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## **STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ONLINE GUIDANCE COUNSELING SYSTEM**

**Abstract.** Information and communication technology (ICT) impacts the guidance counseling services (GCS) in many higher education institutions (HEIs). However, many HEIs are experiencing the digital gap most especially in bridging ICT and GCS. This paper aims to measure the attitudes towards the development of an online guidance counseling system in a private university in the Philippines. All respondents are tertiary students during the 1st semester of the academic year 2014-2015 in a total of 348. An adapted survey questionnaire was used. The study shows that despite the students underutilizing the GCS, these students show positive attitudes towards the proposed system. The result implies that these students are capable of adapting to an online environment as an alternative to a face-to-face counseling setup. Based on the results, developing an online guidance counseling system is a promising initiative for this university.

**Keywords:** e-learning, Information Systems; Online Guidance Counseling; ICT in Education

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Information and communication technology (ICT) is playing a major role towards the development of contemporary life in academic institutions. International research has shown that ICT can lead to better student learning and enhanced teaching methods. According to the National Institute of Multimedia Education in Japan, there is a significant and positive impact on the achievements of a student when exposed to educational ICT through curriculum integration (Richards, 2008). While the popularity of e-Learning and other automated solutions are taken advantage of by many academic institutions, it is hard to deny that guidance counseling is also an aspect in an Academic institution which ICT needs to make a progressive impact on.

While it is likely that many stakeholders in an academic institution are wondering what guidance counselors do on a daily basis, guidance counselors are usually known for handing out college application forms, conducting leadership training activities, lectures about personal and social developing and career development activities. To most institutions, guidance counseling includes assisting students in areas of academic achievement and ensuring that students become productive and well-adjusted citizens of the future (Drigas, Koukianakis&Papagerasimou, 2008). In some parts of the United States, academic guidance counseling needs to change at the high school level because studies show that these departments are underutilized by students (Johnson, Rochkind& Ott, 2010), (Sheehey, 2012). While it may still be unknown if the same case is happening in the Philippines, there are many growing problems in the Guidance Counseling Office like those being experienced by the subject of this study such as reaching out to students for guidance and the lack of progress monitoring. Another problem is that many students overlook the benefits of having access to guidance counseling services. Ultimately, the office is often distracted with other clerical duties. With the usability of the current information system, it is likely that undiscovered

problems will emerge in the future greatly affecting the performance of the guidance counseling office, the students, hence, the whole academic institution.

Guidance counseling is one of the many fields branched in psychology. Moreover, just like many other sciences, psychology has already taken advantage of the many capabilities of the ICT to its benefit. With the use of the Internet, practitioners can create programs for psychological intervention, evaluation, orientation and specialized counseling, as a means of prevention. Drigas et al. summarized and cited that “The Internet is not only a medium of communication between the practitioner and the patient, but it also became the future of psychology” (Drigas et al. 2008).

Taking into account that the Internet is a stream of information with uncertain value, prestige and often includes controversial matters regarding ethical and privacy issues, it is the aim of this paper to deliberate the readiness of educational stakeholders specifically, the students towards the development of an Online Guidance Counseling System.

**The problem statement.** The guidance counseling office currently is being challenged by various clerical problems that steal away most of their time from monitoring the status of the students. Most of these problems originate from the nature of their work since the guidance counseling office has to perform other tasks aside from doing counseling services. Their current information system can only do limited information management functionalities, and most of the record-keeping activities are done manually with lots of paperwork. Reaching out to students to monitor their problems and achievements is another challenging task since the office has very limited personnel. In response to these challenges, developing and implementing an online guidance counseling system is highly recommended. Not only that it will help make their work more efficient but also, help promote the utilization of their counseling services. The project appears to sound very promising. However, there have always been negative issues surrounding the use of online platforms where people can share and view sensitive information freely and without guidance. It is noteworthy to know that this kind of platform is not a replacement for a face-to-face guidance counseling service but rather a tool to help the guidance counseling office perform their task more efficiently in the institution. This kind of tool is also a valuable asset not just for the counseling office but the whole institution.

