

ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF REMOTE COUNSELING SERVICES AMONG OMANIS SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS IN TRANSFORMING SCHOOL COUNSELING

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**Vol. 18. No. 1
December Issue
2023**

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented shift in the field of education, compelling school social workers in Oman to rapidly adopt remote counseling services to navigate the complexities of uncertain and high-risk conditions. This study explores the multifaceted landscape of advantages and challenges faced by school social workers in Oman while delivering remote counseling services during the pandemic. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten school social workers, thematic analysis was employed to uncover key insights. Findings unveiled that three key themes emerged from the data regarding the advantages: (1) empowering counseling through digital technology and social media platforms; (2) flexibility in the practices of remote counseling services; and (3) boosting skills and experiences in remote social counseling services. Additionally, two themes highlighted the challenges faced: (1) readiness for adopting new technology and (2) lack of available remote counseling services applications and platforms. These findings emphasize the transformative potential of remote counseling services while underscoring the importance of addressing associated challenges for sustainable implementation.

Keywords: *School, Counseling, Social, Workers, Oman.*

INTRODUCTION

In the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, most counseling services were traditionally conducted within the premises of K-12 schools. However, the global challenges posed by the pandemic forced K-12 education worldwide to pivot towards remote delivery, necessitating the complete redesign of entire courses to suit the online environment (Khlaif et al., 2021). This sudden shift to remote learning, which lacked proper planning and resource management, placed significant stress and disruptions on all parties involved in education, including administrators, teachers, students, parents, as well social workers (Al Salman et al., 2021). The transition adverse effects on the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students, resulting in increased stress, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and instances of domestic violence, thereby impeding learning and adjustment (Camacho-Zuñiga et al., 2021; Raguindin et al., 2020). Moreover, students encountered various challenges, including decreased engagement, internet connectivity issues, difficulties in time management, setbacks in academic performance, and limited

communication with teachers (Azubuike et al., 2021). The transition to online learning also had an impact on teachers and families (Jelinska & Paradowski, 2021). Teachers had to swiftly adapt to unfamiliar online teaching methods, facing obstacles due to limited resources, expertise, and training to support student learning and well-being (Flack et al., 2020). Many teachers relied on personal computers and had limited access to technology, using their own materials alongside Ministry of Education platforms (Kruszewska et al., 2020). This resulted in a heavy workload, increased stress, and negative emotions for teachers during the pandemic (Portillo, 2020). Additionally, families grappled with the abrupt transition to remote learning during COVID-19, with common challenges including limited access to technology and internet connectivity issues (Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2021; Azubuike et al., 2021). Parents also had concerns about supporting their children in a teacher-less environment, navigating online platforms, and assessing the quality of remote learning (Mohammed, 2020). Hence, the role of a school social workers becomes crucial in bridging communication gaps between students and parents as they navigate the challenges of remote learning.

School social workers were instrumental in helping students adapt to new academic and social environment, ensuring educational progress and psychological well-being by adopting remote counseling in a context heavily reliant on digital technology and social media (Al-Khamees, 2021). The use of digital technology and social media in online counseling services provided school social workers with an advantage, enabling them to offer personalized support and feedback to K-12 students. This approach fostered their psychological development and instilled hope for adaptive growth (Liu, 2021). Furthermore, technological innovations and social media further supported their efforts during this crisis, ensuring the continuity of services, improved communication with families, and increased student engagement (McLaughlin et al., 2020; Astuti, 2021). Social workers provided guidance and monitored students through social and online platforms, helping with educational and social issues (Alkhameiseh, 2021). Their ethical responsibility drove them to adapt and use various tools and communication channels, such as Zoom, text messages, online chats (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter), emails, and phone calls, have made remote counseling possible. This has played a significant role in enhancing the overall mental well-being of students, as noted by Ashcroft et al. (2022). Savitz-Romer et al. (2021) also found that utilizing WhatsApp as a counseling tool enables students to efficiently seek advice and solutions, thus minimizing the supervision time needed.

