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ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FREE ONLINE COUNSELING SERVICES IN ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT
The rising incidence of mental health problems among adolescents calls for counseling services that are accessible, timely, and affordable. This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of free counseling services provided through online platforms in addressing mental health problems among adolescents. It employs a qualitative approach, drawing on interviews with adolescent users of counseling services across various online platforms and with counselors. The findings indicate, first, that free online counseling is effective as an initial intervention for mild to moderate mental health problems among adolescents, particularly in providing emotional support and preventing crises. Second, most adolescents who attended online counseling sessions reported an improved ability to recognize emotions and manage stress. However, counselors also identified limitations in establishing deeper therapeutic relationships because of time constraints and reduced nonverbal interaction. Third, limited face-to-face interaction and inconsistent follow-up support remain challenges to achieving optimal outcomes.
Keywords: Free Online Counseling, Mental Health Problems, Adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

Online counseling has become increasingly prominent in mental health care. Advances in information technology make psychological support accessible without requiring individuals to leave their homes (Ursula, 2021). Anxiety, depression, and stress are growing mental health concerns. Life pressures, social change, and economic uncertainty place additional burdens on psychological well-being. Counseling services are therefore increasingly important for helping individuals address these challenges and strengthen their psychological resilience (Diniaty, 2013; Handika & Herdi, 2021).

Several platforms offer free online counseling, including ipkindonesia.or.id, himpsi.or.id, praktekpsikolog.com, yayasanpulih.org, pijarpsikologi.org, berbagicerita.id, temanbincang.id, and bagikata.com. Communication between clients and counselors or therapists varies, ranging from email and text chat to telephone calls and live audio or video sessions. Free online counseling makes services accessible to individuals who face difficulties obtaining in-person assistance, particularly those in remote areas or without easy access to mental health professionals. Providing counseling free of charge may also reduce the stigma surrounding psychological help-seeking. Many people experiencing mental health problems remain reluctant to seek help because they fear rejection or judgment (Munawaroh et al., 2021).

Although free online counseling promises greater inclusivity, several challenges remain. User experiences, resource availability, and service effectiveness require further investigation. Security and privacy are major concerns: clients' personal information may be hacked or misused, potentially undermining the integrity of mental health services (Pohan, 2022). Online counseling may also make it difficult to establish a strong therapeutic relationship between therapist and client. Counselors' limited ability to convey empathy directly can hamper effectiveness. Electronic communication may diminish important nonverbal dimensions of conventional counseling (Munawaroh et al., 2021).

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of users' experiences and perceptions of free online counseling services. A case study design is appropriate because it provides a detailed account of the context, processes, and outcomes of counseling delivered through free online platforms. According to Bogdan and Taylor (as cited in Salim and Syahrum, 2012), qualitative research generates descriptive data in the form of observable speech, behavior, and written or spoken words. This study therefore seeks to describe particular events in detail. Direct field-based investigation was conducted to obtain concrete information about the implementation of online counseling in addressing users' problems.

Data trustworthiness was addressed through triangulation by comparing interview findings with content analysis and contrasting the perspectives of different participants. Peer debriefing and member checking were employed to support the accuracy and appropriate interpretation of the data (Lloyd et al., 2024). The design seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness, barriers, and potential solutions associated with counseling delivered through free online platforms. Combining qualitative inquiry with a case study approach is expected to provide valuable insights for the development and improvement of community mental health services.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings and Discussion

1. Effectiveness of Online Counseling Services

A service can be considered effective when its outcomes correspond to its stated objectives. The main objectives of Pijarpsikologi.org are to expand access to psychological services and reduce users' emotional burdens. The findings suggest that most users experienced improvements in psychological well-being, indicating a high degree of perceived effectiveness. This assessment can be understood through theories of service effectiveness, counseling communication, and technology-based psychological interventions. Generally, effectiveness refers to the extent to which a program achieves its predetermined goals (Steers, 1985). In online counseling, it denotes the ability to improve psychological well-being, reduce emotional distress, or strengthen coping skills through digital communication.

