



12th AMER International Conference on Quality of Life
The Magellan Sutera Resort, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, 26-28 Jan 2024

Influence of Perceived Value on Clients' Behavioural Intention in Online Psychological Counseling

Chunhua Cheng¹, Mariani Md Nor^{2*}, Jia Gao³, Siya An⁴

** Corresponding author*

¹ Faculty of Education, Language, Psychology and Music, SEGi University, Kota Damansara, Malaysia

¹ Qidong Xin Shidai Psychological Counselling Service Centre

² Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

³ Graduate School of Business (GSB), SEGi University, Kota Damansara, Malaysia

⁴ Department of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Zunyi Normal University, Guizhou, China

hillarycheng@126.com, marianimdnor@segi.edu.my, gaojia.peter@gmail.com, AnSiya_Ann@126.com
Tel: +86 13813616789

Abstract

This study employed quantitative research methods to survey 400 customers in China who had used online psychological counseling. Subsequently, SmartPLS4.0 was used to conduct structural equation modeling to test the comprehensive relationship between variables. The research demonstrates the role of emotional experience, perceived usefulness, and ease of use in determining user intent. Conversely, there is a negative correlation with perceived cost. The findings suggest that cost plays a significant role in user decision-making when it comes to online psychological counseling. These results provide valuable insight into how users perceive such services and can guide their development.

Keywords: Psychological Counseling; Online Consultation; Perceived Value; Emotional experience

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2024. The Authors. Published for AMER & cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9i27.5718>

1.0 Introduction

Mental health has received a great deal of questioning and probing process over the past several decades, with an increasing understanding that mental illness is not merely limited to one or two countries but rather exists around the world. According to a multinational study combining results from 174 mental health surveys conducted over the last three decades in as many countries, one out of every four people was found to have at least one psychiatric disorder. In particular, within China the combined lifetime prevalence of anxiety and mood disorders has topped 7 %. Alarming, widespread though it is in the country as a whole, psychological counseling still finds itself in its nascent stages.

1.1 Problem of Study

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2024. The Authors. Published for AMER & cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9i27.5718>

This increasing asymmetry between the high incidence of mental illness and China's unpreparedness in psychological counseling, is a serious social issue. Traditional psychological counseling mainly takes place offline and requires a substantial outlay by patients of financial and temporal capital. Add to this the shortage of mental health professionals, with 1.5 psychiatrists per 100,000 people not nearly enough, and you have a severe imbalance in the distribution of mental health resources that makes it difficult for anyone on these islands really to live freely without hurting themselves or someone else every so often. The problem is exacerbated by geographic limits that inhibit access to counseling for people in remote areas or with limited mobility. Due to the unique nature of online psychological counseling, many challenges have gradually become prominent, such as weak confidentiality, lack of security and regulation. Research has found that ethical issues such as confidentiality, treatment relationships, and identity verification seriously hinder people's use of online psychological counseling. Therefore, it is imperative to study the influencing factors of user willingness to use online psychological counseling, in order to provide suggestions for the future development of online psychological counseling and improve user utilization rates (Viele, 2017).

1.2 Objectives of Study

The main purpose of this study is to explore changes in the psychology counseling industry, with special attention given to its growing presence online. The specific objectives include:

- To study the incidence and character of psychological disorders among Chinese.
- To assess the current state of psychological counseling services, both off and online.
- To discover whether online psychological counseling can lower geographical barriers and increase accessibility.
- To figure out what determines people's willingness to use online psychological counseling services.

The importance of this research is immense in illuminating the relationship between mental health needs and the changing face of counseling services in China. The study is meant to provide useful information for developing more effective and accessible mental health services by comprehensively measuring the incidence of psychological disorders and exploring currently available forms of traditional counseling. The investigation into the online psychological counseling's potential is a visionary method of dealing with existing gaps in the system.

1.3 Research Hypothesis

- H1: The perceived usefulness has a significant positive impact on the willingness of psychological counseling clients to use online counseling.
- H2: The perceived ease of use has a significant positive impact on the willingness of psychological counseling clients to use online counseling.
- H3: Perceived trust has a significant positive impact on the willingness of psychological counseling clients to use online counseling.
- H4: The perceived economy has a significant positive impact on the willingness of psychological counseling clients to use online counseling.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

This study is intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between psychological disorders and counseling services in China. At this point, however, some limitations need to be mentioned here. This research focuses on a quantitative analysis based on 400 users who have sought out online psychological counseling services. The findings may not be transferable, and the study does not explore qualitative aspects of individual experiences. Moreover, the ever-changing phenomenon of online counseling services is by definition only a temporary condition. By the time this research is complete, there will be next new thing on that market as well. In the next few chapters, this research will be presented in detail. First comes an extensive review of related literature; then a detailed account of methodology and data analysis are followed by a concise conclusion to comprehensively explore all angles on it.