Nonetheless, social workers in Oman encountered new challenges when adapting to online education methods, which were uncharted territory for many of social workers and educational professionals. The shift from in-person counseling to remote counseling presented obstacles for educational social workers, prompting concerns about their preparedness and proficiency in technology skills (Melero, Hernandez, & Bagdasaryan, 2021; Azman et al., 2020). Digital technology's potential in professional practice, notably in Omani school counseling, remains unrealized due to insufficient research and program development. This deficiency is attributed to the limited research, studies, and proposed programs dedicated to integrating technology into counseling practice (Awashreh, 2023). During the pandemic, the role of social workers, as noted by Osman (2020), remained unclear and undefined. They faced challenges, including inadequate preparation to handle emergency situations. Moreover, the lack of parental cooperation hindered their ability to fulfill their duties, ultimately leading to a diminished role for social workers in schools (Saleh, 2023). Among the challenges that school social workers faced was the lack of a remote platform, making it difficult for them to communicate with their students. Additionally, their lack of training, limited cooperation from parents with social workers, which often led to inaccurate assessments of the situation, and the mode of communication with students posed another obstacle (Karaman et al., 2021). Therefore, this study aims to explore advantages and challenges in remote counseling services using digital technology and platforms for school social workers in Oman. The results of this

research could potentially offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of remote counseling services using digital technology and social media within Oman context. Based on earlier background, the present study proposes the following Questions:

RQ1: What are the advantages of adopting remote counseling services through the utilization of digital technologies and social media platforms?

RQ2: What are the challenges faced by social workers in Oman during adopting remote counseling services through the utilization of digital technologies and social media platforms?

METHODS

Participants

Ten social workers employed in high schools across Muscat, Oman, willingly participated in the research through purposive and snowball sampling methods (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The selection criteria were as follows: (a) engagement in remote counseling utilizing technology during the pandemic, (b) a minimum of three years' experience in the field of social work, (c) employment at high schools in Muscat, (d) willingness to actively partake and share personal experiences. The age range of the participants varied from 30 to 42 years old, with an average age of 35, comprising an equal gender split of 5 males and 5 females. Their professional experience ranged from 5 to 10 years (50%), and over 10 years (50%). In terms of educational background, 50% held a Bachelor of Social Work degree, while 30% possessed master's degrees in social science, sociology, counseling, and guidance. Additionally, 10% had degrees in Social Planning, and the remaining 10% held sociology degrees. Among the participants, five had previous exposure to utilizing technology, and all exclusively engaged in remote social work during the two-year period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Detailed sociodemographic characteristics are in Table 1.

N	Age	Education	Gender	Experience in social work	Remote social working Experience	Using technologies before the pandemic
1	35	Bachelor of Social Work	Male	9	2	1
2	39	MA in Social Science	Male	14	2	0
3	38	Bachelor of Social Work	Male	12	2	0
4	32	Bachelor of Social Planning	Male	7	2	0
5	42	MA in Sociology	Male	18	2	2
6	40	MA in Counseling and Guidance	Female	15	2	2
7	30	Bachelor of Social Work	Female	5	2	1
8	38	Bachelor of Social Work	Female	12	2	0
9	31	Bachelor of Sociology	Female	8	2	3
10	34	Bachelor of Social Work	Female	7	2	1

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants.