According to Gibson and Mitchell (2011), effective counseling requires clearly defined goals, counselor reliability, an empathic counseling relationship, and methods suited to clients' needs. When counseling moves online, its effectiveness also depends on counselors' ability to establish a therapeutic relationship without direct face-to-face contact. This is consistent with Bordin's (1979) working alliance theory, which identifies the quality of the counselor–client alliance as a major determinant of counseling outcomes in both in-person and online settings.

Accessibility is a crucial component of effectiveness in free online counseling. Andersen's (1995) health service utilization framework suggests that services become more effective when users can access them easily in economic, geographic, and psychological terms. Free services enable people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to obtain psychological support without financial barriers, thereby extending the reach of community mental health interventions.

Theories of technology-based psychological intervention (Barak et al., 2008) further indicate that online counseling effectiveness is influenced by data security, the quality of digital communication, and users' trust in online media. Secure platforms, comfortable communication channels, and user-friendly interfaces can enhance perceived effectiveness by helping clients feel protected and emotionally supported.

The theoretical analysis suggests that the effectiveness of free online counseling is determined not only by clients' eventual behavioral changes but also by the quality of counselor–client interactions, accessibility, technological conditions, and users' perceptions of the service. Together, these perspectives explain how online services may offer an effective alternative source of psychological support, especially for young people and individuals with limited resources.

Improvements in emotion regulation also reflect the usefulness of the online counseling approaches used by these platforms. Counselors often guide adolescent clients through simple techniques, such as grounding, breathing exercises, and structured reflection, which can be practiced digitally. These interventions appear to help adolescents alleviate short-term emotional distress while gradually developing independent self-management skills.

2. Connections with Humanistic Counseling Theory

The counseling model emphasizes empathy, unconditional acceptance, and counselor genuineness. This approach is particularly suitable for adolescents who need a safe space for self-expression. Free online counseling is closely connected to humanistic counseling theory, especially in its emphasis on human dignity, respect for individual

uniqueness, and the optimal development of personal potential (Anggraini, Arsini, & Dazura, 2023).

Humanistic counseling theory is grounded in the view that individuals are whole, autonomous beings capable of taking responsibility for their lives. One of its leading figures, Carl Rogers (2000), emphasized self-actualization, genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard in counseling. An effective therapeutic relationship should be built on warmth, empathy, and congruence, enabling clients to feel safe enough to explore and understand themselves.

Free online counseling provides open and inclusive access without financial obstacles or the stigma associated with seeking help, in keeping with humanistic respect for individual dignity. Counselors can still communicate warmth and empathy through online channels. Flexibility in choosing when and where counseling occurs supports client autonomy and comfort, reinforcing the process of self-actualization central to humanistic theory (Bohari & Watson, 2011).

In online counseling, attending skills and empathic communication can foster an emotional connection between counselor and client and help establish a healthy, enduring relationship (Kiling-Bunga, 2017). Research indicates that existential-humanistic principles, including unconditional acceptance, self-reflection, and respect for clients' feelings, can help individuals manage anxiety, build self-esteem, and make better decisions.

a. Psychological Comfort and Unconditional Positive Regard

One of the most prominent findings concerning free online counseling is the high level of psychological comfort experienced by users. This comfort enables adolescents to disclose emotional experiences and personal difficulties. It arises not only from easy access and a familiar environment but, more fundamentally, from feeling accepted by counselors without judgment—a central humanistic principle known as unconditional positive regard.

Most participants reported feeling free from fear of being judged or criticized during online sessions. They felt safe because counselors fully accepted their emotions, thoughts, and past mistakes, including experiences they had previously struggled to share with others. In humanistic counseling, such acceptance creates the foundation for more open self-exploration. Warm, nonjudgmental counselors who listen sincerely help establish a psychologically safe space.