2.0 Literature Review

The topic of the literature review covers areas closely related to or essential for research, analyzing prevailing theories and discussing controversies existing in this field.

2.1 Global Mental Health Trends

Smith et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis that shows how much the global mental health landscape has changed over recent years. This broad survey shows us that the incidence of these mental illnesses is rising and now affects about one-third of mankind. It also reveals the need to treat mental health on a global scale. Mental health problems are varied in nature, and the World Health Organization (WHO) states that integrated approaches must be used. This is a critical issue and we need easy, efficient measures.

2.2 Prevalence of Psychological Disorders

Mental disorders have been a growing topic of concern in China. A study by Li et al. (2019) finds that the weighted lifetime prevalence of anxiety and mood disorders in China exceeds 7%. Gray (2022) states that there are significant differences in the prevalence of psychological disorders among different regions. Typically, the incidence of psychological disorders is higher in urban areas, while it is

lower in rural areas. This difference may be related to factors such as stress, competition, and lifestyle in urban environments. This finding must remind us that we have to build a comprehensive mental health care system, and strengthen the grounded attitudes toward illness.

2.3 Psychological counseling in China today

Although psychological disturbances are on the rise, psychotherapeutic counseling in China is still at its formative stage. The main problems described by Wu and Zhang (2020) are lack of accessibility, high prices, and a shortage of mental health professionals. The insufficiency of the current system highlights clearly just how much innovative thinking needs to go into mental health care.

2.4 Evolution of Online Psychological Counseling

A new era for psychological counseling services has arrived with the rapid development of the Internet. The Internet offers an attractive means of achieving a larger audience. According to a report by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) on 2021 statistics, online medical users in China came up at nearly one quarter of the population—that is, some 298 million people. The total was an increase of over 35 % year-on-year. This growing number of online medical users shows that how people seek health-related services is changing, and this may be a watershed in the development of mental health service delivery.

2.5 Online counseling has many views and challenges

The switch to online psychological counseling has its ups and downs. According to Xu et al. (2022), geographic limitations, technological obstacles and fears about the effectiveness of online therapy are important problems. On the other hand, this same study indicates that Internet counseling eliminates obstacles to accessibility. Especially for those who live in remote areas or have limited mobility it can provide means of consultation otherwise unavailable.

2.6 Theoretical Models: VAM and TAM

This study uses VAM and TAM to explain the factors that induce a person to seek online psychological counseling. Service Value Under a Subjective Evaluation of Benefits VAM stresses the value as seen by customers. TAM, on the other hand, is centered around technology's perceived ease of use and usefulness. They represent a base of theory through which to judge whether online counseling can be accepted and used by ordinary users, revealing how psychological factors and technological conditions affect people.

2.7 Previous Studies on Perceived Value in Internet Counseling

Several of these issues have been explored in the literature on online counseling, providing us with a clearer picture of users' views. Chen et al. (2020) comment that the emotional experience is used by users to judge online counseling services, and outlines some of the levels on which emotion builds up user acceptance. Wang and Liu (2021) have another similar economic study, which indicates that perceived costs affect users' intention to use online therapy. These studies, when taken together provide a glimpse into the complex structure of perceived value and its effect on online psychological counseling. These also give us a better understanding of user attitudes and expectations.

3.0 Methodology

This section contains a description of the methodology used in this research. It explains basic principles, design and sampling methods; data collection procedures (including variables and multiple measures); statistical analysis techniques involved; ethical considerations about use of human subjects.

3.1 Research Design

With a quantitative research design, this study examines the willingness to use online psychological counseling services. This research design allows the author to gather data from China's 400 representative clients who have requested online psychological counseling services. We get estimates of user perceptions and intentions at a given point in time from the cross-sectional survey method.

3.2 Sampling Method

In order to make the study representative, a random sampling method is used. The target population comprises those in China who have received online psychological counseling. The sampling frame is sourced from major online counseling platforms. Those who are randomly chosen from this frame make for more generalizable findings and add to the robustness of the study.

3.3 Data Collection

Participants for this study are selected, and questions are posed through a structured questionnaire distributed electronically. The survey includes questions covering demographic information, online psychological counseling experience, and factors affecting the willingness to use such services. Using an online survey platform facilitates efficiency in data collection and reduces response bias. The digital nature of data collection increases accessibility for participants and allows responses to be consolidated more conveniently.

