

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES, TYPES OF CONCERNS AND ONLINE DISCLOSURE IN ONLINE COUNSELLING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG STUDENTS OF A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study investigated the online disclosure, types of concerns and demographic variables in online counselling relationships among students of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU). The study adopted the research survey method. The sample for this study comprised 200 online counselling platform users among students of the university. Questionnaire was used in collecting data for this study while frequency counts, percentage and Chi-Square were used in analysing the data. Result from this study showed that most of the respondents (60.5%) exhibited moderate level of online disclosure, while 22.0% and 17.5% exhibited low and high levels respectively. Result further showed that 56% and 44.0% of the respondents discussed social-personal and academic related issues respectively. Result of this study also showed that types of concerns and students' demographic variables have no relationship with online counselling disclosure. The study concluded that none of the students' demographic variables and types of concerns had significant relationship with their online disclosure in online counselling relationship.

Keywords: *Disclosure, Online counselling, Concerns, Communication, Counsellor, Client.*

Introduction

Disclosure is one of the processes which aid counselling relationships as well as improve relationships between counsellors and clients. In counselling relationship, disclosure means revealing personal and intimate information which may not be available on the surface to others.

Disclosure has been defined as an act of revealing personal information about one to another (Rosen, Cheever, Cumming & Felt, 2008). It involves letting go of anxiety and apprehension of losing someone due to

knowing someone more intimately; when relationships reach this stage they become more intimate (Rosen et.al, 2008). In counselling relationship, disclosure (mutual and personal) has been defined as the revelation to the counsellor or client both personal and professional information (Zur, 2007). Generally, when disclosure in counselling relationship goes beyond the standard professional disclosure of name, credentials, office address, fees, emergency contacts, cancellation policies, etc., it is considered as disclosure (Zur, 2008).

Disclosure can be deliberate, unintentional, or accidental. It can be verbal or non-verbal and it can be available to the client and counsellor without the therapist's/client's knowledge or approval. In the Internet era, the concept of disclosure of information about therapists/clients has become even broader and more complex. Search engines, such as Google, and specialized for-fee background checks, have completely changed the way clients and counsellors can obtain information about their therapists and clients, what kind of information are available to the clients/therapists with the click of mouse and, correspondingly, what therapists/clients may inadvertently disclose online (Zur, 2008).

According to Barak and Gluck-Ofri (2007), the purpose of disclosure in traditional, face-to-face counselling is to exchange pieces of intimate information about the self in order for counsellors and clients to further understand and get to know one another in the hope of formulating a successful counselling relationship.

However, online communication is said to be characterized by increased disclosure. Rheingold (1993) pointed out that online interaction emboldens individuals to open up and reveal themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do

without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms. The properties of online interaction – nonverbal cues, altered identifiability, asynchronous communication, and a need to reduce uncertainty – have an impact on individuals' self-awareness, self-presentation considerations and other psychological aspects; in addition they also encourage self-disclosure and intimacy (Joinson 2004).

At the same time, disclosure may also be essential for the development and maintenance of trust in an online counselling relationship. This is because research has shown that counsellors tend to prefer clients who disclose intimate details to those who disclose themselves to a lesser extent (Collins & Miller, 1994). Furthermore, client may reveal more intimate information to counsellors they trust and also tend to trust those to whom they have revealed intimate information (Collins & Miller, 1994). Disclosure means the openness and vulnerability of both the counsellor and the client. Gibbs, Ellison and Heino (2006) suggested that perceived success in online relationship is commonly predicted by disclosure.

Furthermore, early studies on therapist disclosure portray a generally favourable view of the concept especially in online

counselling relationship. Disclosure has been shown to contribute to perceptions of the therapist as empathic, warm, credible, and possessing positive regard, while clients are said to have shown a credible trust, reliance, openness and vulnerability in disclosing information (Hill & Knox, 2002). Also, it has been observed that appropriate disclosures support, reinforce, or legitimise the client's perspective by adding an element of comfortability, and are preferred to those that are challenging (Cristelle & Robin, 2010). Clients seem to respond more favourably to disclosure that conveys similarity to, and extends immediately from, what they have shared with the therapist (Barrett & Berman, 2001; Myers & Hayes, 2006).