Several participants described counselors as people who “accepted whatever was shared without assigning blame” and “provided space to talk without pressure.” For adolescents navigating a sensitive stage of identity development, having someone who accepts them as they are—even through a digital medium—offers meaningful emotional support. It helps them feel valued and confident enough to share personal experiences.

These findings are consistent with Rogers' theory that psychological growth requires a therapeutic environment characterized by (a) unconditional positive regard, (b) empathic understanding, and (c) counselor congruence or genuineness. In this study, unconditional acceptance was the element participants experienced most directly. They felt that counselors understood their perspectives without passing moral judgment, allowing them to explore deeper feelings freely. This sense of safety facilitated a strong therapeutic alliance despite the absence of face-to-face contact.

Psychological comfort and unconditional positive regard are therefore fundamental to the success of free online counseling. A safe emotional environment enables adolescents to develop trust, disclose concerns, and engage in counseling that, in certain

circumstances, may be comparable to or even more comfortable than face-to-face services.

b. Counselor Empathy as the Foundation of the Therapeutic Relationship

Counselor empathy emerged as a key contributor to successful free online counseling. Within humanistic counseling, empathy extends beyond understanding a client's complaints: it involves genuinely attempting to experience the client's emotional world from their own perspective. The findings show that adolescents perceived this empathy through the interactions counselors established during online sessions.

Participants described counselors as attentive listeners who responded warmly and offered feedback demonstrating an understanding of their feelings. Although communication took place through chat or video calls, adolescents still experienced a meaningful sense of the counselor's emotional presence. This strengthened the therapeutic relationship and created a feeling of being accompanied even without physical contact.

Several participants said counselors could "validate feelings," "understand without lengthy explanations," and "respond in a reassuring way." Such validation helped adolescents recognize that their emotions were neither wrong nor excessive. Counselors' sensitive, gentle, and nonjudgmental language further strengthened trust and openness, two important components of humanistic counseling.

Interviews with counselors also indicated that they deliberately cultivated empathy in each session using reflective listening, paraphrasing, and empathic responses. Although digital media limit the observation of nonverbal expressions, counselors compensated by attending to vocal tone, speaking pace, typing patterns, and clients' word choices. Empathy could thus remain strongly present despite communication through a screen.

From the perspective of Carl Rogers' humanistic counseling theory, empathy is one of the three principal foundations of a therapeutic relationship, alongside unconditional positive regard and counselor congruence (Sholihah et al., 2025). Empathy allows clients to feel "deeply understood," opening a path toward psychological healing (Hidayat & Santosa, 2024). The present findings indicate that this mechanism can also operate effectively in free online counseling without physical presence.

Empathy also appeared in counselors' ability to help clients name emotions they found difficult to identify. Some adolescents reported that counselors recognized feelings they had not explicitly expressed. This ability created a sense of being known and understood, which is particularly important during adolescence, a developmental period often marked by emotional uncertainty.

c. Enhanced Self-Awareness and Self-Actualization

Improved self-awareness was a significant outcome among adolescents receiving free online counseling. In humanistic counseling, self-awareness refers to the ability to understand one's feelings, needs, values, and patterns of thought with greater honesty and objectivity. The findings indicate that online sessions encouraged adolescents to see themselves more clearly, identify sources of emotional pressure, and understand their own responses.

Some participants reported that, before counseling, they experienced anxiety or distress without understanding its causes. After several sessions, they began identifying specific emotional triggers, including academic demands, friendship dynamics, and personal insecurity. Recognizing these triggers is central to the development of self-awareness, through which adolescents learn to acknowledge their emotional experiences more deeply.

Counselors played an important role by using reflective questions, paraphrasing, and experiential exploration to help adolescents examine deeper layers of emotion. Many began recognizing patterns such as avoidance, fear of rejection, or people-pleasing tendencies. These insights were not always easy for them to develop independently without a counselor's assistance.

Consistent with Rogers' theory, greater self-awareness is an initial step toward self-acceptance and, ultimately, self-actualization. In this study, self-actualization does not imply the complete realization of one's highest potential; rather, it denotes adolescents' growing tendency to act authentically, make decisions consistent with personal values, and express their needs without fear of judgment.