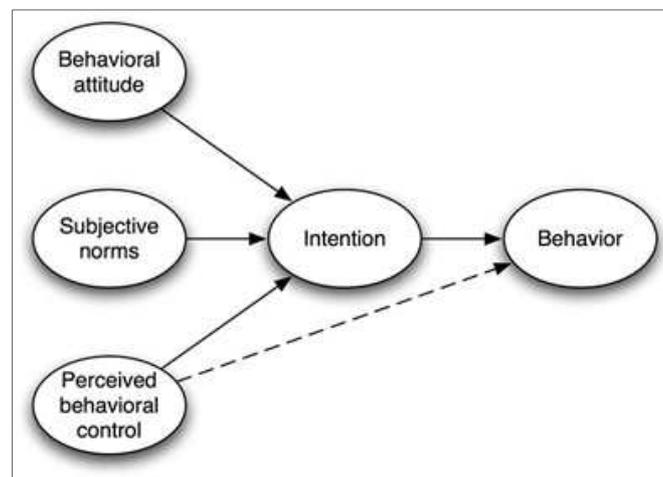
Online platforms such as a guidance counseling system consider students sharing sensitive and classified information to the academic institution. Guidance counselors and school administrators, on the other hand, can study the data submitted by the students individually or collectively without compromising any ethical and privacy guidelines. Although there is no doubt this kind of tool can have so much value to academic institutions, one contributing problem that might hinder its success is the attitude of the students towards the project. An individual’s intent to use information technology can be affected by several factors. Since the proposed system is new to the community, understanding how the users perceive the system will significantly help in identifying what the system should do in the future. Also, if the stakeholders such as the students fail to understand the whole project, this could lead to the rejection or misuse of the online system. The main objective of this study was to measure the stakeholder’s attitudes towards developing a web-based solution to one of the current problems specifically in the guidance counseling services.

**Analysis of recent studies and publications.** According to Brown (2012), research concerning online counseling has developed in a two-step approach, “beginning with anecdotal and professional opinions, to more recently, examination of these speculative statements through empirical methods.” Quantitative studies mostly specify that online counseling is fairly as effective as face-to-face counseling, which is also becoming famous in the field of mental health. Research also suggests that online counseling can sufficiently address a variety of mental health conditions such as panic disorders, depression, eating

disorders, substance abuse and smoking cessation. Through engagement with a sequence of counseling sessions, this can lead to an effective therapeutic partnership between the counselor and the patient.

Based on most literature and among professionals, “online therapy” is usually referred to as cybertherapy, e-therapy, web-counseling or computer-mediated psychotherapy (Brown, 2012). Text-based counseling specifies to online discussions occurring within an email or chat modalities. There are two main methods to interact with patients or clients: asynchronous and synchronous communication.

Asynchronous communication includes email, message boards or forums and online blogs where the counselor and the client are communicating but not in real-time. Neither the counselor nor the client has to be at the computer at the same time which allows both to consider how and when to respond to their discussion (Richards, 2008). Synchronous interactions, on the other hand, refer to a kind of discussion where both the counselor and client communicate in real-time, regardless if it is written or verbal. Common examples of this kind of environment include instant messaging and video conferencing (Richards, 2008).



*Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behaviour*

According to one of the most influential predictive theories, the theory of planned behavior, an “individual’s intention to perform a given behavior is a function of motivational factors that influence the behavior and volitional control of the behavior in question” (Ajzabe, 1991). The theory applied in the setting of an online counseling suggests that a student’s intention to use an online counseling system may involve motivational factors such as a need for psychological support (Brown, 2012). For example, students believe that using the online counseling system may provide relief and anonymity (Brown, 2012). Another important factor includes the student’s ability to contact the counselor remotely. According to a journal in Iowa State University (Vogel, Wester, & Larson 2007), many factors inhibit seeking help from counseling services from a professional. Such factors include self-esteem and social stigma; the fear of being judged by others once they are seen visiting the counselor’s office. With a setting that allows the student and the counselor to communicate remotely, this will then enable the student to secure a private space while meeting with the counselor (Oliva, 1970).