Although, there are some literature on disclosure in counselling relationships, most of these studies have been largely concentrated on the traditional face-to-face counselling, while disclosure in online counselling has received little research attention. Also, certain factors – such as clients' sex, age, and issues of concern among others – which could encourage disclosure have not been considered. This research aims to fill these gaps.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims at ascertaining the level of online disclosure in online counselling relationships among students of Obafemi Awolowo University; examining the types of concerns of students in online counselling relationships among students of Obafemi Awolowo University; and investigating possible relationship between online disclosure and demographic variables like sex, age and year of study in the university.

In order to achieve the stated objectives the following research questions were raised:

1. What are the levels of online disclosure in online counselling relationships among students of Obafemi Awolowo University?
2. What are the types of concerns of students in online counselling relationships among students of Obafemi Awolowo University?

Also the following hypotheses were raised:

1. There is no significant relationship between students' online disclosure and their sex.
2. There is no significant relationship between students' online disclosure and their age grade.
3. There is no significant relationship between students' online disclosure

and their year of study in the university.

4. There is no significant relationship between students' online disclosure and their types of concerns in online counselling relationship

Methodology

The study adopts a survey research design. The population for the study comprised all the undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, south-western part of Nigeria. Sample participants were selected in such a way that only students who had interacted with online counsellor on the OAU online counselling platform successfully were regarded as qualified for the research. A total of 200 students were selected from the online counselling participants. The instrument adapted for data collection was the mutual disclosure questionnaire by Wheelless (1976). The questionnaire was validated by the researcher and its reliability coefficient showed 0.913. It consists of 16 adapted items in the form of direct questions. The responses to each item are graded on a four-point Likert-type scale. The possible responses to each item on the questionnaire are four (strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree) with scores 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively, for a positive question and the

scores reversed for a negative question. The data was collected by sending to the email addresses of the participants through google forms. Data collected were analyzed using simple percentages and chi-square statistics.

Results

Research Question 1

What are the levels of online disclosure in online counselling relationships among students of Obafemi Awolowo University?

To address this research question, clients' disclosure was obtained by scoring the responses provided by the participants to items in the Section D of the questionnaire in such a way that "Strongly Agree" response was scored 4 while "Agree" response was scored 3, "Disagree" response was scored 2, while "Strongly Disagree" was scored 1. This process was reversed for negative items such as 3, 7, 9, 11, 14 and 16. The resulting scores were summed up into a measure of mutual disclosure. The mean score obtained was 41.47; the standard deviation was 3.89, while the minimum and maximum scores were 32 and 52 respectively. On the measure, those who scored between 32-39 were described as exhibiting low level of online disclosure. Those who scored between 40-44 were described as exhibiting moderate level of online disclosure while those who scored 45

and above were described as possessing high level of online disclosure. These were

subjected to descriptive statistics and the result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Level of Online Disclosure in Online Counselling Relationship among OAU Student

Level of Online Disclosure	Frequency	Percent
Low	44	22.0
Moderate	121	60.5
High	35	17.5
Total	200	100.0

Table 1 shows the level of online disclosure in online counselling relationships among students of OAU. From the table, majority of the students (60.5%) exhibited moderate level of online disclosure, followed by 22.0% which demonstrated low level of online disclosure; only 17.5% exhibited high level of online disclosure.

Research Question 2

What are the types of concerns of students in online counselling relationships among students of Obafemi Awolowo University?

To answer this question, the chats collected from the respondents through the online counselling platform were categorized into two groups on the basis of core issues presented which include academics and social-personal. Students' responses to types of concerns were then analysed descriptively.

Table 2: Types of concerns of OAU students in online counselling

Types of Concerns	Frequency	Percent
Academics	88	44.0
Social-personal	112	56.0
Total	200	100.0

Table 2 showed that a large percentage of the students (56 %) discussed social-personal issues with the online counsellor, while 44 % discussed academic related issues with the online counsellors.