Several participants demonstrated aspects of this development by setting boundaries in friendships, managing study time more effectively, or taking small steps to improve emotional well-being. Greater self-awareness helped them recognize their genuine needs instead of merely responding to pressure from their surroundings.

Deep reflection remained possible even when counseling took place online. The privacy of the setting allowed users to engage in introspection more freely without feeling directly observed. Chat and digital journaling also helped adolescents articulate their thoughts in writing, often providing an effective means of reflection for this age group.

Greater self-awareness and an emerging desire for self-actualization suggest that free online counseling can have meaningful positive psychological effects. Although it is delivered remotely and without charge, the quality of the counseling relationship and process can still support significant personal development among adolescents.

d. Client Autonomy in Expressing Problems

Client autonomy in expressing problems was another important finding. In humanistic counseling, autonomy refers to an individual's freedom to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences without coercion or controlling direction from the counselor. Humanistic counseling holds that meaningful psychological change is possible when clients have space to be themselves and independently determine the direction of their exploration.

The study found that free online counseling provided adolescents with considerable freedom of expression. Participants noted that counselors did not rigidly direct their accounts but allowed them to present problems in their preferred sequence, depth, and focus. This approach increased comfort by removing pressure to discuss matters before they were ready.

Participants also felt that online formats, whether chat or video calls, gave them greater control over the counseling process. They could pause to think, choose their words carefully, or withhold sensitive details until they felt prepared to discuss them. This autonomy strengthened emotional safety and allowed adolescents to construct personal narratives without feeling forced.

Interviewed counselors confirmed that they sought to maintain a nondirective approach consistent with humanistic principles. Rather than giving instructions or immediate solutions, they used open-ended questions, reflection, and emotional validation. Their goal was to help adolescents discover answers grounded in their own capacities and self-understanding, consistent with Rogers' belief that individuals have an inherent capacity for growth when offered an appropriate environment.

Client autonomy was also evident in participants' choice of topics for each session. Counselors might offer gentle guidance, but clients retained the final decision. Some participants said they felt “freer to share” because they were not required to follow a set

agenda. This differed from their experiences in families or offline environments, where norms, expectations, and social pressures often restricted expression.

Autonomy is particularly important during adolescence because identity exploration and the desire to be recognized as an independent person characterize this developmental stage. Free online counseling appears to support this process by offering a flexible, nonintimidating space for expression with relatively little social pressure.

e. Therapeutic Relationships in Online Settings

The therapeutic alliance is central to successful counseling, whether in person or through digital media. Humanistic counseling regards the quality of the counselor–client relationship as especially important, sometimes more important than particular techniques. This study found that a strong and meaningful therapeutic relationship could still develop between counselors and adolescents online.

Participants reported feeling emotionally close to their counselors despite the lack of direct physical interaction. This closeness arose from counselors' empathy, provision of safe spaces, and genuine attention throughout sessions. The digital medium did not necessarily undermine the relationship; some adolescents found it easier to disclose concerns through a screen or chat without fear of judgment.

Some participants felt “understood” and “supported” and experienced counselors as emotionally present despite their physical absence. These experiences reflect Rogers' concept of empathic understanding: the counselor's ability to enter the client's subjective world and respond in a reassuring and validating manner.

Counselors built therapeutic relationships through warm language, attention to conversational details, and consistent feedback. In digital settings, counselors must compensate for missing nonverbal cues such as posture and facial expressions. They did so by modulating vocal intonation during video calls, responding promptly to messages, and interpreting clients' writing patterns during chat sessions.

Some counselors emphasized that establishing an online therapeutic alliance requires additional creativity and sensitivity. They used open-ended questions, reflection, and more explicit emotional validation to ensure clients felt seen and heard. This approach corresponds to the concept of presence in online counseling: being emotionally and cognitively available despite not sharing the same physical space.

