

Narrative Analysis on the Experiences of Filipino Guidance Advocates in Online Counseling during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the experiences of guidance advocates during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their attitudes and viewpoints on online counseling. It aids schools, administrators, parents, students, researchers, and professional associations in supporting efficient services. In telling their stories, eight (8) participants expounded their personal, positional, and ideological understandings of their experiences and the implications of life circumstances. Narrative analysis was employed to better comprehend the experiences and produced the following narratives: beginning—onset of online counseling; middle—building client-practitioner relationships and effective online counseling strategies; and end—closing the online counseling intervention. It further identified ten (10) themes that defined the participants' collective experiences: (1) experiencing feelings of limitation and a sense of uncertainty; (2) experiencing feelings of openness, perseverance, and patience; (3) experiencing a sense of fulfillment, happiness, and hope; (4) perceived role as a beacon of hope in times of uncertainty; (5) perceived role as a formator of growth; (6) perceived role as a helping partner; (7) online counseling as an alternative support modality; (8) guidance advocates as aids in the formation of growth; (9) online counseling as an alternative mode and part of the holistic mental health services; and (10) guidance advocates stronger commitment amidst the challenges. Guidance advocates provide hope and support to clients, recognizing the importance of self-care, skill acquisition, and mental and physical preparation for service challenges.

Keywords: *guidance advocates, online counseling, Covid-19 pandemic, wellbeing, narrative analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted mental health, wellbeing, and education, leading to lockdowns, physical distancing, and economic difficulties which somehow resulted in experiencing loss, grief, and fear. Schools have had to adapt to online classes and self-taught learning methods, resulting in having the Guidance office as a crucial source of mental health aid for students, as they struggle with the loss and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. It had affected the mental health and well-being of Filipinos, leading to increased anxiety and negative effects on learning and motivation [1]. Students struggled to adapt to new learning methods, and concerns arose about their existing skills coping with academic demands [2]. The Department of Education (DepEd) partnered with organizations to provide psychosocial support and recommended online counseling, as long as it provides a safe and confidential space [3].

Telepsychology, also known as web therapy, phone therapy, or online therapy, is a form of counseling delivered using devices like computers or phones [4]. It replicates the facilitative conditions of face-to-face counseling, is cost-efficient, and is timely due to the pandemic. However, it presents challenges for both

clients and healthcare providers [5]. The Philippines faces a shortage of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) to support 20 million public school students. As of May 2020, there were only 1,097 active counselors, and by June 2022, there are only 4,069 RGCs, according to Sen. Sherwin Gatchalian [2]. Online therapy has become increasingly popular during COVID-19, aiding in anxiety management, and discussing controllable and uncontrollable issues. However, few qualitative studies explore its practical application [6].

Organizations provide guidance and counseling to support personal, social, academic, and professional growth, aiming for personal happiness and societal usefulness through private sessions and diverse perspectives [7]. Guidance advocates who are graduate-level professionals play a crucial role in the educational system, assisting students, parents, teachers, and administrators in developing peer interactions, self-confidence, and organizational abilities [8]. Due to a lack of licensed guidance counselors, they fill in and provide tailored solutions. Guidance advocates assist in assisting students in accessing professional help from mental health professionals, informing them about mental health issues, and collaborating with them. They conduct intake interviews, prepare necessary documents, and conduct counseling sessions. Alongside teachers, they assist in career advocacy programs.