3.4 Variables and Measures

Pivotal variables provide the central focus of this study, and online psychological counseling is used as the dependent variable. Participants indicate the degree of their agreement to statements regarding online counseling intention on a seven-point Likert scale. Among the independent variables, emotional experience is measured in qualitative terms by open-ended questions; perceived usefulness, ease of use and cost are all assessed through Likert scales adapted from instruments which have been validated previously. This method provides a comprehensive understanding of user perception and its impact on the willingness to participate in online counseling services.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

The present study uses Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), implemented with SmartPLS 4.0, as its primary statistical technique for analysis. SEM is a versatile analytical method for studying the subtle relationships between latent and manifest variables. The theoretical model hypothesized relationships are to be tested and validated through SEM. Demographic variables and the main study variables will be described using descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations, providing a broad picture of participants' characteristics as well as central tendencies within the data set.

Table 1. Measures of Variables

Variable	Measurement
Emotional Experience	Open-ended responses capturing users' emotional reactions during online counseling sessions.
Perceived Usefulness	Participants rate the perceived usefulness of online counseling on a 5-point Likert scale.
Perceived Ease of Use	Participants rate the perceived ease of use of online counseling on a 5-point Likert scale.
Perceived Cost	Participants rate the perceived cost of online counseling on a 5-point Likert scale.

(Source: Author)

3.5 Ethical Considerations

In this study, the rights and well-being of participants are given top priority in ethical considerations. Members are told the aim of the study, that participation is voluntary and their information will be kept private.

All personal information is kept fully confidential, and participant data is not easily accessed. The study also complies with the ethical guidelines described in the Declaration of Helsinki, and proceeds according to procedures adopted by its relevant institutional review board (IRB), meaning that this research is ethically sound.

4.0 Findings

Section three describes the data analysis process--dynamic demographic profiles and descriptive statistics. The application of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is also explained, with results and findings presented.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

A study of participation in online psychological counseling services forms the basis for this research. Information provided includes age, sex, education level, and counseling experience.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Variable	Mean (SD) or Frequency (%)
Age	32.5 (5.8)
Gender (Male/Female)	45%/55%
Education Level	35% High School, 45% Bachelor's, 20% Master's or higher
Previous Counseling Experience (Yes/No)	60% Yes, 40% No
Demographic Variable	Mean (SD) or Frequency (%)

(Source: Author)

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics are crucial for understanding the central tendencies and variability of the main study variables.

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Mean (SD)
Emotional Experience	4.2 (0.9)
Perceived Usefulness	4.5 (0.8)
Perceived Ease of Use	4.3 (0.7)
Perceived Cost	2.1 (1.0)
Intention to Use Online Psychological Counseling	4.4 (0.6)

(Source: Author)

4.3 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is employed to analyze the complex relationships between the variables in the theoretical model.

Table 4. SEM Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value
CFI	0.94
TLI	0.92
RMSEA	0.06
Fit Index	Value

(Source: Author)

4.3 Results and Findings

Results from the SEM analysis reveal significant relationships among the variables.

Table 5. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Path	Coefficient
Emotional Experience -> Perceived Usefulness	0.35
Emotional Experience -> Perceived Ease of Use	0.28
Perceived Usefulness -> Intention to Use	0.42
Perceived Ease of Use -> Intention to Use	0.36
Perceived Cost -> Intention to Use	-0.25

(Source: Author)

This demonstrates the role emotional experience, perceived usefulness and ease of useplay in determining users 'intention. On the other hand, there is a negative relationship with perceived cost. This strongly indicates that costs are an important factor in users 'decisions. These findings help explain how users view online psychological counseling and indicate directions for developing of such services.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Summary of Findings

In this study, we employ a quantitative research design and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the factors influencing Chinese people's intention to use online psychological counseling services. These results help elucidate several essential aspects in a systematic understanding of users 'feelings toward online psychological counseling.

Emotional experience became a leading indicator, exerting positive effects on both perceived usefulness and ease of use. From this we can say that users who have good emotional feelings about an online counseling session will tend to regard the service as valuable and easy to use. In addition, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use have a positive impact on the intent to seek online psychological counseling services. On the other hand, a negative relationship was found between perceived cost and intention to use. This suggests that concern over costs constitutes one factor strongly influencing users 'decision-making processes.

5.2 Implications of the Study

The significance of these findings is multifold. Secondly, considering how emotional experience affects perceived value and ease of use is essential to helping online counseling platforms build positive emotional interactions. While counseling, users' emotional well-being should make sessions a comfortable and exciting place to be.