Online therapeutic relationships may offer distinct benefits. Adolescents can attend sessions in familiar spaces, such as their bedrooms, which may help them feel safer and more relaxed. This comfort can deepen conversations and reduce psychological barriers associated with in-person services. Such openness helps explain how therapeutic relationships can develop successfully online.

Free online counseling can therefore support an effective therapeutic relationship. Through empathy, consistency, and unconditional positive regard, counselors establish emotional closeness with adolescents. This relationship enhances comfort and provides a foundation for psychological change throughout counseling.

3. Limitations and Areas for Development

Online counseling has shown considerable effectiveness in addressing mild psychological problems among adolescents, including anxiety, stress, and mild depression, because it is accessible, flexible, and more comfortable for some young people who hesitate to meet counselors in person (Widianti et al., 2021). Its effectiveness is nevertheless limited in cases of serious mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression accompanied by suicide risk. In such cases, face-to-face

clinical assessment and care are generally prioritized to enable direct monitoring and support.

Online counseling can improve adolescent mental health by encouraging openness and providing flexible access across times and locations. Adolescents with mild problems may find the relatively anonymous online setting helpful because it allows them to discuss difficulties without embarrassment or social stigma. Studies have reported that digital counseling can facilitate counseling processes and strong counselor–client relationships in mild to moderate cases (Sosialita, 2023).

Severe depression, psychotic disorders, bipolar disorder, and suicidal thoughts require clinical assessment, ongoing treatment, and, where appropriate, pharmacotherapy or family interventions. Free online counseling often serves only as an initial or supplementary intervention rather than the primary treatment for severe conditions. In-person care facilitates more accurate risk assessment, immediate intervention when necessary, and multidisciplinary coordination (Widianti et al., 2021). Adolescent mental health services therefore need clear referral pathways so that serious cases can be promptly directed to appropriate in-person facilities or specialists (Eka et al., 2024).

Further interventions may include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), family-focused therapy for adolescents (FFT-A), pharmacotherapy, or hospitalization, depending on severity (Widyasih, 2020). Online counseling is valuable for improving access and providing initial assistance for mild adolescent mental health problems, but integration with in-person services and referrals remains essential for severe conditions.

a. Technical Limitations: Signal Quality and Internet Connectivity

Technical limitations, particularly unreliable signals and internet connections, are major barriers to the effectiveness of free online counseling. Almost all participants reported that unstable internet access could disrupt video, audio, and chat sessions. Such interruptions affect conversational flow and may reduce the depth of counseling because counselors and clients must repeat explanations or postpone important discussions when connections fail.

Some participants explained that losing their connection during a conversation caused them to lose focus, feel awkward, or lose emotional momentum while disclosing sensitive matters. These unwanted interruptions can hinder the development of a stable therapeutic alliance. Adolescents in emotionally vulnerable states may also become distressed by technical disruptions, interrupting ongoing efforts to regulate their emotions.

From counselors' perspectives, technical difficulties make it harder to perceive clients' emotional nuances. Poor video and audio quality reduce their ability to observe facial expressions, changes in vocal tone, and signs of discomfort that may be important during counseling. In chat sessions, slow connections delay replies and disrupt the conversational rhythm necessary for a sense of therapeutic presence.

These problems were more common among participants living in areas with inadequate internet infrastructure or relying on unstable mobile data. The digital divide therefore remains an important determinant of the effectiveness of free online counseling. Although platforms provide services without charging users, the quality of counseling still depends on the technology available to clients.

The findings underscore that technical limitations are not merely operational difficulties but can directly influence counseling outcomes. Unstable connectivity makes sessions less effective, and some adolescents reported having to reschedule appointments to preserve interaction quality. Repeated disruptions also frustrated some clients and made it difficult to attend subsequent sessions consistently.

Signal and connectivity problems are consequently important considerations in developing free online counseling services. Although such disruptions may be beyond the direct control of counselors or platforms, providers can mitigate their impact through low-data options, troubleshooting guidance, and flexible communication methods.

b. Limited Counseling Session Duration

Limited session duration emerged as another major challenge reported by many participants and counselors. Sessions generally lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, a period regarded as adequate for initial intervention but often insufficient for exploring problems in depth, especially when adolescents face complex emotional burdens or require more time for reflection.