While we continue moving into the new millennium, counselors are increasingly becoming information managers. For instance, today, school counselors are expected to have knowledge concerning a vast array of resources, including community referrals, career information, class scheduling, college admission requirements, test and assessment and

student learning and student progress. The school now has access to data banks that allow the counselor to customize resources to meet each student's needs. Counselors, therefore, must become familiar with software for computers, the Internet, videos and other resources that assist in organizing information. With the explosion in information and the expected continuation of this trend, counselors will have to be on the cutting edge of information management. (Neugrug, 1999)

In 1970, a study about two private schools, which include the subject of this study, showed that students fear that private matters expressed to the guidance counselor might be a factor in their wrong concept and attitude toward the guidance counselor. In some instances, the students were right on this point because a breach of confidential matters about them by the guidance counselor is a serious harm that will damage their reputation, or cause them unwarranted embarrassment. There are cases when students do not want to disclose personal information even if the guidance counselor and the person to whom the report is made have the best intention for it. Students have the tendency to avoid college guidance services unless they are in serious difficulty or compelled to do so by the teacher or parents because of the close identification of these services with the punitive, corrective, and administrative and psychiatric divisions of the institution. The student's negative attitude toward the university guidance was further reinforced by the inconsistencies among counselors and faculty members of the University. There were times as well when the counselor was called upon to do a task in which there would be a conflict between his responsibilities to the students and the university such as sitting in the disciplinary board conference with the dean of men and women on disciplinary measures or active as an administrative arm of the University. It was then usual and reasonable for the students who had revealed information about themselves to assume that the counselor would use it against them in the future (Oliva, 1970).

According to another research, distance counseling sessions and the option to become anonymous enables the counselee to control personal disclosure. This means that the counselee can consequently realize therapeutic benefits of writing while he or she is under this so-called "zone of reflection" (Richards, 2008). In many instances, the use of an Internet site may encourage the counselee's decision making. The counselor is obliged to suggest that the most desirable outcomes are more likely to happen when both the counselee and the counselor are involved in the counselee's decision making (Gibson, 2003).

**The article's goal.** This article presents the attitude level among tertiary students towards an Online Guidance Counseling System. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to answer the following questions: a) What is the attitude towards seeking professional help?, and b) What is the attitude towards online counseling among the respondents?

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

The research design of the study is descriptive. This quantitative research gathered inputs from the tertiary students of a private university in Dumaguete City, Philippines who were enrolled in the academic year 2014-2015. Survey questionnaires were printed and distributed to the respondents through their respective colleges. It took 2 – 3 weeks to collect all the questionnaires back for tallying. During the academic year 2014-2015 and the time this research was conducted, the population of the nine different colleges collectively was 2,654. To determine the sample size of the entire population, the formula used in this research follows  $1+(N \cdot E^2)$  where the maximum margin of error is set to 0.05 (5%). By applying the formula, the total sample size is 348 which is 13% of the population size. Table 1 shows the entire population.

Table 1

**Distribution of Respondents**

College	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	5th Year	Total Population	Contributing Percentage	Total Sample Size
College of Agriculture	34	17	13	8	n/a	72	3%	9
College of Arts and Sciences	84	50	35	24	n/a	193	7%	25
College of Business and Accountancy	338	188	158	126	n/a	810	31%	106
College of Computer Studies	110	69	54	47	n/a	280	11%	37
College of Criminology	86	38	18	n/a	n/a	142	5%	19
College of Education	307	114	84	83	n/a	588	21%	77
College of Hospitality Management	176	88	82	18	n/a	364	14%	48
College of Nursing	18	13	29	49	n/a	109	4%	14
School of Industrial Engineering	33	19	22	13	9	96	4%	13
Total	1186	596	495	368	9	2654	100%	348

Due to the fairly limited study of online guidance counseling, few standardized measures exist to assess online counseling attitudes and utilization. The survey used in this study uses Likert Scale and is adopted from (Brown, 2012) which is also an adopted version from many original instruments. The 6-point Likert-Scale contains mixed positive and negative statements and the points are interpreted as: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, and 6 = Strongly Agree.

