

# A Comparative Study Of College Counseling Preferences: Face-To-Face Vs. Online Counseling

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## Abstract

Two years ago, the sudden transition to online education mandated a transformation of counseling services into remote work. This non-experimental quantitative research study was conducted to examine college students' preferences and attitudes toward counseling services in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and investigate the continuation of receiving online counseling sessions based on the attitude toward face-to-face counseling. A sample of 416 college students was surveyed using the Face-to-Face Counseling Attitudes Scale (FCAS) and the Online Counseling Attitudes Scale (OCAS) (Rochlen et al., 2004). The results showed that higher education students in the UAE have positive attitudes towards both face-to-face and online counseling, with a higher preference for face-to-face counseling over online one. In addition, results showed that online counseling and face-to-face counseling are positively related and students' attitudes towards face-to-face can predict the continuation of receiving the counseling services with 19% attribution to attitudes towards the face-to-face counseling.

**Keywords:** online counseling; face-to-face counseling; e-therapy; students counseling; counseling in the UAE

## Introduction

In the past two years, and during the outbreak of COVID – 19, a rapid change in daily lifestyle has been in place, which mandates shifting to online mode, so, people started dealing with many challenges. These challenges include job loss, salary reduction, fear for health, unfamiliarity with new social interaction rules, and general worry about subjective well-being. Research studies highlighted the negative impact of the COVID – 19 epidemic on people's mental and physical health. As it was shown that the number of people whose mental health has been influenced during epidemics is greater

than the number of people whose physical health has been affected by the infection spreading during the epidemic (Ornell et al., 2020). Moreover, the research study of (Taquet et al., 2021) revealed that those who have no previous record of psychiatric disorders, when they were diagnosed with COVID – 19, it was linked to a first psychiatric diagnosis.

The sudden transition to the online mode demands counseling services to be delivered virtually as well as to meet clients' needs. Colleges and schools need to grow their reliance on providing counseling services to students during the lockdown

period. In addition, it was revealed that in Arab countries around 17.7% of the population experience depression, furthermore, the stigma related to mental health disorders prevents people from seeking mental therapy (Mental Health, 2020). Thus, online therapy could be a solution for those who consider social stigma. Therefore, there is a need to facilitate student counseling by providing online counseling. As the attitudes towards face-to-face counseling have been studied broadly (Rochlen et al., 2004), attitudes towards online counseling, in the UAE need to be studied to determine the students' preference and their willingness to continue seeking counseling services.

This research study aims to achieve these objectives: (1) measuring the attitudes of college students in the UAE towards online and face-to-face counseling, (2) exploring students' preferences towards face-to-face counseling and online counseling to understand the differences in attitudes, and (3) exploring the relationship between students' attitude towards face-to-face and online counseling. This research article discusses the counseling services that are offered only inside higher education institutions in the UAE. For this study, Attitude refers to students' acceptance of online counseling and the willingness to seek it when the traditional one is not available. Traditional counseling here refers to face-to-face (F2F) counseling. The preference here refers to students' choice of counseling mode. Attitudes toward online and face-to-face counseling are measured by the Online and Face-to-Face Counseling Attitudes Scale (OCAS) and (FCAS) developed by (Rochlen et al., 2004). The current study conceptualizes online counseling as the psychological and emotional support services provided over the internet to students by therapists and mental health professionals on campus. As there is not sufficient research on this area in

the UAE, this increases the demand for inquiring into the topic.

The findings of this study will benefit the higher education settings in the UAE in terms of providing clarification about the students' attitudes and preferences toward college counseling services. From a global perspective, the findings will enrich the base of knowledge about college counseling services. Because the UAE hosts a diverse group of people, so measuring preferences towards counseling diverse students from different ethnicities will attract readers across the globe.