However, due to a shortage of registered guidance counselors, some schools allow these advocates to perform other duties, limiting their availability for the learners and effectiveness in facilitating counseling services. The pandemic has posed challenges for guidance advocates, including adapting to tele-behavioral health, supporting clients' changing needs, and handling overbooked cases. The COVID-19 pandemic led to drastic changes in mental health care, requiring services to be transferred to online platforms. Ethical considerations like competence, informed consent, privacy, and security have drawn interest from trained mental health professionals, requiring further research [9]. They must also balance personal responsibilities alongside professional challenges. With these, it is important for different institutions to prioritize the wellbeing of their students and their guidance advocates. COVID-19 experiences reveal attitudes towards online counseling, benefiting different areas of concern. The study validated the experiences of guidance advocates, highlighting their significant contributions to the mental health profession. It provided insights on effective practices for online counseling, helping advocates maintain their wellbeing while delivering efficient services. The findings can be applied to in-person counseling, particularly during the transition from online to face-to-face settings. The researcher explores the experiences of guidance advocates during the pandemic, focusing on their perceptions of wellness programs, self-care practices, and retention. Despite their critical role, there is limited research on their experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Narratives are subjective, linguistic expressions of lived experiences that impact both the narrator and listener. The narrative theory framework posits that individuals' views of themselves, and their environments develop within culturally mediated social interactions. It emphasizes postmodern ideas, storytelling as a natural human tendency, multiple storylines, and the influence of culture on lives. The framework also suggests that problems are externalized from individuals within the narrative framework [10]. This study used narrative analysis as a guide to aid in understanding the stories and experiences of guidance advocates who have experienced online counseling during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis was composed of a beginning, middle, and end, which helped in defining the human experiences of the participants as a whole.

Using Murray's narrative analysis framework, it allows participants to convey their experiences and meanings of life events in relation to their identity at the personal, positional, and ideological levels [11]. At the personal level of analysis, this allows the individuals to organize their perception and their evaluation of the social setting they live in when an important situation is happening that includes people whom they interact with. Being able to retell their stories helps in their identity formation. The positional level of

analysis refers to the differences in social position of the individuals in the social milieu. Through storytelling, the individual's social interaction extends to an interpersonal level wherein their identity has been influenced by different social characteristics surrounding them. Lastly, the ideological level is interested in society's own beliefs and assumptions about everyday thoughts and practices. It explores the representations of people in the narrative. This level shows events of what is happening in the situation the guidance advocates are in.

This study aims to explore the experiences of guidance advocates in online counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying gaps in existing regulations and processes of the counseling and referral system in schools. It provides insights on how online counseling can be used in schools with face-to-face sessions, and how school administration can support guidance advocates for better workloads and wellbeing. It study seeks to understand how guidance advocates experience online counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic. It specifically answers the following research questions.

1. What are the personal experiences of guidance advocates in online counseling?
2. What positions do guidance advocates take to themselves, the clients and the community when conducting online counseling in relation to its effectiveness?
3. What ideologies were realized from the experiences of guidance advocates in online counseling?

METHODS

Participants

The study utilized a qualitative research design with narrative analysis in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, focusing on participants' subjective experiences and understanding the local profession's set-up. Participants in this study were eight (8) school guidance advocates using purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: (a) working in a private higher education institution; (b) Psychology Major graduate; (c) has two to five years' experience as guidance advocates including those during the pandemic; (d) non-licensed guidance counselor (e) have experienced in person and online counseling services who resides in the city, and willing to participate in an audio recorded interview.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participant Code	Age	Gender	As Guidance Advocates	Highest Education
CN: 001	52	M	3 yrs	w/ MA units
CN: 002	29	F	5 yrs	Bachelor's Degree
CN: 003	26	F	3 yrs	w/ MA units
CN: 004	28	F	5 yrs	Bachelor's Degree
CN: 005	28	F	5 yrs	w/ MA units
CN: 006	26	M	2 yrs	Bachelor's Degree
CN: 007	34	F	4 yrs	w/ MA units
CN: 008	27	F	3 yrs	w/ MA units

Note: Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the eight research participants with varying ages, gender, number of years as Guidance Advocates and their Highest Educational Attainment in adherence to the sampling criteria.

Procedure

Consent forms were given to the respondents identified to participate in the study. Participation in this study was voluntary. They are free to withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, from making their real names anonymous. Each participant was assigned a code number for easier recognition and organization of the data. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Xavier University Research Ethics Board with a study protocol code XU Package No. MAPSYCH2023001095.