There is a total of 24 questions consisting of single and multiple-answer questions. These questions are categorized into five different groups. The questions are classified as a) Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Help, and b) Attitudes toward Online Counseling

The data collected are interpreted descriptively. For questions which require multiple optional answers, the researcher uses the percentage of the total number of responses per question. For questions using the Likert-Scale, the formula used to determine the average score per question is  $\sum_{k=1}^6 (\text{SCORE}_k)$  where six indicates that the question uses a 6-point Likert-Scale, k represents the scale value and SCORE<sub>k</sub> is the total number of responses in a certain scale on a specific issue.

### 3. THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Help

As seen in Table 2, 226 (65%) of the students agree to provide identification and contact information if necessary when engaged in online counseling. 203 (58%) of the students also agree to an immediate face-to-face counseling when necessary. These results give strong support to the implication that students who will use the online system are willing to be identified by the guidance counselor and engage into a face-to-face meeting whenever necessary.

Table 2.

**Students that will Agree on the Following if They Were to Engage in Online Counseling**

College	Provide accurate identification and emergency contact information		Provide my student identification number		Agree to an immediate face-to-face counseling session if my counselor thought it was necessary		Agree to an immediate telephone counseling session if my counselor thought it was necessary		Visit a mental health specialist if my emotional condition worsened, and my personal safety became at risk	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
College of Agriculture	7	78%	3	33%	6	67%	2	22%	3	33%
College of Arts and Sciences	17	65%	12	46%	16	62%	5	19%	8	31%
College of Business and Accountancy	73	68%	38	36%	62	58%	15	14%	31	29%
College of Computer Studies	22	59%	12	32%	23	62%	4	11%	13	35%
College of Criminology	11	61%	7	39%	6	33%	2	11%	2	11%
College of Education	47	61%	32	42%	46	60%	14	18%	31	40%
College of Hospitality Management	31	65%	15	31%	25	52%	2	4%	14	29%
College of Nursing	10	71%	3	21%	12	86%	1	7%	5	36%
School of Industrial Engineering	8	67%	0	0%	7	58%	4	33%	3	25%
Total	226	65%	122	35%	203	58%	49	14%	110	32%

While identifying and contacting students with various needs is made more efficient, this will lead to an improved utilization of the counseling services once students start visiting the office for a face-to-face consultation. As seen in Table 2, it is also interesting that visiting a mental health specialist when necessary scored 110 (32%) considering that only 49 (14%) agreed to have an immediate telephone counseling if necessary. The result suggests that students value personal face-to-face meetings with specialist more compared to distant meetings.

Table 3.

**Counseling Sessions Students are Interested in**

Q1. I am interested in learning more about:	f	%
Face – to – Face Counseling (going to the counselor’s office in person)	92	26%
Online Guidance Counseling (using online systems, email, instant messaging, video conferencing, etc.)	51	15%
Both type of Counseling	151	43%
I am not interested in any of it	53	15%
No Answer	1	0%
Total	348	100%

During the initial interview with the guidance counselor, it is noted that only a few students are availing counseling services in the university. Considering such case, Table 3 still

shows that 151 (43%) students are interested in learning more about both Face-to-Face Counseling and Online Guidance Counseling. It is interesting to note that 92 (26%) are only interested in Face-to-Face Counseling, 51 (15%) in Online Guidance Counseling and only 53 (15%) are not interested in any mode of counseling. The results imply that many students are willing to try or explore online counseling as an alternative to Face-to-Face sessions.

It seems that college students in this university 45 years ago and students of today's generation have the same positive attitude towards seeking professional help from the guidance counselor. Oliva stated that students despite underutilizing guidance counseling services were also interested in utilizing guidance counseling services. However, there are many factors which inhibit these students from doing so. She recommended that there must be an alternative means of accessing counseling services without mandating the students to reveal their identities. This is to secure absolute privacy to the students since students believe that meeting a guidance counselor is associated with something negative. Some students are also in the dilemma of seeking for guidance but afraid of disclosing confidential information for the risk of having embarrassment. It is also noted that many students according to her research are not good in expressing themselves through talking personally (Oliva, 1970).