Data Collection

In April 2021, a qualitative study was conducted in Muscat, Oman, involving semi-structured interviews with four high school social workers. The aim was to gather their opinions on the benefits and drawbacks of employing Remote Counseling Services in their work. These interviews, initially conducted through Google Meet, were guided by a question set developed from a literature review and refined after two pilot studies with social workers colleagues. Such an approach allowed for a balance between structure and flexibility, ensuring participant-centered discussions (Merriam, 2009). The interviews were carried out, recorded, and transcribed by the author, with subsequent validation by the interviewees. In order to ensure confidentiality and facilitate a comprehensive analysis

of individual opinions, each participant was assigned a unique code or pseudonym (e.g., P1, P2, P3), allowing for a systematic and organized presentation of their responses within the methodology section." Alongside this, contemporaneous field notes were taken to capture the author's reflections, following the reflexive thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Notably, no follow-up interviews were necessary, concluding the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research software NVivo Version 12 was employed to streamline the coding process for the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis, following the method described by Braun and Clarke in 2006, was used to analyze the data. The information obtained from the interviews was initially organized into categories, and themes were subsequently derived from these categories, aligning with established practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2014). The thematic analysis process involved stages such as familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for, and reviewing themes, defining, and naming these themes, and ultimately creating a comprehensive report. In addition, the data was scrutinized for both commonalities and disparities within the identified themes to capture the range of experiences among the respondents. Thematic analysis was chosen as it provides a robust framework for coding qualitative data, facilitating the identification of patterns from the collected data that pertain specifically to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2014). During the presentation of findings, italicized illustrative quotes were used to underscore key points made by participants during the interviews. It's important to note that the entire process of coding, categorizing, and conducting thematic analysis was carried out solely by the author. Data collection, transcription, and analysis were pursued until no new relevant themes or issues emerged, signifying data saturation, which indicates a comprehensive exploration of the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Ethical considerations

The study obtained ethical approval from the ministry of education in Oman Ethics Committee on February 28, 2021, for an amended survey. These approvals ensured the study's adherence to ethical guidelines and participant protection.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present the emerging themes related to the advantages and challenges experienced by social worker when embracing remote counseling services through the integration of digital technologies and social media platforms. This result has not only enhanced the expertise, abilities, and proficiencies of professionals, but has also enabled them to effectively address their obstacles and enhance their overall professional effectiveness within the field.

1. The Advantages Of Adopting Remote Counseling Services

Theme 1: Empowering Counseling Through Digital Technology and Social Media Platforms

Leveraging digital technology and social media platforms can significantly enhance remote counseling and communication for social workers. The participants described the features of using digital technology and social media platforms which allow instant communication, enabling quick responses to questions, concerns, and updates. P9 reported, "During the Covid-19 time, I started my counseling practice by creating an action plan based on the directives given by the Ministry. The plan contained guidance programs, counseling sessions, and a case study. The Zoom app and other platforms and programs were used including Google Meet. I also produced instructional, informative booklets and videos that I shared on social media with parents, through WhatsApp, and Facebook". Furthermore, P3 clarified that while they were accustomed to using social media platforms like WhatsApp

and Twitter for communication in their daily life, they had never used them for offering counseling services as their primary work. He stated, "Social media platforms provide a variety of tools that can be used to facilitate interactions between counselors, families, and students. Before the pandemic, we did not use technologies and platforms in our work; we only used them in our daily lives, such as WhatsApp and Twitter. Currently, I used several options on social networking platforms, including WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Zoom, which helped me in my counseling work".

According to participants, several of the school social workers stated that different modes of communication served various purposes and yielded varying degrees of success. Varied outcomes may arise based on the nature of the rapport between the school social worker and the student, as well as the purpose of the contact. P8 said, "To educate students about COVID-19 challenges, we engaged selected teachers via an educational platform. Through videos, photos, and instructions, we helped them adapt to the crisis. We maintained regular communication via Facebook, WhatsApp, etc. Our job aims to mitigate psychological and behavioral problems in remote learning and provide the necessary assistance and guidance to ensure uninterrupted student progress".

