and build trust in online mental health services.

Qualitative interviews reinforced these insights, with students appreciating affordability, convenience, and privacy. One student shared, “Using WhatsApp makes it easier and less stressful to start a conversation,” demonstrating how familiar platforms reduce psychological barriers to seeking help (Wibowo, 2016; Mansyur et al., 2020). Supporting factors include student autonomy in scheduling, easy access through trusted communication tools, and reduced logistical burdens, while barriers encompass unstable internet, lack of counselor training in digital methods, institutional limitations, and challenges in interpreting emotional cues online (Haryati, 2020; Daulay et al., 2022). Practically, the findings advocate for hybrid counseling models combining online and face-to-face strengths, enhanced digital literacy programs, and supportive institutional policies to optimize student-centered mental health services in PTKI (Maheu et al., 2017).

Limitations include the study’s localized sample and qualitative scope, suggesting future research should broaden demographic reach, employ longitudinal designs, and develop culturally and gender-sensitive online counseling frameworks for more inclusive and effective mental health care (Norcross & Phillips, 2020; (Mishna et al., 2012)).

CONCLUSION

The results indicate that students’ choices regarding online counseling are strongly influenced by ease of use, affordability, and emotional safety. Students appreciate the flexibility of scheduling sessions through accessible digital platforms, the lower costs compared to face-to-face counseling, and the privacy that online services offer, which helps reduce discomfort in discussing personal issues.

However, despite the growing acceptance of online counseling, many students continue to prefer face-to-face counseling due to the perceived greater emotional connection and trust it fosters. Concerns about technical disruptions and limited nonverbal communication in online settings further reinforce this preference. Therefore, counseling services must adopt diverse delivery methods that accommodate these varying needs and preferences. Given these insights, Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) should prioritize integrating hybrid counseling models that blend online and in-person services. Additionally, enhancing counselor training in digital communication and improving technological infrastructure are critical steps to deliver effective, accessible, and responsive mental health support aligned with students’ evolving expectations.

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