### 3.2 Attitudes Toward Online Counselling

As seen in Table 4, the results in statements Q12 and Q13 significantly indicate that discussing problems with a counselor using the Internet is more easily compared to discussing it face-to-face. In reference to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzabe, 1991), Q14 suggest that friends, classmates, and even teachers will influence the student positively to engage in online counseling.

Table 4.

Attitudes toward Online Counselling

Questions	$\bar{X}$	Description
Q12: If I were to seek guidance counseling services, it would be difficult for me to discuss my problem(s) if I meet the guidance counselor in person face-to-face.	3.55	Slightly Agree
Q13: If I were to seek guidance counseling services, it would be difficult for me to discuss my problem(s) with the counselor if I use the Internet.	3.47	Slightly Disagree
Q14: If my friends, classmates and teachers would also participate in Online Counseling, then I would also do the same.	4.14	Slightly Agree
Q15: Using an online counseling system would help me learn more about myself and perform better in my academic life	4.30	Slightly Agree
Q16: If a friend had personal problems, I might encourage him or her to consider online counseling.	4.16	Slightly Agree
Q17: I would tell my personal and secret problems with an online counselor.	3.24	Slightly Disagree
Q18: It could be worthwhile to discuss my personal problems with an online counselor.	3.64	Slightly Agree
Q19: If online counseling were available at no charge, I would consider trying it.	4.71	Agree
Q20: If I were having a personal problem, seeking help with an online counselor would be the last option I would consider.	4.03	Slightly Agree
Q21: I would feel uneasy discussing emotional problems with an online counselor.	3.98	Slightly Disagree
Q22: I would fear explaining my problems to an online counselor.	3.53	Slightly Disagree
Q23: I think it would take a major effort for me to schedule an appointment with an online counselor	3.81	Slightly Disagree
Q24: I would be afraid to discuss stressful events with an online counselor	3.65	Slightly Disagree
Overall Mean	3.86	Slightly Agree

The results in Table 4 show very positive attitudes in response to the development of an online counseling system. Despite the scores in statement Q21 to Q24; since most or perhaps all of these students-respondents are first timers in this kind of system, it is natural to have issues in trusting how the system handles confidentiality. Nevertheless, the overall result of this section is more than enough to favor the development of the project.

The highest item in table 4 is Q19 which means that students will use the system as long as it is free of charge. Among the questions in Table 4, Q17 got the least score where it indicates that students are not willing to tell the guidance counselor about their secrets. The results in Q17 show that students as of now are hesitant of telling personal matters to their counselors because a small breach of personal secrets from the counselor might cause the student's unwarranted embarrassment (Oliva, 1970).

The overall mean of Table 4 indicates that most students have fairly positive attitudes toward online counseling session. This implies that students are likely to utilize the services offered in the guidance counseling office through the use of the online guidance counseling system. Further, the students who responded to the survey also left comments comparing the proposed system to social media networks. The popularity of social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter may have been one of the factors why it is easy for students to accept the proposed online system.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Students are interested in both face-to-face, and online counseling services and results also indicate that these students value face-to-face counseling more than distant meetings. Although that is the case, many students find it difficult to discuss their personal problems with a guidance counselor in person. This could be influenced by many factors such as self-esteem, social stigma and the challenge of self-disclosure (Vogel, Wester, & Larson 2007). Nevertheless, the results of this research also indicate that students do not find it difficult to discuss their problems when using the Internet. While students find it worthwhile to discuss their personal problems with an online counselor, the strongest factor for students to consider online counseling is if the service is free of charge. Students believe that this kind of service could help them understand more about themselves and assist them to perform better in their academic life. It is also likely that students will engage in online counseling when their friends, classmates and teachers participate as well.

In reference to the theory of planned behavior, this research provides a solid foundation that the utilization of the guidance counseling services in the school may improve significantly through the online system.

