

## **ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF COUNSELING IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

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### **Abstract**

The development of digital technology has led to significant changes in guidance and counseling practices, particularly through the use of online media. Digital counseling offers greater accessibility and flexibility of services; however, it also presents complex ethical challenges. This article aims to analyze ethical challenges in counseling in the digital era and to examine the application of professional ethical principles in technology-based counseling services. The method used is a literature review by analyzing scientific sources, academic journals, books, and professional ethical codes relevant to the topic. The results indicate that the main ethical challenges of digital counseling include risks to confidentiality and data privacy, blurred professional boundaries between counselors and clients, limitations in counselors' technological competence, and ethical dilemmas related to the use of social media and artificial intelligence. The application of professional ethical principles such as confidentiality, integrity, professional responsibility, competence, and client protection is essential to maintain the quality and professionalism of digital counseling services. This article concludes that professional ethics remain relevant and essential in digital counseling, although contextual adaptation, strengthening of digital ethical literacy, and the development of clear operational guidelines are required in line with technological developments.

**Keywords:** counseling ethics, digital counseling, professionalism, privacy

### **Abstrak**

*Perkembangan teknologi digital telah mendorong perubahan signifikan dalam praktik bimbingan dan konseling, khususnya melalui pemanfaatan media daring. Konseling digital menawarkan kemudahan akses dan fleksibilitas layanan, namun secara simultan memunculkan tantangan etika yang kompleks. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tantangan etika konseling di era digital serta mengkaji penerapan prinsip-prinsip etika profesi bimbingan dan konseling dalam konteks layanan berbasis teknologi. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi kepustakaan dengan menelaah berbagai sumber ilmiah berupa artikel jurnal, buku, serta dokumen kode etik profesi yang relevan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa tantangan utama konseling digital meliputi risiko pelanggaran kerahasiaan dan privasi data, kaburnya batas profesional antara konselor dan konseli, keterbatasan kompetensi teknologi konselor, serta dilema etika dalam penggunaan media sosial dan kecerdasan buatan. Penerapan prinsip etika profesi seperti kerahasiaan, integritas, tanggung jawab profesional, kompetensi, dan perlindungan terhadap konseli menjadi kunci dalam menjaga kualitas dan profesionalitas layanan konseling digital. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa etika profesi tetap relevan dan esensial dalam konseling digital, namun memerlukan adaptasi kontekstual, penguatan literasi etika digital, dan*

*pengembangan pedoman operasional yang jelas seiring dengan pesatnya perkembangan teknologi.*

**Kata Kunci:** *etika konseling, konseling digital, profesionalisme, privasi*

## INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in the 21st century has brought very significant changes in various aspects of human life. Digital transformation not only affects the way individuals communicate and access information, but also shapes patterns of social interaction, education systems, and health services, including mental health services. The advancement of information and communication technology is characterized by the increasing use of the internet, smart devices, and various digital platforms that allow interactions to take place quickly, flexibly, and across geographical boundaries. These changes require various professions to adapt, including the guidance and counseling professions, to remain relevant to the needs of modern society.

In the context of guidance and counseling, the development of digital technology has given birth to a new paradigm in the implementation of psychological assistance services. Services that were previously dominated by face-to-face interaction are now starting to shift towards the use of digital media. Digital counseling or online counseling emerged as a form of service innovation that utilizes information and communication technology as the main means of interaction between counselors and counselees. This phenomenon is in line with the view of Barak et al. (2009) who stated that digital technology has expanded the form and reach of psychological interventions through online media.

Digital counseling refers to the process of providing professional assistance by counselors to counselees through technology-based media, such as email, instant messaging applications, video conferencing, telephone, and online counseling platforms. These services provide an alternative to conventional counseling, especially in improving the accessibility of mental health services. A number of international studies have shown that online counseling is effective in reaching individuals who experience geographical limitations, mobility barriers, or social anxiety that prevent them from attending face-to-face counseling (Richards & Viganó, 2013; Andersson et al., 2014). The findings reinforce the position of digital counseling as an essential part of contemporary counseling services.

The urgency of developing digital counseling is increasing in line with changes in people's lifestyles that are increasingly dependent on technology. The internet and digital devices have become an integral part of daily life, including in seeking psychological support. Global situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated the massive adoption of online counseling services. Restrictions on social interaction encourage counselors and psychological service institutions to shift services to online mode in order to maintain the sustainability of services (Ifdil, 2020; Wind et al., 2020). In this context, digital counseling is no longer seen as a temporary solution, but rather as a service model that has long-term potential.