Hypothesis 1: *There is no significant relationship between students' online disclosure and their sex.*

To test this hypothesis, a crosstabulation was conducted between the sex of the students and the level of disclosure they exhibited. Also chi-square statistics was computed. The result is presented in Table 3

Table 3: Relationship between the sex of the students and the level of online disclosure in online counselling relationship among OAU students

Sex	Level of Disclosure			Total	χ^2	df.	Sig.
	Peripheral	Intermediate	Core				
Male	20 (10.0%)	65 (32.5%)	22 (11.0%)	107 (53.5%)	2.379	2	0.304
Female	24 (12.0%)	56 (28.0%)	13 (6.5%)	93 (46.5%)			
Total	44 (22.0%)	121 (60.5%)	35 (17.5%)	200 (100.0%)			

Table 3 presents the relationship between the sex of the undergraduates and the level of disclosure in online counselling relationship. The table shows that the value of the chi-square statistic obtained was 2.379 at p-value of 0.304. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 threshold for Social Sciences, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Consequently, the null hypothesis is accepted. It can therefore be concluded that there is no significant relationship between the students' sex and the disclosure

in online counselling relationship. Hence, any possible relationship observed must have been due to mere chance or sampling error

Hypothesis 2: *There is no significant relationship between students' online disclosure and their age grade.*

To test this hypothesis, a crosstabulation was conducted between the age of the students and the level of disclosure they exhibited. Also chi-square statistics was computed. The result is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Relationship between the age of the students and the level of online disclosure in online counselling relationship among OAU students

	Level of Disclosure			Total	χ^2	df.	Sig.
	Peripheral	Intermediate	Core				
15-20 years	22 (11.0%)	47 (23.5%)	9 (4.5%)	78 (39.0%)	11.212	8	0.190
21-25 years	14 (7.0%)	41 (20.5%)	16 (8.0%)	71 (35.5%)			
26-30 years	4 (2.0%)	28 (14.0%)	9 (4.5%)	41 (20.5%)			
31-35 years	4 (2.0%)	4 (2.0%)	1 (0.5%)	9 (4.5%)			
36 and above	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)			
Total	44 (22.0%)	121 (60.5%)	35 (17.5%)	200 (100.0%)			

Table 4 reveals the relationship between the age grade of the students and their online disclosure in online counselling relationship.

The table reveals that the value of the chi-square statistic obtained was 11.212 at p-value of 0.190. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 threshold, the null hypothesis

is accepted. It can therefore be concluded that there is no significant relationship between the students' age and their online disclosure in online counselling relationship, such that any possible relationship observed must have been due to mere chance or sampling error.

Hypothesis 3: *There is no significant relationship between students' online*

disclosure and their year of study in the university.

To test this hypothesis, a crosstabulation was conducted between students' year of study in the university and the level of disclosure they exhibited. Also chi-square statistics was computed. The result is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Relationship between the year of study of the students and their online disclosure in online counselling relationship among OAU students

Level	Level of Disclosure			Total	χ^2	df	Sig.
	Peripheral	Intermediate	Core				
100	15 (7.5%)	29 (14.5%)	9 (4.5%)	53 (26.5%)	9.547	12	0.656
200	10 (5.0%)	18 (9.0%)	7 (3.5%)	35 (17.5%)			
300	7 (3.5%)	18 (9.0%)	3 (1.5%)	28 (14.0%)			
400	4 (2.0%)	24 (12.0%)	4 (2.0%)	32 (16.0%)			
500	1 (0.5%)	5 (2.5%)	2 (1.0%)	8 (4.0%)			
PG	7 (3.5%)	26 (13.0%)	9 (4.5%)	42 (21.0%)			
Total	44 (22.0%)	121 (60.5%)	35 (17.5%)	200 (100.0%)			

Table 5 reveals the relationship between the year of study of the students and their online disclosure. The table reveals that the value of the chi-square statistic gotten was 9.547 at p-value of 0.656. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 threshold, the null hypothesis is therefore accepted. It can be concluded that there is no significant relationship between the year of study of the students and their online disclosure in online counselling relationships. In that case, any

possible relationship observed must have been due to mere chance or sampling error.