Materials

To be able to explore the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the participants, an open discussion interview with guide questions was conducted. 1. What led you to become a guidance advocate and how do you feel about it? 2. What were your significant experiences working as a guidance advocate? Probe: What skills do you think you have that made counseling work in handling clients? 3. How do you go about your online counseling session? Probe: How would you describe your relationship with your client in your online counseling experience? 4. What were the important values or thoughts you were able to acquire in your online counseling experience? Probe: How did you make sense of your experiences as a guidance advocate? 5. How did the counseling end? 6. What are the problems that stood out with you in conducting online counseling? Probe: How did you manage these problems and expectations?

The interview guide questions were initially crafted by the researcher, reviewed by the adviser, validated by the external validators then underwent a pilot interview. These were then submitted to the panel members for review and approval.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded via Google Meet and were transcribed verbatim using oTranscribe; a transcription tool that allowed the researcher to convert the audio into text for a clearer understanding of the interview content [12]. The narrative thematic analysis process used consists of five stages: (a) organization and preparation of the data, (b) obtaining a general sense of the information, (c) the coding process, (d) categories or themes, and (e) interpretation of the data [13]. The current study adapted Murray's model in data analysis by constructing a matrix that includes the stories from each of the three levels of analysis namely personal, positional, and ideological level.

Coding process was used to identify personal, positional, and ideological evaluations. Personal experiences of feelings guidance advocates underwent as a result of online counseling during the pandemic were examined, while positional evaluations focused on role perceptions. Ideological evaluations reflected insights gained from online counseling experiences. The final narrative analysis identified commonalities across experiences, with reviewers helping validate themes.

Validity and Quality

The study used Yardley's four principles to ensure data validity, including sensitivity to context, commitment, impact, and reflexivity [14]. The ethically adjusted questions reflected participants' perspectives, socio-cultural context, and linguistic settings, influencing the researcher's interpretation. The researcher's commitment to the topic was evident in the comprehensive data collection, providing practical and insightful knowledge about the issue. The researcher used existing interview questions to understand the profession and its future use and also assessed assumptions and personal biases.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants’ narratives cover the beginning, middle, and end of their online counseling experiences during the pandemic. Murray’s analysis identifies 10 themes: personal, positional, and ideological. Guidance advocates in online counseling faced both positive and negative experiences. They viewed their profession as a passion, despite adversity, and persevered to achieve their goals. Passion inspires people to move forward and achieve their goals.

Narratives of Guidance Advocates Online Counseling

The study explores the stories of guidance advocates to gain insight into their personal, positional, and ideological experiences in online counseling. Common themes emerge, providing a better understanding of the participants’ perspectives.

Table 2

Themes of the Study

Chapters	Personal	Positional	Ideological
Beginning	Experiencing feelings of limitation and a sense of uncertainty	Perceived role as a beacon of hope in times of uncertainty	Online Counseling as an alternative support modality
Middle	Experiencing feelings of openness, perseverance and patience	Perceived role as a formator of growth	Guidance Advocates as aid in formation of growth
End	Experiencing sense of fulfillment, happiness and hope	Perceived role as a helping partner	Online Counseling as alternative mode and part of the holistic Mental Health services

Guidance Advocates Stronger Commitment Amidst the Challenges

Note: Table 2 shows the different themes generated from the narratives of the research participants wherein the common experiences, feelings, perspectives and ideas were analyzed to produce categories relevant to understanding the data.

Beginning: Onset of Online Counseling (Skill Assessment and Facing Online Challenges)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an online counseling platform was utilized to provide services to students. Despite concerns about resource limitations, physical and virtual connection, personal competency, effectiveness, and catering to a large number of students, guidance advocates emerged as a source of hope and an alternative support modality in this challenging time.