## Literature Review

### Online Counseling

A few decades ago, online counseling has been initiated and utilized to provide e – therapy and help people to preserve a healthy mentality. while online counseling became available and broadly used, many research studies (e.g., Rochlen et al., 2004; The et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2018) showed a higher preference for face-to-face over online counseling. Today, the availability of an internet connection became the main requirement for several educational institutions. Internet technologies enable delivering psychological support services remotely (Ritterband et al., 2003a). Online counseling services have been available before the pandemic. A few decades ago, online counseling has been viewed as a potential method for reaching clients who are not accessible via traditional counseling services, furthermore, online counseling was found to be more convenient for clients with a lower cost than traditional counseling (Barak, 1999; Murphy & Mitchell, 1998; Tait, 1999). Internet services provide easy and instantaneous access to highly specialized interventions from therapists regardless of any geographical limitations. Many terms explain the concept of online counseling such as telepsychology (APA, 2013), e-therapy (Scala et al., 2012), online

therapy (Rochlen et al., 2004), internet therapy (Pihlaja et al., 2018), enter therapy (Lange et al., 2000), and e-counseling (Harun et al., 2001).

Online counseling provides facilities to clients, it can be delivered either synchronously or asynchronously through various online communication programs. These therapies may include interactive or static websites to enable users to access information and suggestions about their concerns and issues (Barak & Bloch, 2006). Synchronous counseling refers to live counseling sessions where the client and therapist are simultaneously conversating with each other either through text, audio, or video chat programs (Richards & Tangney, 2008; Barak & Bloch, 2006). Online therapy sessions include simulation programs (Botella et al., 2008), and stand-alone self-directed software (Ritterband et al., 2003b). Asynchronous services involve clients posting online submissions or sending emails to a therapist, a mental health clinic, or a website, they receive responses on their issues (Richards, 2009).

### **Attitudes Towards Online Counseling**

Preferences and attitudes towards counseling differ among people. Previous studies demonstrated that people prefer face-to-face over online counseling, however, people expressed neutral to slightly positive attitudes toward online counseling (Rochlen et al., 2004; Bathje et al., 2014). The researchers attributed the preference for face-to-face over online counseling to participants' discomfort with using online counseling technology (Bathje et al., 2014). On the other hand, a research study was conducted on online support group therapy for Asian American men, the results revealed promising findings for online counseling over face-to-face counseling (Chang & Chang, 2004). Researchers suggest that these findings or the preference for online counseling are because of the

participants' comfort with anonymity and accessibility in online therapy (Chang & Chang, 2004).

A study that reviewed 65 papers on videoconferencing in online counseling showed its effectiveness (Backhaus et al., 2012). A research study was conducted to explore the attitudes demonstrated by psychology graduate students towards face-to-face and online counseling, although the results showed a satisfying positive attitude towards online counseling, participants still prefer the face-to-face mode of counseling (The et al., 2014). The participants attributed their preference for face-to-face counseling to it providing a higher sense of empathy, emotional support, connection, and confidentiality (The et al., 2014). Furthermore, the Clinical Psychology graduates indicated their willingness and openness to conduct online therapy sessions because they address social stigma issues anonymously (The et al., 2014).

### **Benefits of Online Counseling**

Research studies indicated the benefits of online counseling, which are explained here:

- **Convenience and Ease of Access**  
Online counseling is convenient for people who have barriers to language, mobility, time, and accessibility to physical and mental health centers (Rochlen et al., 2004). Based on (Richards, 2009), students found online counseling more convenient because it provides easy access to text-based online counseling at any time, even outside counseling office hours, which enabled them to write about their emotions and the minute they are happening instead of waiting for the appointment to come (Richards, 2009).
- **Self-Disclosure and Disinhibition**  
Users of the internet tend to say things online that they would not otherwise say directly during face-to-face counseling, which is known as "disinhibition". According to Suler (2004), disinhibition encourages self-expression and self-

reflection during online text-based counseling sessions, which makes it easier for therapists to gain insight into their client's concerns and provide effective interventions. Furthermore, sessions conducted through voice chat or videoconferencing have been proven through research to encourage self-disclosure (Simpson & Reid, 2014). A study by (Bambling et al., 2008) reported that text-based counseling users felt more comfortable and Counselors in this study also reported that clients were less likely to resist opening up and discussing their issues (Bambling et al., 2008).

On the other hand, online counseling includes some challenges such as a lack of nonverbal cues, which hinders achieving the therapy goals. It was found that nonverbal communication like eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, posture, body language, and tone of speaking impact the efficacy of therapy (Hall et al., 1995). Moreover, efficient use of time is a barrier for counseling, which refers to pausing in the conversation to compose a message or a reply that reduces time efficiency (Bambling et al., 2008).