Hypothesis 4: *There is no significant relationship between students' online disclosure and their types of concerns in online counselling relationship.*

To test this hypothesis, a crosstabulation was conducted between the types of concerns of the students and the online disclosure they exhibited. Also chi-square statistics was computed. The result is presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Relationship between students' types of concerns and the level of online disclosure in online counselling relationship among OAU students

Types of concerns	Level of Disclosure			Total	χ^2	df	Sig.
	Peripheral	Intermediate	Core				
Academics	20 (10.0%)	59 (29.5%)	9 (4.5%)	88 (44.0%)	5.900	2	0.052
Social-personal	24 (12.0%)	62 (31.0%)	26 (13.0%)	112 (56.0%)			
Total	44 (22.0%)	121 (60.5%)	35 (17.5%)	200 (100.0%)			

Table 6 reveals the relationship between the students' types of concerns and their online disclosure in online counselling relationship. The table reveals that the value of the chi-square statistic obtained was 5.900 at p-value of 0.052. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 threshold, the null hypothesis is accepted. It can therefore be concluded that there is no significant relationship between the students' types of concerns and their online disclosure in online counselling relationship, such that any possible relationship observed must have been due to mere chance or sampling error.

Discussion of Findings

Disclosure has been said to be very important to the success of establishing successful counselling relationships between counsellors and clients on the internet.

Disclosure is said to portray on a client the sense of a counsellor who is empathetic, warm and ready to help, while disclosure on the part of the client conveys to the

counsellor that such client is willing and ready to get help and get the counselling relationship to work (Hill & Knox, 2002). Hence, both the counsellor and client must find a proper avenue of ensuring proper disclosure in an online counselling relationship.

Results from this study showed that majority of the respondents (60.5%) demonstrated a moderate level of disclosure. While only 22.0% and 17.5% demonstrated high and low levels of online disclosure respectively. This findings is contradictory to that of Obisakin (2016) who found that majority of respondents in her study demonstrated a low level of disclosure in online counselling platform, while the percentage of those who demonstrated moderate and high levels of disclosure among the respondents are significantly small in comparison to the respondents who demonstrated a low level of disclosure. The reason for this as opined by Sanchez-Ortiz et al. (2011) may be that online counselling clients have problem with

online disclosure because relationship is being established on the internet. Hence, they tend to send fewer messages and hide important details about themselves (Sanchez-Ortiz et al., 2011).

Also from this study, result showed academic and social-personal concerns as the dominant concerns discussed by the respondents with social-personal concerns as the most prevalent. This finding is in line with that of Adebawale (2013) who found that social and personal concerns are the most discussed issues during online counselling interactions. Also, Zeren (2015) in his study found that personal issues are discussed more than issues surrounding academics in both online counselling as well as in a face-to-face counselling. However, in contrast to this finding, Glasheen and Campbell (2008), Glasheen and Campbell (2009), Adebawale and Popoola (2011) found that issues relating to academics are the most discussed issues among students during online counselling relationships.

In addition, the study found no relationship between online disclosure and students' sex, age, year of study as well as types of concerns in online counselling relationships among OAU students. Although, not much study have been done in relation to this in the aspect of online counselling; however,

Valkenburg, Sumter and Peter (2010) in their study on adolescence disclosure in online and offline relationships found that female adolescents possess higher level of disclosure than male adolescents. Also, older adolescents demonstrated higher level of disclosure in online relationships than younger ones. This finding is contradictory to the result of this present study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concluded that none of students' demographic variables and types of concerns had significant relationship with their online disclosure in online counselling relationship among OAU students. This implies that students' online disclosure were not contingent upon their sex, age and year of study in the university as well as their issues of concerns. It is recommended that further researches look into other possible factors – such as confidentiality, trust issues, safety of online platforms for counselling, etc. – that could engender disclosure in online counselling interactions. Having adequate knowledge of factors that will engender disclosure will help online counsellors in building a direct and successful counselling relationships with their clients in online counselling relationships.

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