The results of this study propose that an online system for guidance counseling will significantly leverage the ability of the guidance office to reach out more students to monitor, collect data and provide counseling services. The online counseling system must be designed in such a way that it will only extend to the services that are implemented by the counseling office of the academic institution. Having too many online services to the extent that it goes beyond what the counseling office offers may cause the project to backfire. It should be noted that the online system must be designed not to give additional burden to the office personnel. In addition to that, a simplified user's interface will avoid intimidating users against using the online platform. It is also suggested that the online counseling system must not necessarily require additional office personnel.

The system must feature basic communication interfaces such as instant-messaging, discussion boards and peer-based discussion platforms that allow the user to be anonymous. With this kind of preference, many students will be able to express their feelings more effectively without worrying about revealing their identity to the counselor. Since it is also

noted that peers and teachers may influence a student to engage in online counseling, it is suggested that the system has minor similarities to typical social networks.

To protect the confidentiality of the collected information, the system developers must ensure that there are security measures embedded to the system that will prevent anyone from misusing it. They must guarantee that all features in the system including those related to maintenance will not breach any privacy rights. A usage policy, code of conduct and ethical standards must be provided to support any future promotions and lectures done on how to use the counseling system properly. This kind of functionality will attract more students to use and trust the system hence, provide more accurate data. This can be achieved with the collaborative efforts between the system developers, guidance counseling office, and the university administrators.

The system must also have a strong back-end and database structure since it will be collecting tons of data from the students. To increase the value of the project, the system should also be able to produce various data-analysis and reports that fit the needs of the whole institution and future studies.

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## СТАВЛЕННЯ СТУДЕНТІВ ДО РОЗВИТКУ ОНЛАЙН СИСТЕМИ КОНСУЛЬТУВАННЯ

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**Анотація.** Інформаційні та комунікаційні технології (ІКТ) впливають на розвиток систем консультування (СК) у багатьох вищих навчальних закладах (ВНЗ). Проте, існує значний цифровий розрив між ІКТ і СК у багатьох ВНЗ. У статті представлені результати оцінювання ставлення студентів до розробки онлайн системи консультування у приватному університеті на Філіппінах. Респондентами виступили 348 студентів вищого навчального закладу, які були опитувані протягом 1-го семестру 2014-2015 навчального року. Було використане адаптоване анкетування. Дослідження показує, що, незважаючи на те, що студенти не в повну міру використовують СК, вони демонструють позитивне ставлення до запропонованої системи. Результати оцінювання демонструють здатність студентів адаптуватися до онлайн середовища як альтернативного очному консультуванню. На підставі результатів зроблено висновок, що розробка онлайн системи консультування є перспективною для університету.

**Ключові слова:** електронне навчання; інформаційні системи; онлайн система консультування; ІКТ в освіті

## ОТНОШЕНИЕ СТУДЕНТОВ К РАЗВИТИЮ ОНЛАЙН СИСТЕМЫ КОНСУЛЬТИРОВАНИЯ

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**Аннотация.** Информационные и коммуникационные технологии (ИКТ) влияют на развитие систем консультирования (СК) во многих высших учебных заведениях (ВУЗ). Однако, существует значительный цифровой разрыв между ИКТ и СК во многих вузах. В статье

представлены результаты оценивания отношения студентов к разработке онлайн системы консультирования в частном университете на Филиппинах. Респондентами выступили 348 студентов высшего учебного заведения, которые были опрошены в течение 1-го семестра 2014-2015 учебного года. Было использовано адаптированное анкетирование. Исследование показывает, что, несмотря на то, что студенты не в полную меру используют СК, они демонстрируют положительное отношение к предложенной системе. Результаты оценивания демонстрируют способность студентов адаптироваться к онлайн среде как альтернативной очному консультированию. На основании результатов сделан вывод, что разработка онлайн системы консультирования является перспективной для университета.

**Ключевые слова:** электронное обучение; информационные системы; онлайн система консультирования; ИКТ в образовании

**Conflict of interest.** The authors have declared no conflict of interest.



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