### **Counseling in the UAE**

The concept of counseling in the UAE refers to providing guidance services. As stated by (Al-Darmaki, 2015), "guiding someone to the right path" (p. 107). Broadly, counseling in the UAE is viewed as advising regarding academic issues, raising kids, or providing marriage therapy, hence, counseling can be offered by social workers, advisors, or family consultants. Despite the mentioned specialization, counseling services should be offered by experts in the field of counseling psychology with its theories and implementation. In addition, people of the UAE used to choose from face-to-face and online counseling. as the spread of the COVID – 19 epidemic, people may go for online counseling to follow the safety measure.

Since online counseling has spread in the UAE, people started to familiarize themselves with it and use it to avoid the social stigma that may result because of face-to-face counseling. The transition to online mode supports the adoption of online counseling. Telemedicine is a form of online counseling that has become broadly spread, verified, and institutionalized all over the UAE, because of the adoption of the online mode in the last couple of years. Previously, online counseling was suggested as an effective method that eliminates barriers and challenges present in the face-to-face counseling, now it has gained a new role as an essential service that helps people cope with challenges during a pandemic without spreading the virus through physical proximity or contact. Telemedicine is defined as using and exchanging medical information between sites electronically to enhance clients' mental health states (American Telemedicine Association, 2020).

### **College Counseling in the UAE**

College students in the UAE like any other college students across the globe, experience many common problems such as depression, anxiety, lack of motivation, or adaptation issues (Al-Darmaki, 2011). In addition to the academic concerns, many other issues could influence college students' mental health including the fast cultural, social, and economic transformation in the UAE as a country that hosts numerous numbers of people from different ethnicities and backgrounds. Notwithstanding, research findings revealed that many people in the UAE are not motivated to seek counseling help because of the prevalence of some negative thoughts and feelings about counseling assistance (Al-Krenawi et al., 2009). Usually, higher education Emirati students resort to college counseling centers to seek help with anxiety because of learning, adjustment issues, career concerns, and other psychological issues related to

learning and examinations. Despite all these mentioned concerns, many college students are irresolute to seek assistance from college counselors (Al-Krenawi et al., 2009). The research outcomes of (Heath et al., 2016) suggested that college students' attitudes towards seeking help are indirectly associated with social stigma, feared the loss of face, and self-disclosing to a counselor. In the UAE, most of the higher education institutions establish a counseling center that is directed by a specialist with a doctorate in psychology and counseling. The college counseling centers provide individuals with more opportunities to see the wider perspective of situations and arrive at sound decisions. As stated by 19 college counselors from different higher education institutions, the college counseling centers in the UAE are aiming to achieve the following objectives:

- (1) Providing counseling, career counseling, mental health awareness, and community involvement.
- (2) Helping students to develop self-development and self-understanding, and reach their maximum full potential.
- (3) Empower students by creating caring environments through offering workshops for personal and professional development that enhance various skills.

These counseling services used to be offered face-to-face like any educational services, however, these counseling services have been sifted to a virtual mode of delivery after the transition to online learning.

### Research Questions

The following research questions are proposed to achieve the purpose of the study.

1. What are college students' attitudes towards online and face-to-face counseling

as measured by the OCAS and FCAS in the UAE?

2. What is the preference for counseling mode among college students in the UAE?

3. What is the relationship between students' attitudes towards face-to-face and their attitudes towards online counseling as measured by the OCAS and FCAS in the UAE?

### Methods

This is a nonexperimental, quantitative research study that aims to investigate students' attitudes toward online counseling after the transition to online education mode and compare them to their attitudes toward face-to-face counseling. According to Cook and Cook (2008), this type of study is essential to provide a descriptive basis for future experimental research which will yield results of evidence-based practices that continuously develop and improve based on proven methods.

### Sample

A total of 416 undergraduate students who are enrolled in different colleges and universities in the UAE were surveyed. Students were allowed to participate only if they are enrolled in the on-campus face-to-face counseling sessions, which have been shifted to online counseling after the transition to online learning. The sample of 416 consists of students  $n = 174$  (41.8%) males and  $n = 242$  (58.2%) females. The sample's age ranged from 18 – 38 years with a median of 24, age is categorized and displayed in (Table 1). The sample represents a diverse group of students from different backgrounds enrolled in colleges and universities in the UAE as displayed in (Table 2).