Theme 2: Flexibility in Practices Remote Counseling Services

Remote counseling offers unparalleled flexibility in delivering counseling services for social workers in Oman. Through the transcendence of geographic borders, students can obtain expert assistance from the convenience of their own environments. The participants in the interviews highlighted that the use of digital technology and social media in school social counseling work brings flexibility in time for social workers and parents. P10 said, "Flexibility within remote counseling services contributes to enhancing the ease and authenticity of interactions between students, parents, and counselors. This leads to a more relaxed and candid counseling experience. Additionally, remote sessions can be held on a variety of digital platforms, according to the interests and requirements of each student". P9 described, "I believe that remote social work saves a lot of time, especially since many parents have work commitments. When the work is done in person, it's difficult to find a time that suits parents and their responsibilities. However, remote work allows us to coordinate meetings with parents and students at any time". P3 had similar opinion" using digital platforms in counseling practice attracts students. It gives them the freedom of expression, motivation, comfort, and a desire to learn. Most importantly, it keeps them engaged and interactive with teachers and the social specialist".

This indicates that some students' apprehension has been overcome because to the freedom social specialists have in their work thanks to the usage of digital technologies. They now feel more liberated and at ease accepting personal interviews and counseling sessions remotely as confirmed by P1, "I firmly believe that remote counseling gives students the freedom to speak openly and fearlessly about their issues. Additionally, using remote counseling allowed us to meet with students for longer periods of time and occasionally even with parents during times that did not coincide with the regular school day". The utilization remote counseling using social media and digital technology to establish a global network of specialists exemplifies another crucial facet of flexibility in modern social work environments. Professionals can now connect, collaborate, and share insights in any time with experts from diverse fields across the globe, transcending physical limitations. This dynamic network-building not only enhances professional growth but also promotes interdisciplinary approaches to complex challenges. According to P3, "job flexibility not only attending meetings with students, parents and colleagues but also learning from global practices. Sharing experiences is made simpler by digital tools; some social workers even broadcast sessions and discussions on different social media platforms, which facilitated our adaptation to the new situation".

Theme 3: Boosting Skills and Experiences in Remote Social Counseling Services

The Majority of participants indicated that their use of digital technology in school counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant role in enhancing their digital competence and experiences as P7 described, " The abrupt tech shift offered a new perspective, fostering growth in tech-driven social work. This encompassed upskilling in tech for counseling and advancing the digital era of social work". P2 noted, "I admit that remote work via technology and social media significantly contributed to enhancing our skills. These tools offer social specialists a forward-looking outlook for self-enhancement in social work through technology. They've enabled us to acquire tech-related skills in counseling, propelling the digital-era evolution of social work". Some participants also mentioned that technology assisted them in making more effective decisions. P4 explained, "At first, when I started using technology, I faced real difficulties. However, after accepting the situation and practicing, I noticed that technology provided me with accurate and rapid information in situations where appropriate decisions needed to be made. It aided me in making decisions more effectively". P8 recounted, "Utilizing digital technology in counseling yields a benefit in enhancing the professional performance of social specialists. The internet, for instance, offers an extensive repository of books and references. Additionally, it provides educational resources, counseling programs, advice, and ideas that empower social specialists in their effective work execution".

2. The Challenges Faced By Social Workers In Oman During Adopting Remote Counseling

Findings related to RQ2 what were the challenges faced by school counselors during remote counseling services? Two themes presented by participants' descriptions of their experience; (1) readiness for adopting new technology; and (2) lack of available remote counseling services applications and platforms.

Theme 1: Readiness for Adopting New Technology

The successful implementation of digital technology in education often requires a multi-faceted approach that includes the expertise of social workers. While technology offers numerous benefits, its implementation in school counseling work can indeed come with certain challenges, including a lack of readiness for adopting new technology in school counseling services. P1 shared experiences "The unexpected crisis caught everyone within the education system off guard. The primary emphasis was on students and devising efficient strategies for delivering their education. As a result, social workers did not receive the necessary consideration for proper training to conduct remote extension work, resulting in an inadequate level of preparedness for effectively overseeing remote counseling services". A similar viewpoint was expressed by P3 who remarked "We lacked the ability and knowledge necessary to engage in social remote counseling work in a productive and flexible manner. We were hampered by the lack of platforms, tools, software, or methods for remote work during the epidemic. We were having trouble since we were all relying on our own skills and knowledge of technology". Her colleague P10 also described the "Although some social workers had a basic understanding of technology and used it in their remote counseling services, unfortunately, they lacked the expertise to use it effectively for remote counseling. Their efforts were hampered by this, which limited their ability to help with counseling beyond a basic level".

