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Communication in the 21st Century: Implications of Counseling in a Digital World

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COMMUNICATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
IMPLICATIONS OF COUNSELING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

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requirements for the Master of Science Degree in
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Communication in the 21st Century:
Implications of Counseling in a Digital World

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Rebecca Johnson

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the implications of social media and technology within the counseling profession. The areas of focus include an overview of the types of digital communication mediums accessible, concerns and ethical dilemmas that arise when counseling online and using social media, the complications with using various forms of digital communication through online counseling, a brief analysis of the benefits, and lastly a guide for future counselors to use when considering entering the digital world.

Technology has drastically evolved over the last decade, and managing the digital world can be difficult for some. The information provided in this paper aims to motivate counselors to use new technology by understanding the implications of their actions.

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Introduction

The vast majority of US adults are Internet users, have a smartphone, and use social media sites to access and share information. (Institute of Business Ethics, 2011) As digital technologies and social media continue to expand, providers must adapt their professional communication to meet the expectations and needs of consumers. While this world of digital communication is newer to the counseling realm, it is a growing field. Along with this, it is imperative that a provider who chooses to use this platform for working with clients must understand the implications of digital communication. (Rummell and Joyce, 2010) Internet counseling or psychotherapy involves a variety of activities such as psycho-education, individual therapy, and automated self-help interventions delivered via the Internet. Many of these online communication interventions come with ethical dilemmas and concerns, specifically in the area of confidentiality.

Confidentiality is not only essential for the therapeutic relationship, but also the privacy of both the client and provider. Clients must be aware of the limitations of online counseling or using online resources, and this is the job of the provider to explain. (Townsend, Leese, McDonald, Li, Kerr & Backman, 2015) While the disadvantages and concerns of digital communication are evident, online counseling gives opportunity to those currently without access and gives one more platform to reduce the stigma of mental illness. Digital communication is unavoidable and this paper intends to reduce those misunderstanding related to this new form of communication. (Townsend et al., 2015)

Online Mediums

Social media is a term generally used to describe any form of social interaction that is Internet based. These online tools can include Internet forums, networking sites, webcasts, and blogs. Many practitioners use email, private messaging chat services, chat rooms, video conferencing or computer voice messaging systems to work directly with clients. (Rummell et al., 2010) These new mediums allow instant access to content on a global scale. These forms of media are also free, if not available at a low cost, and are accessible any time of the day. Social media can be interactive and instant, making it difficult to control. This medium can blur private vs. public boundaries because it is a public domain. (Business Ethics, 2011) While this new frontier of communication and access to information has a multitude of benefits, it also shifts the use of social media/the Internet into the counseling practice.

Social media no longer has a clear distinction and does not fit neatly into past categories. (Swatman, 2012) The most popular social media or social networking sites are Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Outside of these forums, there are more media sites that can be used for self-help, discussing, publishing, and videoconferencing. This emergence of social media has forced a shift in how consumers seek information. (Gagnon & Sabus, 2015) Clients are now able to not only research what kind of care they seek, but also who their doctor/therapist may be, what their diagnosis may be, and what treatment they think they will need. Technology and social media can affect health behaviors and decision-

making. (Gagnon & Sabus, 2015) This new dynamic alters the boundaries that professionals need to follow and establish.

Each social media site and/or forum has its own “terms of service” that is essentially a legal agreement. These agreements are often hidden behind settings and security pages that establish what information is kept private and what information is available to the public. Like any agreement, those individuals using these sites need to fully understand their rights when they “accept” the terms. Professionals need to be aware that emails, photos, personal information such as address and phone number, and even search history is not kept private on most of these sites. (DeMille, 2014) Even with adjusting privacy setting and “blocking individuals,” the information or intellectual property of the individual put on the Internet becomes property of that site. (<https://www.facebook.com/terms>)

Social media sites come with the wonderful innovations of technology and it is important that providers continue to adapt their communication styles to meet the expectations and needs of their consumers. (Gagnon & Sabus, 2015) Along with this, professionals need to be aware of how they utilize their own professional and personal social media sites. It is hard to escape the realm of digital communication. With an understanding of the concerns and ethical dilemmas that could ensue, providers in the counseling profession and clients will be able to use this technology to its fullest.

