

Chapter 24

Online Therapy During COVID–19 and Beyond: Evaluation of Online Therapists Using Level–Based Weight Assessment Method

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ABSTRACT

The quarantine measures taken to prevent the risk of transmitting COVID-19 have seriously affected the mental health of many people. Therefore, the demand for online therapy services has increased even more in this era. This chapter aims to provide guidance to individuals in choosing the most suitable online therapist from the array of available options through the development of a decision model. In this direction, the criteria that potential clients pay attention to when choosing therapists will be weighted with level-based weight assessment (LBWA) method. This study holds importance in shedding light on the criteria that clients prioritize when evaluating online therapists and how therapists are assessed based on these criteria. The absence of quantitative research on the evaluation of online therapists underscores a gap in the existing literature, highlighting the originality and significance of this study.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ways and forms of interpersonal communication have changed due to the rapidly developing and spreading technology (Rochlen et al., 2004). Many communications that used to be face-to-face are increasingly being carried out through online channels (Zeren and Bulut, 2018). In recent years, great importance has been attached to the use of information and communication technologies in various fields such as education and health (Rochlen et al., 2004). Especially, advances in digital technology have a significant impact on traditional healthcare systems (McDonald et al., 2020). Through the integration of technologies with healthcare systems, diagnosing disease, monitoring patient's health conditions, robotic surgeries can be conducted (Mohanta et al., 2019). Online therapy is also one of the services that can be performed by the individuals who provide and receive the treatment by using a tool supported by information and communication technology (ICT) as a therapy environment (Oktay et al., 2021; Zeren and Bulut, 2018).

The concept of online therapy, which emerged from the term behavioral telehealth, refers to the application of telecommunications and technological knowledge to provide behavioral health services (Cardenas et al., 2008). It is a professional help service in which the client (patient) and the therapist communicate using electronic resources while they are in separate or distant places (Zeren and Bulut, 2018). The various terms used to describe such services generally refer to online psychotherapy. Other terms for online therapy which are mostly interchangeable with one another, include telehealth, behavioral telehealth, tele-mental health, telepsychology, tele-counseling, teletherapy, cyber counseling, cyber-therapy, internet therapy, internet counseling, internet-based treatment, e-therapy, e-counseling, e-psychotherapy, e-mental health, distance counseling, web counseling, web therapy, web psychotherapy, online counseling, interapy, online psychotherapy, computer-mediated (assisted) therapy (Cardenas et al., 2008, de Bitencourt Machado et al., 2016, Poyrazlı and Can, 2020, Stoll et al., 2020, Tuzgöl, 2020,).

Remote psychological support services are provided by the use of various technological resources (Oktay et al., 2021). Online therapies are carried out in the form of instant correspondence, telephone counseling over the internet, and real-time counseling via video conference. With the widespread use of the internet and smartphones, the number of individuals or groups who prefer internet-based treatment is increasing. Thus, experts and clients can interact and communicate instantly by using internet-connected communication technologies from different places (Bozkurt, 2013).

Online therapy is an alternative to face-to-face therapy, while can also be considered a supplement of it (Stoll et al., 2020). Convenience, greater accessibility, asynchronous communication, easy applicability, time flexibility, protection of privacy, low cost, and free location are stated as benefits of online therapy for both clients and therapists (Cárdenas et al., 2008; Harris and Birnbaum, 2015; Mallen et al., 2005, Poyrazlı and Can, 2020; Richards and Viganó, 2013). Apart from these, it also offers extra advantages for therapists by providing the elimination of some expenses such as rented places, parking lots, and secretaries. Furthermore, online therapy offers significant advantages to individuals who face challenges in accessing traditional in-person therapy. This includes individuals who are physically or mentally unable to leave their homes due to health issues, economic constraints, or other reasons. It also benefits those residing in remote areas, far from traditional mental health centers, as well as individuals who frequently travel and find it difficult to commit to in-person sessions. Online therapy can also be a more comfortable option for those who have difficulty expressing themselves in face-to-face settings or who are concerned about the potential stigma associated with seeking mental health services at physical treatment centers (Aktürk, 2020; Zeren and Bulut, 2018).

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