In the post-pandemic era, digital counseling is increasingly integrated into the guidance and counseling service system through a hybrid approach that combines online and face-to-face services. This condition requires counselors to have dual competencies, namely counseling competence and technological competence. Counselors are expected to be able to utilize technology professionally, responsibly, and in accordance with the principles of professional ethics. Without a strong ethical foundation, the use of technology in counseling has the potential to cause new problems.

Although digital counseling offers a variety of advantages, its implementation is inseparable from complex ethical challenges. Digital media has different characteristics from face-to-face interactions, such as the limitations of nonverbal cues, the reliance on technological stability, and the increased risk of data security. In face-to-face counseling, counselors can observe the counselor's facial expressions, body language, and emotional responses firsthand. On the other hand, in digital counseling, these limitations can affect the accuracy of the counselor's understanding of the counselor's condition, potentially giving rise to ethical dilemmas in the professional decision-making process (Zur et al., 2019).

The issue of confidentiality and privacy of counseling data is one of the most crucial ethical challenges in digital counseling. Personal information submitted through online media is at risk of being leaked due to hacking, use of insecure platforms, or substandard data management. Research shows that privacy breaches in digital healthcare can have a serious impact on client trust as well as their psychological well-being (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Anindya et al., 2024). Therefore, the protection of counseling data is an ethical aspect that cannot be ignored in digital counseling practices.

Additionally, the flexibility of digital communication has the potential to blur the professional boundaries between counselors and counselors. Interaction through social media, communication outside of service hours, and too informal communication styles can shift professional relationships into personal relationships. This condition risks reducing the objectivity of counselors and violating the ethical principles of the guidance and counseling profession (Handika & Marjo, 2022). This phenomenon is also in line with the findings of international research that emphasizes the importance of boundary management in online counseling practices (Barnett, 2019).

Another ethical challenge is related to the competence of counselors in utilizing technology and ethical readiness in dealing with the dynamics of digital-based services. Not all counselors have adequate digital literacy to manage online counseling services safely and effectively. The principle of competence in professional ethics requires counselors to provide services according to their expertise and abilities. Therefore, the development of counselor competencies through digital counseling training and digital ethical literacy is an urgent need (Reamer, 2018).

Although many studies have been conducted on digital counseling and professional ethics, most research still addresses ethical issues partially, such as confidentiality or

privacy, without comprehensively linking them to the ethical principles of guidance and counseling professions. In fact, the ethical challenges of digital counseling are multidimensional and interrelated. This shows that there is a research gap in the form of a lack of conceptual studies that integrate the ethical challenges of digital counseling with the principles of professional ethics as a framework for service adaptation in the digital era.

Based on these gaps, the novelty of this article lies in a conceptual analysis that integrates various ethical challenges of digital counseling with ethical principles of the guidance and counseling profession. This article not only identifies emerging ethical issues, but also emphasizes the importance of applying ethical principles in an adaptive and contextual manner to maintain integrity, professionalism, and protection of counseling in the midst of the rapid development of digital technology.

Based on this background, the formulation of the problems in this article is: (1) what are the ethical challenges that arise in counseling practice in the digital era, and (2) how to apply the ethical principles of the guidance and counseling profession in technology-based counseling services. The purpose of writing this article is to analyze the ethical challenges of digital counseling and examine the implementation of the ethical principles of the guidance and counseling profession as a basis for service adaptation to maintain professionalism and protection of counselors.

## **METHODS**

This study uses a library research method with a qualitative-descriptive approach. The literature study method was chosen because this study does not aim to test hypotheses or collect empirical data in the field, but to examine and analyze in depth the concepts, theories, research findings, and regulations related to the ethics of digital counseling. The qualitative-descriptive approach allows the author to understand the ethical phenomenon of digital counseling holistically through the interpretation of meaning and synthesis of ideas from various scientific sources.

Relevant literature studies are used in conceptual research because they provide a space for researchers to conduct critical exploration of the thoughts of experts as well as the development of cutting-edge studies in the field of guidance and counseling. Through this approach, researchers can identify patterns, gaps, and tendencies of thinking related to ethical challenges in technology-based counseling practices, as well as relate them to the ethical principles of the guidance and counseling profession that apply.

The data sources in this study consist of primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources include the official document of the code of ethics for the guidance and counseling profession, especially the Indonesian Code of Ethics for Guidance and Counseling published by the Indonesian Guidance and Counseling Association (ABKIN). This document is used as the main normative foundation in analyzing the application of professional ethical principles in the context of digital counseling.