Table 1. Distribution and Percentages of Participants by Age Group

			Cumulative
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
			Percent

Valid	18-24	260	62.5	62.5	62.5
	25-31	109	26.2	26.2	88.7
	32-38	47	11.3	11.3	100.0
	Total	416	100.0	100.0	

N= 416

Table 2. Distribution and Percentages of Participants by Nationality

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	UAE	115	27.6	27.6	27.6
	Egypt	25	6.0	6.0	33.7
	Lebanon	5	1.2	1.2	34.9
	Syria	64	15.4	15.4	50.2
	Palestine	20	4.8	4.8	55.0
	Jordan	48	11.5	11.5	66.6
	Yemen	14	3.4	3.4	70.0
	KSA	5	1.2	1.2	71.2
	Iraq	24	5.8	5.8	76.9
	Tunisia	14	3.4	3.4	80.3
	USA	9	2.2	2.2	82.5
	India	43	10.3	10.3	92.8
	Pakistan	21	5.0	5.0	97.8
	Sudan	9	2.2	2.2	100.0
	Total	416	100.0	100.0	

### Instrumentation

To achieve the purpose of this research article, 3 sections questionnaire was used and developed on Google forms to facilitate data collection. Section I: Face-to-Face Counseling Attitudes Scale (FCAS) developed by (Rochlen et al., 2004), a 10 – item Likert scale that measures attitudes towards face-to-face counseling. FCAS is divided into two sections, each containing 5 items. Each 5 items section represents a factor describing participants' attitudes. The first factor is the Value of Face-to-Face Counseling which represents participants' general perceptions of the utility of face-to-face counseling for themselves and others. While Discomfort with Face-to-Face Counseling is the second factor that represents participants' degree of ease and comfort with face-to-face counseling. All 10 items are a 5-point Likert scale with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 5 indicating “strongly agree”. According to

Rochlen et al. (2004), the higher the score, the more positive attitudes toward face-to-face. An example of the items in the scale includes “I would feel uneasy discussing emotional problems with a face-to-face counselor”.

Section II: Online Counseling Attitudes Scale (OCAS) (Rochlen et al., 2004), which contains 10 – Similarly to FCAS, the OCAS is divided into two groups of 5 items each, that describe the two factors mentioned previously with the unique distinction that the items in this scale specifically refer to online counseling instead of face-to-face counseling. The items were rated in the same way as the FCAS. An example of the items in this scale includes “I would feel uneasy discussing emotional problems with an online counselor”.

### Section III: Demographics Survey

The demographic survey was created to provide basic demographic information such as participants' gender, age, educational

level, and nationality. There are four questions asked participants to confirm if they are enrolled in face-to-face or online counseling, with their college counselor. Those who are not enrolled in counseling sessions were removed from the study.

### **Instrumentation Validity and Reliability**

The measurement scale was proven to have high reliability. According to (Rochlen et al., 2004 & Bathje et al, 2014), Cronbach's alpha  $\alpha$  for Face – to – Face scale ranged from 0.77 to 0.90, and for the Online scale,  $\alpha$  ranged from 0.77 to 0.88. In addition, (Wong et al., 2018) demonstrated that Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the scale ranged from 0.77 to 0.90. For this research study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was calculated to evaluate the internal consistency between the items of the Face-to-face Counseling Attitudes Scale, and the Online Counseling Attitudes Scale. Data analysis revealed that the scale has a high internal consistency between its items, which indicates high reliability. Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$  for face-to-face counseling and,  $\alpha = .88$  for Online counseling, therefore, the measurement scale is reliable for this research study. For instrument validity, the instrument was sent to a panel of 3 experts in counseling in the UAE to confirm its validity for use and distribution among higher education students in the UAE.