Personal Level: Experiencing Feelings of Limitation and a Sense of Uncertainty

During the pandemic, guidance advocates experienced challenges in transitioning from face-to-face to online counseling due to physical distance measures. Issues with signal, internet connectivity, and devices posed challenges in delivering and receiving messages, affecting their personal experiences.

“It was very challenging and sometimes frustrating, having difficulty with securing internet connectivity, difficult to approach the students staying at home since their triggers are at home, difficult to share, difficult

for the student to open up through online and the resources used.” CN:002

Participants in the study reported lacking necessary tools and reliable internet access, leading to unstable networks and a lack of trust. Tethering concerns could hinder successful sessions and make it difficult for clients to relate to the sessions [15].

“The first part of the virtual counseling is really challenging to my part. Considering that I don’t have enough gadgets and resources on how to conduct about it, but I think I was able to find some ways like making use of my cell phone as a way of communicating to them via SMS or just making a call to them, if they are using the same network that I’m using with. And the first thing that I encountered with how to equip myself is with the use of the different platforms, and thanks be to God, of course, I did a little bit of study and research on how to make use efficiently of the other platforms like Google Meet, Zoom.”- CN:001

The unstable network limited communication with students, affecting their ability to connect virtually and personally. Nonverbal cues, such as body language, are crucial in therapeutic interactions. However, guidance advocates struggled to read these cues due to factors like poor internet connectivity or camera malfunctions. Using telephone calls instead of Google Meet sessions was an effective backup strategy for continuing sessions. Online counseling requires trust and confidentiality, but many students struggle with privacy. Collaboration, mutual trust, and open conversations are crucial. Despite challenges, guidance advocates’ dedication and passion continue to grow.

“In values, you should really show openness. The students will not see any hinder for them to talk or express themselves. I also learned that I should be very patient. Having a long patience and with self-control as well. There are times that I get irritated with the student’s concern-overacting in a sense and it makes me say things like the generation Z now is very different. That’s why I should really understand them and go deeper. That’s what I always think. Lastly, the value of professionalism. If you do your task, if you follow the process then you can attain your goal in counseling.” CN:003

Online counseling effectiveness is uncertain due to lack of experience and licensing. The pandemic has added stress, and additional training may be needed. Guidance advocates have adapted by participating in webinars and pursuing graduate studies to improve their online counseling and telehealth services while adhering to ethical standards.

“Aside from having patience and trust, I also widened my understanding and perspectives to their problems. Go the extra mile, you must be patient and look for another way, extend more time. Further studies can also help. It is an investment for your growth. To be someone more equipped, you must invest in your education.” CN:006

Guidance advocates conducted online counseling sessions for students, either from walk-ins or initiated by the guidance office. Some students wanted a schedule with their guidance advocate, while others wanted individual or group sessions and webinars. Students who couldn’t join on either platform were rescheduled for another session.

“Will I be able to cater them? Was I able to help them? I felt overwhelmed and it made me think if I was in a hurry during the session? I am not yet licensed and so there are a lot of things I need to learn. We also cannot say that we will only cater for 5 students because of their great number. I feel that there is a shortage in the guidance team because there are so many students that I can’t handle all of them.” CN:003

Filipino school counselors face limiting feelings on their effectiveness due to multiple responsibilities, lack of role definition, and systemic disempowerment. Their effectiveness is impacted by relationships with administrators, scheduling sessions, and the pandemic’s impact on academic and mental health issues [16].

A study conducted by Plakhotnik [17] found that COVID-19's perceived impact on degree completion negatively impacts student well-being, indicating the need for effective support. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated student mental health issues, leading to increased online counseling services. Successful online counseling can alleviate emotional distress and social withdrawal symptoms [18], but excessive workloads negatively impact guidance advocates' performance. Collaboration with teachers, parents, and administrators is crucial [19].