Some participants felt that sessions "passed too quickly," particularly when they reached important points in narrating experiences or exploring feelings. They sometimes perceived counseling as ending before achieving sufficient understanding or emotional relief. This sense of incompleteness led some adolescents to seek additional sessions, although not everyone could arrange them consistently.

For adolescents who need more time to open up, brief sessions pose a significant barrier. Much of the initial meeting may be spent establishing safety and trust, leaving less time for deeper exploration. Counseling must then continue in subsequent sessions, which may not be immediately available because demand for free services is high.

Counselors also found time restrictions challenging when attempting to manage the counseling process comprehensively. Within a limited session, they had to guide discussions efficiently, validate clients' feelings, provide suitable interventions, and prepare clients to end without emotional disruption. This became particularly difficult when problems required extensive clarification or reflection.

Short sessions may also affect the therapeutic alliance. Strong relationships develop through gradual trust-building, whereas brief contact may limit emotional closeness. Some adolescents reported feeling "not ready to end the session" when time ran out, making the transition toward closure uncomfortable.

These findings indicate that, despite increasing access, the limited duration of free online counseling sessions can reduce effectiveness in some circumstances. The problem extends beyond scheduling to the depth of psychological exploration and clients' emotional stability afterward. Providers should consider faster follow-up appointments, flexible extensions where feasible, and supplementary materials that enable clients to continue reflecting independently after sessions.

c. Challenges in Interpreting Nonverbal Communication

A significant limitation of free online counseling is counselors' reduced ability to observe clients' nonverbal language. Facial expressions, gestures, posture, eye contact, and physiological changes are important components of therapeutic communication. During in-person counseling, these cues help counselors assess clients' emotional states even when feelings are not stated explicitly.

Digital media do not always convey these cues effectively. During video calls, camera quality, lighting, and internet connectivity influence how clearly facial expressions and movements can be perceived. In text-based sessions, the challenge becomes more pronounced because counselors must infer emotional states primarily from word choice, typing pace, and sentence structure.

Several interviewed counselors acknowledged difficulties judging the intensity of adolescents' feelings in chat sessions. Young clients sometimes described their emotions briefly or in a flat tone despite experiencing substantial distress. Conversely, clients who

appeared verbally composed could be experiencing severe anxiety that would be difficult to identify without direct observation.

Counselors also noted that nonverbal signs such as tears, bodily tension, and changes in voice, which often inform psychological assessment, were not always adequately visible. This limitation may affect judgments about the severity of clients' problems, especially in cases involving self-harm risk or indicators of severe depression.

Participants likewise acknowledged that digital communication sometimes prevented them from fully conveying their feelings. Some felt that words alone could not capture their emotional distress and hoped counselors could better "read" their condition. Online platforms cannot always meet this expectation.

Difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues may also influence the therapeutic alliance. In person, a counselor's smile, eye contact, and empathic gestures create a warm, supportive atmosphere. Online, such signals are more restricted, and some clients may initially experience the relationship as less personal.

Counselors attempted to address this problem through more explicit communication. They asked clarifying questions, invited clients to describe their emotional states verbally, and attended to details such as pauses, emoji choices where relevant, and changes in writing patterns. They also emphasized the importance of maintaining a safe space for open emotional expression despite limited nonverbal information.

The reduced availability of nonverbal cues is thus an inherent challenge of online counseling, affecting assessment, empathic understanding, and therapeutic relationship dynamics. Counselor training and the selection of communication channels should account for these limitations and seek to minimize information loss.

d. High Service Demand and Delayed Responses

Long queues and slow counselor responses constitute significant limitations of free online counseling. Demand is often high while the number of available counselors is limited. This situation causes prolonged waiting times and may diminish the quality of adolescents' counseling experiences.