### **Data Collection**

After getting the approval (IRB) from the researcher's institution, the consent form was developed to ensure adherence to the ethical codes and protect participants' rights. The questionnaire was modeled on Google Forms with the study description and the consent form. The researcher contacted many college counselors explaining the purpose of the study and seeking access to a virtual session to gather students and invite them to participate in the study. The college counselors sent the invitation to students

seeking their participation, explaining that participation is voluntary. The researcher contacted 23 college counselors in 21 different institutions, and 18 counselors accepted to collaborate. The researcher presented the study well and posted the study link and explained the way to answer the questions. The virtual session for data collection lasts from 30 – 45 minutes per institution. The researcher and the college counselors were available during data collection to answer any questions. Data collection was conducted at the beginning of February 2021 and continued for 9 weeks. Data was transferred to SPSS version 22 for analysis and interpretation. The researcher asked all counselors who accept the invitation to write an essay about the counseling services that their institution offers to the students. All data received from counselors was analyzed and added to the literature review because it is not a research finding of any of the proposed research questions.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

Before starting the data analysis, the researchers addressed all issues related to missing values, outliers, homogeneity of variance, normality, and independence. To answer the first and second research questions, descriptive data analysis revealed that undergraduate higher education students in the UAE have a positive attitude towards both face-to-face and online counseling with ( $M= 3.8269, SD= .93615$ ) and ( $M= 3.4293, SD= .97021$ ) respectively. Comparing the mean scores/students' attitudes towards both counseling modes, the face-to-face showed a higher mean compared to the online mode. Cohen's  $d$  was calculated to find the effect size, it showed that  $d= 0.42$ , according to (Cohen, 1992) this represents a medium-sized effect, which indicates that students express a higher preference for face-to-face than online counseling. To find out the relationship

between students' attitudes towards face-to-face counseling and online counseling, Pearson Correlation Coefficient  $r$  was conducted,  $r=.436$ ,  $p<.001$  is statistically significant which represents a medium positive correlation between the student's attitudes towards face-to-face and online counseling. Simple Linear Regression was conducted to predict whether students' attitudes towards face-to-face can predict their attitudes toward online counseling, which may predict the students' acceptance and willingness to continue receiving online counseling services. All issues related to assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity were addressed. Data analysis showed that  $R^2 = 19\%$  of the total variance in students' attitudes towards

online counseling is accounted for their attitudes towards face-to-face,  $F(1, 414) = 97.011$ ,  $p<.001$  is statistically significant indicating that there is a linear relationship between students' attitudes towards face-to-face and their attitudes towards online counseling. The regression model is represented as follows:

$$\text{Attitudes Towards Online Counseling} = 1.7 + 0.45 * \text{Attitudes Towards Face-to-Face Counseling}$$

Thus, for each 1 unit increase in students' attitudes towards face-to-face counseling, students' attitudes towards online counseling increase by 0.45 units (See Figure 1).

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	Total	416	100.0	100.0	

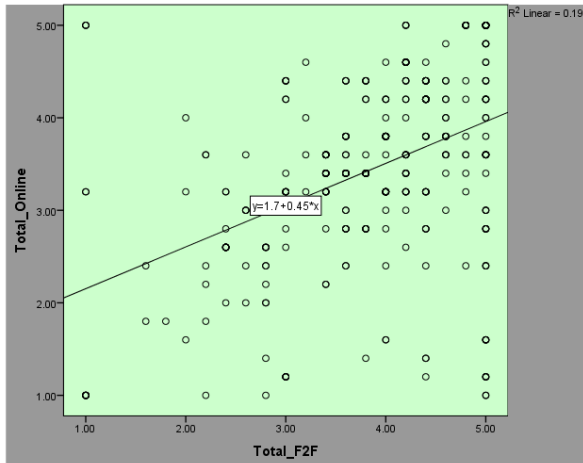
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	Palestine	20	4.8	4.8	55.0
	Jordan	48	11.5	11.5	66.6
	Yemen	14	3.4	3.4	70.0
	KSA	5	1.2	1.2	71.2
	Iraq	24	5.8	5.8	76.9
	Tunisia	14	3.4	3.4	80.3
	USA	9	2.2	2.2	82.5
	India	43	10.3	10.3	92.8
	Pakistan	21	5.0	5.0	97.8
	Sudan	9	2.2	2.2	100.0
	Total	416	100.0	100.0	

Figure 1. The Relationship Between Face-to-Face and Online Counselling





## Discussion

The emergence of technology and its application in therapy has caused the adoption of online counseling by many therapists and clients. This research study examines undergraduate students' attitudes toward online and face-to-face counseling while examining the correlation between students' attitudes toward face-to-face and online counseling. The findings of this study revealed that undergraduate students in the UAE have a positive attitude towards both counseling modes with a preference for face-to-face over online counseling. The outcomes indicate that higher education students in the UAE are aware of the critical role of college counseling in boosting their subjective well-being and can cope with social stigma to maintain good mental health. The implementation of these results can be found in college counseling to improve students' academic support by ensuring students' sustainability of attending regular counseling sessions. Universities should still offer and provide both face-to-face and online counseling sessions to increase students' sustainability in seeking counseling services. The higher preference for face-to-face counseling could be explained as a student's desire to physical empathizing and attach with the counselor and the high degree of accepting face-to-face as a traditional mode of counseling.