During the pandemic, guidance advocates faced uncertainty due to the government's limited knowledge on the virus and yet attracted more media attention leading to anxiety and fear. Online sessions faced challenges, including reducing social engagement and trust. To address uncertainty, guidance advocates sought advice from supervisors and collaborated with office heads. Despite these challenges, they managed difficulties to avoid complications.

Positional Level: Perceived Role as a Beacon of Hope in Times of Uncertainty

Guidance advocates in the Philippines faced personal difficulties during the COVID-19 lockdown, with unclear policies and unclear instructions. As students struggled to find balance, they turned to online counseling and guidance advocates as a source of hope. The uncertainty of the pandemic's end led to fear and unpleasant sentiments, which students had to overcome. They have reported that students were relieved to know that the guidance office was available for contact, sessions, and follow-up calls. They prepared for potential problems by being psychologically and emotionally healthy, as they may face burnout and emotional stress while assisting students. Participants in the study ensured they were prepared for counseling sessions and were informed about COVID-19 to reduce fear [15].

“What do I need to avoid or that this one is better for me to start with when I do counseling. These doubts that I have for myself, I talk it out to my boss. With these doubts that I have, I talk it out with my office head because she is approachable and helpful. There are so many things I'm doing in the office, student loans and renewal of scholarships. When doing counseling sessions, I don't really do half-baked commitment that's why I really prepare beforehand before doing online counseling.” CN:003

Effective counseling requires maintaining personal wellness. Mental health aides are better at connecting with clients, being attentive and creative, and less prone to clinical errors. Guidance advocates, despite personal struggles, can provide hope by addressing feelings and helping students.

Ideological Level: Online Counseling as an Alternative Support Modality

Online counseling has become an alternative support modality for students during the pandemic, as face-to-face interactions were prohibited. Despite obstacles, guidance advocates continue to reach out to students and clients, even when they are shy or uncomfortable in public spaces. Their mission is to provide the best possible assistance.

“It was very challenging and sometimes frustrating, having difficulty with securing internet connectivity, difficult to approach the students staying at home since their triggers are at home, difficult to share, difficult for the student to open up through online and the resources used. It was difficult for me to let the student share, especially if the triggers are with him/her at home in the same space. Most of their concerns are from family members and not all have the luxury of having private space at home. They usually have a common area at home and are even sharing gadgets for school purposes. Their stressors are within their space either beside them or in front of them.” CN:002

A study highlights the growing popularity of online counseling as a practical and accessible way to provide mental health services [20]. Guidance advocates can use Google Suites to create virtual classrooms,

communicate with students via motivational quotes, and schedule “kamustahan” (check-in) sessions. This approach allows for better relationships with clients, enabling them to reach out more effectively and overcome physical distance.

Middle: Building Client-Practitioner Relationship and Effective Online Counseling Strategies

The middle chapter of the online counseling experience demonstrates the strategies used by guidance advocates to effectively manage doubt, perseverance, and deep connection with their students, fostering their growth.

Personal Level: Experience feelings of Openness, Perseverance, and Patience.

Despite initial challenges, Guidance Advocates were confident in their abilities and adaptable to online counseling. They learned about the platform and made students feel comfortable by encouraging open communication and scheduling. They also used phone calls for non-video meet calls and active listening to understand students’ voices. Despite adversity, they remained committed to helping students and were patient with themselves and their students. They appreciated their blessings and remained patient with the changes happening.

Positional Level: Perceived Role as a Formator of Growth

The guidance advocate and student improved their relationship through trust and understanding of concerns. Online sessions allowed the advocates to witness student growth and provide personalized guidance. Students could choose individual or group sessions, video conferencing, or phone calls. Activities were tailored to their needs, and techniques like problem identification and sharing were used. Facilitation skills enabled positive adjustments and effective sessions.