Theme 2: Lack of Available Remote Counseling Services Applications and Platforms

During crisis, remote counseling has gained prominence in education settings due to the need for accessible student's mental health support and therapy. the challenge of adapting counseling platforms to cater to various cultural backgrounds in different geographic areas. P5 identified the instability of the network connection as a primary challenge encountered during remote counseling sessions. "The challenges arise due to the constrained network connectivity, particularly affecting families, and students in remote

locations, along with the process of acknowledging the difficulties they encounter. At times, social workers face significant challenges in uncovering problems that students might be undergoing but have not yet been formally documented or communicated". The same sentiment was shared by the other two participants as well. This aligns with the observation made by P8, who remarked, "The school's network was extremely fragile caused by the strain it experienced. This prompted specific social workers to rely on their personal mobile as an alternative. Furthermore, sophisticated digital devices, applications or platforms that could enhance our counseling practices was limited". A similar statement was made by P9, she sighed and stated, "Indeed, there was a complete absence of technological preparedness, both on the part of organizations and individuals. Due to their high cost and budgetary limitations, several pupils lacked access to necessary technological tools like smart devices and PCs".

DISCUSSION

The sudden shift to remote counseling has introduced social workers to modern tools, applications, and platforms that facilitate distance counseling (Jaber & Al-Hroub, 2023). This transition has also spurred innovation, producing new technological approaches, multimedia content, and methods to enhance counseling during crises (Kelly et al., 2021). The first theme highlights the empowering effect of digital technology and social media platforms on remote counseling. Digital technology and social media platforms have empowered remote counseling, offering instant communication, vital during COVID-19 (Singh et al., 2021). Tools like Zoom, Google Meet, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter enabled counselors to connect, disseminate information, share materials, and conduct sessions. The results are consistent with the findings of Banks et al. (2020), who discovered that versatile platforms facilitated communication among students, parents, and teachers, highlighting their importance in maintaining counseling services during challenging times. This experience carries significance for social workers, showcasing their adaptability and creativity, whether in the context of remote school social counseling or other domains. Similarly, this aligns with the conclusions of Lu et al. (2023), which also suggested that social media empowers individuals to seek knowledge, share information, connect with others, and find entertainment. This, in turn, encourages preventive behaviors at the individual level by increasing people's confidence in their collective effectiveness and strengthening social bonds.

The second theme emphasizes the flexibility offered by remote counseling services. Remote counseling offers flexibility, breaking geographic boundaries for student access. Parents, juggling work commitments, find scheduling in-person counseling challenging. Flexibility extends to digital platforms, catering to student preferences. This convenience encourages active student engagement. Technology fosters a global network of specialists, enabling counselors to connect with experts worldwide, promoting professional growth and interdisciplinary collaboration for innovative problem-solving. This result aligns with Harris et al. (2021), who demonstrated that the adoption of digital technology during the pandemic enhanced social workers' competence. They are upskilled in tech, improving counseling and decision-making. Technology provided quick access to information and resources, benefiting their professional roles. The internet, in particular, emerged as a valuable resource for accessing educational materials, counseling programs, advice, and ideas, empowering social specialists in their professional roles. The results align with the findings of Awen (2020), underscoring the transformative potential of technology in the field of social work. This underscores the ongoing need for digital integration to facilitate professional development in the contemporary era.