Most participants reported waiting for an appointment. During peak periods, particularly evenings and weekends, delays could be longer. Some received an appointment only several days after registering, which caused frustration because they urgently needed emotional support.

From the counselors' perspective, high demand is a direct consequence of providing a free, accessible service. Counselors may feel pressured to attend to many clients in a limited period, potentially affecting both interaction quality and the emotional energy available for each session. Interviewees identified time management and the distribution of attention as major challenges during demand surges.

Long waits may also disrupt continuity. When clients must wait too long for follow-up sessions, an established therapeutic relationship can lose some of its warmth and connectedness. Clients who feel better after one session may also find it difficult to sustain reflection if the interval before the next appointment is excessive.

Adolescents who are sensitive to rejection or have low self-confidence may interpret delayed replies negatively even when the underlying cause is systemic. Some participants felt "not prioritized" or worried that their counselor was uninterested in their story. Thus, delayed responses are not solely a technical matter; they can also shape clients' perceptions and the quality of the therapeutic relationship.

Nevertheless, many participants recognized that free services necessarily operate with limited resources. They valued the efforts of counselors and platforms to reach as

many people as possible. Several reported that they still benefited from counseling once a session eventually took place, despite lengthy waits.

e. Opportunities to Develop Interventions for Severe Cases

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4. Social and Psychological Implications

Free online counseling has played an important role in normalizing discussion of mental health among Indonesian adolescents. Accessibility, comfort, and confidentiality help many young people feel safer disclosing mental health concerns (Mansyur et al., 2020). App- and web-based services allow adolescents to seek psychological assistance across locations and times without counseling fees. This approach reduces geographic and economic barriers that previously impeded access to professional support (Sosialita, 2023). The relative anonymity of online counseling may also encourage honest disclosure without fear of stigma from their immediate social environment.

Free online counseling facilitates open dialogue and makes discussion of mental health increasingly commonplace in digital spaces and adolescent communities. Ongoing education through apps and peer support also strengthens mental health literacy and encourages adolescents to discuss mental health beyond counseling sessions (Saputra, 2025). Many adolescents reported being motivated to invite friends and relatives into conversations about mental health after participating in free online counseling programs.

One significant implication is a reduction in stigma and embarrassment associated with psychological help-seeking. Studies and field reports indicate stronger self-acceptance and greater willingness to discuss mental health concerns after adolescents use free online counseling services (Sosialita, 2023). Peer counselor features allow young people to support one another, share experiences, and build positive solidarity. The research data presented here suggest that free online counseling can reduce anxiety and stress and improve adolescent psychological well-being. Such digital interventions may be viewed as comparable to, or at times preferred over, conventional face-to-face counseling, particularly among technology-oriented younger generations.

CONCLUSION

This study of the effectiveness of free online counseling in addressing adolescent mental health problems demonstrates the considerable potential of digital technology as a medium for psychological intervention in response to contemporary psychosocial needs. Platforms providing counseling without fees have broadened access for adolescents, particularly those previously constrained by economic or geographic barriers and mental health stigma. The analysis indicates that these services can provide safe spaces for young people to express feelings, receive emotional support, and obtain professional guidance without fearing judgment from those around them.

Beyond affordability, effectiveness was reflected in greater adolescent awareness of the importance of mental health and increased willingness to seek further assistance. Communication through instant messaging, video calls, and discussion forums facilitates flexible therapeutic relationships suited to young people's digital practices. Although face-to-face interaction retains advantages for conveying empathy and deepening therapeutic relationships, online counseling can still provide meaningful psychological support, especially for prevention and early-stage assistance.

The effectiveness of free online counseling nevertheless faces several challenges. Limited counselor capacity, data privacy risks, and uneven service quality across platforms require attention. Some users noted that online services were occasionally inconsistent because they depended on stable internet connections and the availability of both counselors and clients. Moreover, not all adolescents possess sufficient digital literacy to assess a platform's credibility or the professional qualifications of its counselors.

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