Ideological Level: Guidance Advocates as Aid in Formation of Growth

Guidance advocates play a crucial role in facilitating growth in students or clients by effectively leading sessions and guiding the problem-solving process. They help students identify the root cause of their problems and encourage meaningful discussions and adjustments. Students appreciate the support provided by guidance advocates and appreciate the efforts made by them. Online counseling intervention has both positive and negative effects on guidance advocates, as it allows them to reach out to students despite difficulties and physical distance. The success and fulfillment of making a difference in students’ lives is a significant aspect of their journey.

“Knowing your capabilities and knowing your limitations. For me, these are the best ways in handling counseling work. You know what you need to do and what you can do. And also, to top it off, aside from that, you really have the heart to listen, to have empathy on the life of the student. That you do not only see this as a job but you serve this as a mission to your life. But as a guidance advocate, there are things that you can’t do. You have to know your limitations, especially those that need a referral. You have to know when to stop or to start.” CN:006”

End: Closing the Online Counseling Intervention (Empowering Mental Health Awareness and Strengthening Guidance Services)

The ending chapter of this experience focused on the indicators where the guidance advocates found themselves feeling fulfilled by their efforts in helping and making their presence known for their students, being hopeful in the future, seeing themselves as an ally to their students, and strengthening the advocacy of taking care of one’s mental health. Seeing improvements in the students’ behavior and coping skills reinforced the values they developed in this chapter, which were trust and faith that the process would be

helpful and that the therapeutic goals would be achieved.

Personal Level: Experience a Sense of Fulfillment, Happiness, and Hope

One of the most fulfilling jobs is to be able to make a positive difference in someone's life. The guidance advocates experience a sense of fulfillment if they were able to see the progress of their students from the online sessions they were having. They were happy to know that they were able to impart positive changes on the lives of their students. Being able to see the changes in their students fuels that sense of hope that someday, it will be okay. This personal experience relates to their positional realizations on how they see their role in this profession.

Positional Level: Perceived Role as a Helping Partner

Guidance Advocates create bonds with students, providing support and guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. They prioritize academics over socioemotional needs, ensuring school guidance offices better advocate for students' needs [16]. When concerns are beyond their expertise, they refer students to registered guidance counselors or professionals like psychologists and psychiatrists. They acknowledge that they are a work in progress and should seek assistance when necessary. A proper referral system is in place for unique situations.

“There are instances also that the student may need to be referred to the supervisor especially in cases that are quite sensitive and needs the guidance of a licensed guidance counselor.” CN:007

Ideological Level: Online Counseling as an Alternative Mode and Part of the Holistic Mental Health Services

The guidance and counseling offices offer various services to cater to the needs of the stakeholders. When the pandemic started, mental health related concerns became a crucial point of focus. The COVID-19 pandemic caused increased – and frequently unmet – mental health demands. During the pandemic, the DOH estimated that at least 3.6 million Filipinos are dealing with mental health difficulties such as depression, substance use disorders such as alcohol use disorder, and mood disorders such as bipolar disorder [21]. Guidance advocates promote student wellbeing and holistic growth by addressing mental health concerns. They organize webinars and events to enhance learning and coping techniques. Initiatives cover stress management, time management, and mental health. The mission continues, with guidance advocates monitoring student progress and scheduling sessions as needed.

“To be able to address the concerns that our clients have in general, we conducted webinars and invited all students if we really cannot call all students for an online counseling session.” CN:002

In addition, the Guidance Advocates saw the importance of taking care of themselves, preparing their hearts for the kind of challenge they would encounter when providing this service to their students, equipping themselves with the necessary skills thus developing a stronger commitment to their line of work despite the adversities they had experienced during the pandemic- Guidance Advocates Stronger Commitment Amidst the Challenges– as the last theme established from the narratives. Despite challenges like unstable internet connectivity, privacy issues, and exhaustion, advocates persevered in their mission. They remained committed to their mission, demonstrating faith and trust in the process, which motivated them to continue providing support to their students.