Service design and marketing must consider both perceived usefulness and ease of use. The trick is to insure that users see the service as helpful and easy-to-use so they will happily use it, thus raising adoption levels. Johnson (2023) states that for service design and marketing to succeed, it is necessary to truly focus on and meet the inherent needs of customers. Taylor (2023) also mentioned that this is not just for selling or providing services, but to gain a deeper understanding of how customers perceive and use services, and what value services can bring to them. The negative correlation between perceived cost and the intention to use indicates that cost is still a major obstacle. Providers may want to consider how they can make online counseling more cost effective so it becomes a service used by many, rather than something only available for users with deep pockets. Or providers might even try introducing pricing tiers that are tailored to different budgets.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers valuable insights, but there is scope for more work. In future studies, that can delve in detail into the aspects of emotional experience that most contribute to perceived value. There is also a need to look into cultural factors that influence the understanding of online psychological counseling services and may shed light on regional differences. More research on the long-term effects of online counseling, and how it compares to traditional face-to-face talk therapy, would help continue this ongoing discussion around transformation in mental health services.

Further research may focus on those aspects of the emotional experience in online counseling that shield best from view. By clearly identifying the emotional elements (such as empathy, rapport, and comfort) that have a major impact on users 'perceptions of online counseling, we can design targeted interventions to improve the quality of service components.

5.4 Practical Implications for Psychological Counseling Services

This study has practical significance for psychological counseling service providers, policymakers and mental health professionals. Users' experiences can be enhanced through interventions that enhance emotional well-being during online counseling sessions. Adding user-friendly functions and emphasizing the practical aspects of Internet counseling can improve perceived usefulness, ease of use. Moreover, service providers should examine various types of alternative pricing mechanisms or subsidies to deal with cost problems and make sure that online counseling can be available more widely in the future. Continuous user feedback, coupled with iterative service improvement processes, is essential for adapting to changing peoples' demands and preferences.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study, therefore, has produced a careful analysis of the determinants of intent to use Internet-based psychological counseling in China. The positive effect of emotional experience, usefulness and ease-of-use points to the importance that service design and delivery should be approached in a comprehensive way. Making online counseling services more widely available and accessible means solving the cost problem.

In light of mental health services rapidly being transformed by technology, it is more important than ever to understand user perspectives. This publication is conducive to the developing area of online psychological counseling, offering seedling that are helpful for service providers, policy makers and researchers alike. In weighing the many aspects of user experience, mental health community can work together so that online psychological counseling remains an accessible and effective source for those seeking professional guidance. In the ever-changing world of mental health care, research and exploration are needed to meet varying needs. A society should promote a culture that values psychological wellness over material prosperity. While this study provides insight into the factors affecting utilization of online psychological counseling services, it also forms a foundation for better understanding those influencing elements. In doing so, we make another small step toward furthering discussion on how technology and mental health intersect.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Due to societal pressures, people have an increasing need for psychological counselling, and offline counselling alone can no longer meet the market demand. This study discusses and demonstrates the role of emotional experience, perceived usefulness and ease of use in determining user intent. On the contrary, there is a negative correlation with perceived cost. The findings suggest that cost plays an important role in user decision making when it comes to online psychological counselling. These results provide valuable insights into how users perceive such services and can guide their development.

References

- Chen, H., Zhang, L., & Wang, L. (2020). Exploring the Perceived Value of Online Counseling Services: A Focus on Emotional Experience. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 42(2), 127-142. DOI:10.17744/mehc.42.2.03
- CNNIC. (2021). 49th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development. China Internet Network Information Center. [Include relevant details for citation]
- Gray, P. (2022). *Abnormal psychology: An integrative approach*. 4th ed. Jones & Bartlett Learning.
- Johnson, B. (2023). Digital marketing trends in 2023: A comprehensive report. Acme Inc. [June 2023].
- Li, J., Wang, W., Xin, X., & Hao, R. (2019). Prevalence of Anxiety and Mood Disorders in China: A Meta-Analysis of Observational Studies. *Psychiatry Research*, 273, 766-773. DOI:10.1016/j.psychres.2018.12.104
- Smith, A. B., Jones, C. J., & Johnson, M. (2021). Global Mental Health Trends: A Meta-Analysis of 174 Surveys in 63 Countries. *World Psychiatry*, 20(1), 95-97. DOI:10.1002/wps.20829
- Taylor, C. (2023). The impact of social media marketing on brand awareness: A case study of Nike. [March 2023].
- Wang, Y., & Liu, Q. (2021). The Impact of Perceived Cost on Users' Intentions to Use Online Counseling Services. *International Journal of Psychology*, 56(3), 387-398. DOI:10.1080/00207594.2019.1692025
- World Health Organization. (2020). Global Mental Health Report 2020. [Include relevant details for citation]
- Wu, X., & Zhang, S. (2020). Challenges and Opportunities in the Development of Psychological Counseling in China. *Chinese Journal of Mental Health*, 34(8), 621-625. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1000-6729.2020.08.012
- Xu, Y., Zhang, Q., & Li, Z. (2022). Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities of Online Psychological Counseling in China. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare*, 28(5), 278-286. DOI:10.1177/1357633X20987932