Concerns and Ethical Dilemmas

The previous section outlined a small selection of mediums that could be used or abused in the counseling profession. There are various concerns and ethical dilemmas that can develop from these digital innovations. Online counseling is one of those innovations

that spark controversy within the profession because of the few guidelines, restrictions, or practical suggestions for practice. (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005) As of 2009, there were more than four million online counseling websites. (Haberstroh, 2009) The number of counselors corresponding with their clients has increased since these last statistics because of the benefits the clients are experiencing. (Dubois, 2004) However, with the benefits, there are difficulties that have risen. This section will inform professionals of concerns and possible ethical dilemmas that may arise with online counseling.

Mental health counseling requires licensure from the state in which a counselor/therapist practices. Those who choose to use an online counseling forum need to be aware of their licensure and the jurisdiction in which they can practice, and in which the client resides in. (Baker & Ray, 2011) Each state has different regulations and laws by which a therapist must abide by. (Poh Li, Jaladin, & Abdulah, 2013) Similarly, malpractice insurance generally is only valid if practicing counselors provided service within the scope of their license, which is once again bound to state regulations. (Poh Li et al., 2013) Just because the Internet spreads beyond state and international boundaries, it does not mean the provider's license can. Once a provider has an understanding of where one can provide services, various confidentiality concerns must be delineated.

One of the most critical and clearly stated ethical standards is from Section A.5.e in the ACA Code of Ethics and states "counselors are prohibited from engaging in a personal virtual relationship with individuals with whom they have a current counseling relationship." (p. 5) It is important to note this ethical standard because this is a clear established boundary, which should not be broken. Often, practicing counselors discuss

issues in relation to whether or not an action will be beneficial to the client. While social media and outside communication with the client may not hinder the quality of service, the professional boundary may be been damaged. (Speight, 2012) Even more crucial, if a client and counselor have a relationship outside of the counseling setting, it gives opportunity for a client to be identified, thus a possible breach of confidentiality. (Jordan et al., 2013)

Along with this, maintaining contact outside of the practice can blur the lines of access and create dependency. The Internet, or the World Wide Web, maintains itself open 24/7, 365 days a year. A provider, in almost all cases, does not follow these hours. Emailing, messaging, and connections through social media allow a client to instantly access a provider. (Kaplan et al, 2011) Clients may see this new form of counseling as a “in the moment” fix rather than what it is – an arranged session. Immediate responses may be expected, along with a misunderstanding of the relationship boundaries can occur if a provider does not explicitly explain the limitations of communication and service. (Gagnon & Sabus, 2015)

Part of the immediacy that Internet brings is then the concern of reporting homicidal or suicidal clients, or in more severe scenarios, having a client confess their intention to carry out a suicide. (Mallen et al., 2005) A provider, in any setting, needs to discuss and provide resources for individual in crisis situations. Clients need to be aware of the limitations to access a provider and boundaries not only to ensure their own safety when in crisis, but also to reduce a provider’s liability. (Speight, 2012)

Many of the legal concerns of online counseling deal with confidentiality. If a counselor chooses to use an online forum to conduct a session, the provider must take

steps to limit the risk of third party's receiving or stealing the information shared during a session. (Mahlen et al, 2015) It is worthy to note that online chat sources such as Skype and Google Chat maintain the rights to the material shared within its programming. (Microsoft Privacy Statement, 2015) Thus, if a provider uses these sites, a client must be informed of the limits of confidentiality. If a provider chooses to use a different medium to conduct session, encryption software is available to safeguard the data being transferred. (Mallen et al., 2005) Even with this method, a client could still save an electronic or paper copy of the session that could be viewed by whomever acquires it.