Secondary sources include articles in reputable national and international journals, academic textbooks, and other scientific publications relevant to the topics of digital counseling, professional ethics, and the use of technology in psychological services. International literature is used to enrich perspectives and strengthen conceptual analysis, while national literature is used to adapt the context of counseling practice in Indonesia.

Data collection techniques are carried out through systematic literature search using scientific databases, such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, and accredited national journal portals. The search was conducted using keywords including *"digital counseling"*, *"counseling ethics"*, *"online counseling ethics"*, *"digital counseling"*, and *"professional ethics in counseling"*. The literature obtained was then selected based on several criteria, namely relevance to the research focus, credibility of the source, and novelty of publications, with priority to articles published in the last ten years.

Data analysis is carried out through several stages. First, the researcher organized the data by grouping the selected literature. Second, the researchers identified the main issues that emerged in the literature related to the ethics of digital counseling. Third, the findings are classified into central themes, such as the confidentiality and privacy of counselor data, professional boundaries in online interactions, the competence and ethical readiness of counselors, and the application of ethical principles of the guidance and counseling profession in technology-based services.

The next stage is critical and interpretive analysis, which is by comparing and synthesizing the views of experts and relevant research findings. This analysis aims to produce a complete conceptual understanding of the ethical challenges of digital counseling as well as formulate ethical implications that can be used as a reference in counseling practice. Through this synthesis process, this research is expected to be able to make a theoretical contribution to the development of digital counseling ethics studies as well as practical contributions for counselors in applying the principles of professional ethics in an adaptive manner in the digital era

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Concepts and Characteristics of Digital Counseling**

Digital counseling is a form of guidance and counseling services that utilize information and communication technology as the main medium in the interaction process between counselors and counselees. This service emerged in response to changes in people's communication patterns that are increasingly dependent on digital media. Digital counseling can be done through various online platforms, such as video conferences, instant messaging applications, emails, and special online counseling platforms.

The main characteristics of digital counseling include flexibility of time and place, the use of internet-based media, and the lack of direct physical contact. Counseling interactions can take place synchronously, for example via video call or live chat, or asynchronously via email or delayed message. This flexibility allows counseling to reach

counselors who previously experienced limited access, either due to geographical factors, time, or certain psychological conditions. However, the characteristics of digital counseling also carry certain implications for the dynamics of counseling relationships. The lack of nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, body language, and voice intonation, can affect the counselor's understanding of the counselor's emotional state. In addition, reliance on the stability of internet networks and technological devices can interfere with the smooth running of the counseling process. This condition requires counselors to be more sensitive, adaptive, and careful in making ethical decisions during the counseling process.

## **2. Data Confidentiality and Security Challenges**

Confidentiality is one of the fundamental principles in the ethics of the guidance and counseling profession. In the context of digital counseling, this principle faces more complex challenges compared to face-to-face counseling. Counselors' personal information submitted through digital media has the potential to be leaked due to system hacking, the use of insecure platforms, unencrypted data storage, or negligence on the part of the counselor or counselor. Data confidentiality violations not only have an impact on the damage of counselors' trust in counselors, but can also have psychological, social, and legal consequences. Counselors can experience anxiety, insecurity, and trauma if their personal data is spread or misused. Therefore, counselors have an ethical and professional responsibility to ensure that any counseling information is properly protected. In practice, counselors are required to have a basic understanding of digital security, such as the use of encryption systems, password security, digital archive management, and the selection of counseling platforms that meet data security standards. In addition, counselors need to provide informed consent to counselors which includes an explanation of the service mechanism, potential risk of data leakage, and confidentiality limits in digital counseling.

## **3. Counseling Privacy in an Online Environment**

In addition to data security issues, counselor privacy in digital counseling is also an important ethical concern. Online counseling is often conducted in an environment that is not completely controlled, such as a home, a public place, or a co-working space. This condition opens up the possibility of interference from other parties that can threaten the privacy and comfort of counseling during counseling sessions. Lack of privacy can affect the level of openness counselors in expressing the problems they face. Counselors may feel hesitant or afraid to speak honestly if there is a chance that their conversation will be overheard or recorded by someone else. This can hinder the effectiveness of the counseling process and the achievement of service objectives. Ethically, counselors have a responsibility to educate counselors on the importance of maintaining privacy during digital counseling sessions. Initial agreements regarding secure locations, use of personal devices, use of earphones, and prohibitions on recording without permission need to be



clearly communicated. These preventive measures are a form of protection of the counselor's right to privacy and part of the counselor's professional commitment.