Although participants cited various advantages of the transition to remote counseling, it occurred rapidly and lacked substantial preparation or training for social workers. This abrupt change presented significant difficulties and challenges in the responsibilities of school social workers, consequently increasing the demand for their role (Awashreh, 2023). Social workers encountered numerous challenges, as they were

accustomed to providing normal onsite face-to-face counseling services where students were physically present to share their issues. One major obstacle faced by Omani social workers underscores the issue of readiness among social workers for embracing new technology in the context of counseling services. The sudden shift to remote counseling during the COVID-19 crisis caught many educators unprepared. Their primary focus was on ensuring educational continuity, neglecting adequate preparation for social workers in remote counseling. Participants felt ill-equipped, citing a lack of training and expertise as significant obstacles. The absence of proper training hindered their ability to use technology effectively for counseling, impacting service quality. Limited technological skills and knowledge also hindered comprehensive counseling beyond basic levels for many participants. This result is consistent with the research by Bellibaş, Kılınç, and Polatcan (2021), which also identified the lack of professional development focused on technological proficiency as a significant challenge in remote counseling. This deficiency further complicates the adoption of remote counseling services for social workers, ultimately affecting their ability to provide effective counseling to students and families adversely. According to (Kruczek et al., 2022; Gümüşluoglu & İlsev, 2009) school leaders should support professional development of staff including social workers and supporting the implementation of changes.

The second challenges focus on the challenges related to the availability of suitable remote counseling service applications and platforms. Participants noted that the sudden surge in the demand for remote counseling during the crisis revealed significant gaps in the infrastructure and technology landscape. Instable network connections, particularly in remote areas, proved a significant hurdle for social workers and students during remote counseling, hampering communication and the addressing of mental health issues. Participants also noted difficulties in adapting counseling platforms to diverse cultural and geographic contexts, emphasizing the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach. This observation is in harmony with the perspective of (Banks et al., 2020) who report that countries characterized by inadequate social infrastructure, sanitation, housing, and income levels, social workers frequently take on increased social and community development responsibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have heightened this trend even further. Moreover, cost-related access limitations to advanced digital tools and platforms restricted the potential for improving the quality of remote counseling services due to budget constraints. This aligns with the emphasis made by Golightley and Holloway (2020) that we are indeed living in extraordinary times, where nations, communities, families, and individuals are called upon to access resources and strengths they may not have previously recognized. In response, social workers are challenged to explore novel approaches to cultivate and promote these strengths, both within themselves and the individuals they assist.

LIMITATION

This study is subject to several limitations that require clarification. The study comprises 10 Omani social workers, focusing more on exploring depth rather than breadth. Consequently, the findings may not readily generalize to larger populations. Future research should overcome limitations by employing by adopting a quantitative or mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to enrich comprehension and broaden the scope of generalization. Triangulation and broader participant representation, including students, families, and teachers of all levels, would result. Furthermore, focusing on Muscat's school social workers challenges may limit comparability to rural areas due to cultural, closure length, technology, and other factors. Further research including pandemic-affected regions is vital to understanding diverse challenges faced by school social workers in different contexts. The findings prompt further research directions, contributing to the school social work and leadership literature. Unresolved queries for future exploration include the distinctive technological proficiencies aiding successful remote counseling transitions, the efficacy of such

counseling across different academic levels, available training resources, the role of school administrators, and specific challenges faced by Omani school social workers in online counseling. This information can inform guidelines, instructional plans, and policies to enhance the quality and accessibility of remote counseling services in educational settings.

CONCLUSION

The rapid transition to remote counseling has propelled social workers into the realm of modern tools and platforms, ushering in innovative approaches to crisis-oriented guidance. Remote counseling's flexibility stands as a hallmark trait, essential for navigating evolving job markets and pressures. Digital technology's sway, especially during the pandemic, has transformed school counseling, proving more effective due to its adaptable nature. Though challenges arise from this shift, it underscores the adaptability and creativity of social workers, showcasing their resilience and potential for growth. However, the lack of preparedness and professional development for technology proficiency presents hurdles. School leaders must champion staff development to mitigate these challenges and empower effective remote counseling. Emotional support from principals also emerges as a vital need, emphasizing the importance of emotional intelligence in crisis management.

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