

Chapter 5

Exploring Affordances and Limitations of 3D Virtual Worlds in Psychoeducational Group Counseling

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential affordances and challenges of 3D virtual environments in psychoeducational group counseling. The research design was based on multiple case study methodology. Face-to-face and 3D virtual psychoeducational counseling groups were formed that focused on procrastination, and multiple forms of data were collected from both groups' participants. The study's results revealed that perceived affordances of the 3D environment for group counseling were similar in both groups, with self-disclosure, anonymity, convenience, interactive environment, and accessible content as the emerged affordances. However, the study also revealed mixed results in terms of perceived challenges. While interaction issues, multitasking, lack of social interaction, and trust concerns emerged as common to both groups, factors such as technical issues and negative attitudes towards virtual intervention were revealed as divergent themes. Intervention outcome results revealed similar patterns in terms of procrastination behavior change in both groups.

INTRODUCTION

Education's role is no longer perceived solely as academic development, with social and psychological development having also become a key area of responsibility. The college learning period, in particular,

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constitutes a unique life stage during which many individuals experience a significant level of change. As such, they are required to cope with issues of identity, socialization, as well as adaptation to university life and an academic career. These challenges have led to increasing demands for psychological support among university students (Erkan et al., 2011). A growing body of literature in recent years has identified the most significant problems faced by students, and their patterns of seeking help in order to deal with these issues (Aluede et al., 2006; Çebi, 2009; Erkan et al., 2012; Güneri et al., 2003; Koydemir et al., 2010; Rickwood et al., 2005; Schwitzer, 2005). Schwitzer (2005) surveyed undergraduate students and revealed their major concerns to be academic issues, followed by emotional problems, and career-related concerns. Similarly, a number of studies have reported that academic, career, emotional, and social issues are the highest-ranking problems amongst college students (Atik & Yalçın, 2010; Erkan et al., 2012). Therefore, higher education institutions bear a responsibility to develop appropriate interventions for their students, and to actively provide support so as to help students deal with these difficulties (Richards, 2009). Many universities have made significant efforts to develop counseling and guidance services in response to the mental health and academic development needs of their students.

Despite the growing importance of college student counseling services (Güneri, 2006), many universities struggle with the logistical challenges of meeting the increasing demand (Kincade & Kalodner, 2004; Riva & Haub, 2004). The evolution of information and communication technologies has greatly impacted on educational reforms, and has raised the question of whether or not computer mediated communication (CMC) tools can be appropriately utilized in student counseling. Travers and Benton (2014) asserted that today's rapidly advancing technology may offer promising options for the development of innovative and effective interventions in universities. Furthermore, students' usage of CMC tools for communication and collaboration is increasing exponentially, which could therefore be leveraged in order to help students master the complex psychosocial skills of today's information age.

BACKGROUND

Online Counseling

Mallen and Vogel (2005) defined online counseling as;

Any delivery of mental and behavioral health services, including but not limited to therapy, consultation, and psychoeducation, by a licensed practitioner to a client in a non-FtF setting through distance communication technologies such as the telephone, asynchronous e-mail, synchronous chat, and videoconferencing. (p. 764)

The evolution of communication technologies has had a significant impact on CMC in both online counseling practice and academic research. This trend has affected both counselors' and their clients' attitudes towards online counseling (Richards & Viganó, 2013), with technology-based communication becoming an indispensable part of daily life. Research comparing online and face-to-face counseling has revealed that the virtual intervention modality is just as effective as the archetypal face-to-face form of counseling (Pordelan et al., 2018).

A considerable volume of theoretical and empirical literature has been published on the affordances and challenges of online counseling (Baker & Ray, 2011; Rochlen et al., 2004). Some of the highlighted

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