#### **4. Professional Boundaries in Digital Counseling**

The flexibility of communication in digital counseling has the potential to blur the professional boundaries between counselors and clients. The ease of contacting a counselor through instant messaging or social media can encourage communication outside of agreed service hours. In addition, the use of language that is too informal or excessive personal interaction can shift the counseling relationship from a professional relationship to a personal one. Violation of professional boundaries risks lowering the objectivity of counselors and violating the principles of professional ethics. Counselors can have difficulty maintaining their professional roles and responsibilities if boundaries are not clearly set from the beginning. In the long run, this condition can also be detrimental to counseling and damage the image of the guidance and counseling profession. Therefore, counselors need to set strict limits regarding service time, communication media used, and the form of interaction allowed. The preparation of a digital counseling contract that contains communication rules, service hours, and consequences of violations is one of the effective strategies to maintain the professionalism of the counseling relationship.

#### **5. Counselor's Ethical Competence and Readiness**

The competence of counselors is an important aspect in ensuring the quality of digital counseling services. Not all counselors have adequate digital literacy and ethical readiness to utilize technology in counseling practice. Limited understanding of technology can lead to technical errors, such as the use of unsafe platforms, as well as ethical errors in data management and online interactions. The principle of competence in professional ethics emphasizes that counselors should only provide services according to their expertise and abilities. Therefore, counselors are required to continue to develop themselves through digital counseling training, improving digital ethics literacy, and participating in regular professional supervision. In addition to improving technical skills, counselors also need to conduct ethical reflection on an ongoing basis. This reflection is important to help counselors in dealing with ethical dilemmas that arise due to the dynamics of technological developments, as well as in making decisions that are in the best interests of clients.

#### **6. The New Ethical Dilemma: Social media and Artificial Intelligence**

The development of social media and artificial intelligence presents a new ethical dilemma in digital counseling practices. Social media is often used as a means of promoting counseling services and informal communication between counselors and clients. However, the unwise use of social media has the potential to violate privacy, confidentiality, and professional boundaries. On the other hand, the use of artificial intelligence technology in the field of counseling, such as for initial assessment or the provision of application-based interventions, raises ethical questions related to accuracy,

professional responsibility, and the role of counselors. AI technology should be positioned as a tool, not as a substitute for the role of counselors as professionals who have competence, empathy, and ethical responsibility. Therefore, strict ethical regulation and supervision are needed in the use of new technologies in digital counseling. Counselors must remain in professional control and ensure that the use of technology does not disregard ethical and humanitarian principles in counseling services.

## **7. Application of Professional Ethics Principles of Guidance and Counseling**

The ethical principles of the guidance and counseling profession, such as confidentiality, integrity, professional responsibility, competence, and protection of counselors, remain the main foundation in digital counseling practices. Although the media and forms of service are changing, the essence of these ethical values should not be ignored. The Indonesian Code of Ethics for Guidance and Counseling provides a normative framework that can be used as a guideline in dealing with ethical challenges in the digital era. However, adaptation is needed in the form of more specific and applicable digital counseling operational guidelines so that counselors have a clear reference in daily practice. With the consistent and adaptive application of ethical principles, digital counseling can be a professional, safe, and well-being-oriented service for counselors. This also emphasizes that technological developments must be balanced with strengthening professional ethics so that the quality of guidance and counseling services is maintained.

## **CONCLUSION**

Digital counseling is a form of guidance and counseling service innovation that was born in response to the rapid development of information and communication technology. Its presence provides various benefits, such as ease of access, flexibility of time and place, and a wider range of services. However, digital counseling also raises a variety of complex ethical challenges, especially related to data confidentiality, the protection of counselor privacy, the professional boundaries between counselors and counselors, the competence of counselors in the use of technology, as well as the emergence of new ethical dilemmas that have not been fully accommodated in conventional practice.

The results of the study show that the ethical principles of the guidance and counseling profession remain relevant and become the main foundation in the implementation of digital counseling. Principles such as professional responsibility, respect for counseling rights, maintaining confidentiality, and upholding professional integrity must still be upheld. However, the application of these principles requires contextual adjustments to align with the characteristics of digital-based services.

Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen digital ethical literacy for counselors, improve technological competence that is balanced with counseling competence, and develop clear, systematic, and applicable digital counseling guidelines. The guidelines are expected to be able to serve as a reference in ethical decision-making and minimize potential ethical violations. With these efforts, the professionalism of counselors and the



protection of counselors can be maintained, so that digital counseling services can run effectively, safely, and responsibly in the midst of the dynamics of technological developments that continue to develop.

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