Furthermore, these findings show that participants consider the social rapport with the counselor, emphasizing the importance of the therapeutic alliance, or the participants view face-to-face as a traditional style that still has its value. These results agree with the findings of Rochlen et al., (2004) and (Wong et al., 2018) who found that undergraduate students expressed a preference for face-to-face counseling more than the online mode. The current results are supported by the findings of Tannous (2017), who revealed that higher education students have a positive attitude towards counseling, however, this is a contradiction in the students' preference for counseling mode. In this study, students prefer face-to-face, however, in the study of Tannous (2017), students showed a higher preference for online counseling and perceived online counseling as a good solution to their daily life problems and concerns. The findings of Tannous (2017) are consistent with those (Tanrikulu, 2009) who demonstrated participants' higher preference for online counseling. Thus, these results could be interpreted in the following contexts: confidentiality, avoidance of embarrassment that online counseling provides to clients, easy accessibility, or the desire of adopting e-therapy techniques as an updated style that saves time and cost for the participants of (Tannous, 2017 & Tanrikulu, 2009).

The positive correlation between students' attitudes toward face-to-face counseling and online counseling indicates that students' acceptance of online counseling is related to their perception of the importance of counseling in general regardless of the style. Moreover, undergraduate students in the UAE can shift to online counseling as they shift to online learning, which could be interpreted in terms of having high e-self-efficacy and resilience that enable them to adapt successfully to online counseling. Findings of the positive correlation between face-to-face and online counseling emphasized that undergraduate students could continue seeking counseling services if they need it; however, the counseling type does not affect seeking counseling. This result could be integrated into the student's annual orientation to include offering e – sessions to spread a positive perception about online counseling and explaining its benefits to students.

**Limitations** of this study underlie the correlational design does not provide an explicit cause and effect that can be interpreted, and the correlation between face-to-face and online counseling could be explained by an external variable. Finally, people have varying levels of comfort with using technology which could influence their perceptions of online counseling.

### **Conclusion**

The primary focus of this study was to investigate college students' attitudes towards both face-to-face and online college counseling services, then find out the students' preferred mode of counseling. In addition, finding out the nature of the relationship between college students' attitudes toward face-to-face and their attitudes toward online counseling. Results showed that college students in the UAE have positive attitudes towards both face-to-face and online counseling, however, they are identified with higher positive attitudes

towards face-to-face than online counseling, which indicates students' preference and consideration of the physical social context in counseling, and they feel comfortable with the face-to-face counseling. The results revealed that students' attitudes towards face-to-face counseling are positively correlated with their attitudes towards online counseling, the more students' attitudes towards face-to-face increase, the more attitudes towards online counseling increase. Therefore, students who have a positive attitude towards face-to-face counseling will view online counseling more positively than students who do not prefer face-to-face counseling. These findings indicate that higher education students in the UAE can cope with the COVID – 19 pandemic and shift from face-to-face to online counseling services smoothly.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of the current study present effective implications for college counselors, clinicians, practitioners, and therapists who are working with higher education Emirati students. The implications include the following; first, Design outreach programs to increase the attitude towards counseling and preference towards online counseling targeting higher education students. Offer regular orientations for students to highlight the critical role of college counseling in helping students emotionally, and academically, and boosting their subjective well-being. An awareness campaign should be spread among Emirati students emphasizing the easy access and confidentiality of online counseling and the avoidance of social stigma to increase the perception and attitudes towards online counseling. In addition, offering mock virtual counseling sessions to introduce and familiarize students with the online counseling sessions.

Future research related to the findings of this study should focus on examining the effect of the online therapeutic outcome vs. the

face-to-face counseling outcome, considering some other variables such as gender and ethnicity and how they could influence the counseling outcomes. Furthermore, the research study could focus on examining the impact of college counseling sessions on improving students' mental health and academic achievements to highlight the role of college counseling.

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