“I find my job during those times very meaningful and very important and I witnessed how my job turned into a ministry of helping. You can just really tell your students that I am busy and I cannot accommodate you but why did we take the time to really talk to them to listen to them. I find meaning in my job that it's

really more on the intrinsic help that we give to them. I would really consider that counseling was something that people did not think of needing at that time but more importantly our mental health is as equally important as physical health.” CN:008

Guidance advocates shared their values learned through online counseling, including patience, presence, validation, hope, trust, love, and faith. They learned to be patient, present, validate feelings, and find silver linings in life’s darkest moments. Trust is fragile, and love is essential for helping, giving, and receiving help. Faith is crucial, as there are limits to human efforts. Online counseling services face challenges, including providing individual and group counseling, collaborating with parents, and ensuring ethical and legal practices. Guidance advocates share experiences of saving lives, helping others realize their giftedness, and witnessing student growth, shaping their values, and guiding principles for helping the least, last, and lost.

Limitations and Implications

The study explores the ideologies, positions, and personal experiences of guidance advocates doing online counseling during the pandemic, concluding with recommendations based on Murray’s narrative theoretical framework. The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced attitudes towards online counseling, benefiting schools, administrators, and educators. Schools have been able to provide guidance services despite lockdown restrictions, while administrators and instructors have benefited from internet connectivity and skill development programs. Guidance counselors rely on advocates for service implementation, and parents rely on them during crises. Future researchers can use this study to develop topics on cultural differences and coping. The study validates the experiences of guidance advocates, highlighting their significant contributions to the mental health profession. It provides insights on effective practices for online counseling and can be applied to in-person counseling in post pandemic. The research also explores their perceptions of wellness programs, self-care practices, and retention.

CONCLUSION

The narrative theoretical framework suggests that there is no definitive truth, but many interpretations of reality. Online counseling experiences of guidance advocates during the pandemic highlight personal difficulties, Filipino resilience, and commitment to their work. Despite the challenges, they persevered, offering counseling options, attending graduate studies, and promoting mental health aid. Guidance advocates in online counseling are essential for providing hope, support, and understanding, requiring genuine interest, sincerity, honesty, self-identity, active listening, patience, and optimism, especially during the pandemic.

Online counseling can improve mental health awareness and support, especially in Asian nations where stigma and self-disclosure are uncomfortable, offering anonymity, physical distance, and convenience for students with mobility issues. These factors make online counseling relevant beyond the pandemic, allowing universities to better serve their local communities and boost service demand [20]. The study emphasizes the crucial role of guidance and counseling in students’ academic, social, and personal journeys, highlighting the challenges faced by these professionals, the importance of mental health, and the ongoing learning journey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Narrative research explores mental health practitioners’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study uses Murray’s three levels of analysis: personal, positional, and ideological, focusing on guidance advocates in higher education institutions conducting online counseling.

School institutions can offer online counseling, enhancing accessibility and safety. Administrators and instructors can support guidance advocates with internet connectivity, training, and services. A supportive school culture and collaboration with advocates promote professional guidance. Guidance counselors may hire more advocates, enhance their skills, and consider online counseling as an alternative to traditional methods. They may also benefit from training, research, and further education to improve their skills and reach a wider audience.

Parents can encourage their children to seek guidance and counseling services for academic and social development. Guidance advocates can provide mental health aid and support. Students can use online counseling to address concerns and counteract stigma associated with seeking help from guidance offices. Professional organizations like the Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP), Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA), Philippine Mental Health Association (PMHA), Professional Regulatory Board and Professional Regulatory Commission and other governing bodies may propose policy resolutions to address the shortage of registered guidance counselors and the increasing demand for mental health aids.

Lastly, future research could explore longitudinal studies to understand gaps in intervention and coping, qualitative comparative studies to identify social support and cultural differences, online counseling sessions outside the pandemic, and quantitative studies with a large sample of guidance advocates to explore statistical variations in their experiences.

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