Next there are the limitations to confidentiality that exist by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). This act is designed to protect individuals and streamline healthcare information in regards to privacy and security. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015) Essentially, a client's individual identifiable information must be kept confidential. A provider must assess whether or not their services and record keeping are compliant with HIPAA regulations. If a provider were to make contact with a client via social media platforms, it is imperative that session-related content is not disclosed and that a client has given written permission to interact informally online. (Kaplan, Wade, Conteh, & Matrz, 2011) These regulations are not made to scare away potential online counseling providers, but to maintain client confidentiality.

Most providers use consultation to provide more concise and informed treatment. Section B.7.a in the ACA Code of Ethics states "information shared in a consulting relationship is discussed for professional purposes only. Written and oral reports present only data germane to the purposes of the consultation, and every effort is made to protect

client identity and to avoid undue invasion of privacy.” (p.8) Providers should be advised that information shared by a client and the clinical impressions a counselor has are as confidential as the client’s name. Therefore, counselors who choose to use online forums to consult must take the utmost care in researching the privacy and legitimacy of these forum platforms. Public forums are available to anyone to access and not only does a provider risk breaking confidentiality, but risks receiving advice from unlicensed professionals. (Mallen et al., 2005) Consultation over the Internet is still deemed a risk in all areas, and providers should maintain consultation with licensed individuals they know from the field.

While online counseling allows access for clients, it also creates cultural boundaries. Multicultural competency is highlighted throughout any counseling program. (Hartley, Johnston, & Tarvydas, 2015) Online counseling sets limitations in communication, which can be enhanced when being unable to see or hear the client. Visual cues are lost with text or email, and cultural differences such as age, race, language, and all other surface-level appearance indicators are lost. While this may help reduce assumptions about the client, it may actually increase the reliance on stereotypical information. (Mallen, 2005)

Other multicultural considerations are absent when it comes to style of communication. Language and non-verbal cues often help a provider gain insight into what communication style is most comfortable for a client. (Rummell & Joyce, 2010) Without these, a provider has to rely on guesswork. This will often lead to miscommunication, misunderstandings, and eventually a loss of the therapeutic relationship. It is also notable to express the difficulties in completing a mental status exam. (Poh Li et al., 2013) A counselor is unable to see a client’s appearance, affect, or mannerism, which may give

insight into the clients presenting concern. Counseling, especially within a multicultural context, relies on more than words to work with a client. Online counseling can limit these beneficial interactions. (Poh Li et al., 2013)

All of these ethical concerns can be reduced if the providers do their research before entering the online counseling world. General ethical codes apply in both settings, and the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics has an established section on Distance Counseling, Technology, and Social Media. It is highly encouraged that all providers understand the implications of this new technology and the ethical dilemmas and concerns. It is also advocated that all providers engage in training of all software and media platforms they utilize. (Reamer, 2013)

Benefits of Digital Communication

There are many disadvantages and concerns to utilizing digital communication in the counseling profession. With each disadvantage there are contradicting advantages. Society is moving towards the inclusion of online services in all areas. During a time where mental health awareness is on the rise, it is imperative that counseling services become accessible to everyone.

One of the primary advantages to online counseling is that it gives accessible mental health counseling to more people. For clients that have constraints due to physical disabilities making it impossible to leave the home often enough or those who are unable to have access to transportation, online counseling may be the answer. (Haberstroh, 2005) Along with this, individuals who suffer from social phobias may have another way to seek service that they otherwise may not seek out. (Poh Li et al., 2013) Accessibility also can

help family counseling where a member may be away and unable to be present in person in each session. (Jordan et al., 2014) Essentially, any individual who has access to Internet has access to mental health services.

On the provider's side, this allows for more flexibility. Providers who conduct online counseling would have the option to work from a home office and create their own hours. A provider can also conduct session at his or her own pace, and are not constrained to a practices standard. (Poh Li et al., 2013) It also gives the provider easy access to the sessions records, whereby a provider can review session content to more accurately assess a clients issues and treatment. These online chats can also allow flexibility depending on if the session is asynchronous email or synchronous chat. (Mallen, 2005) Some counselors actually use online counseling to complete follow-up appointments and check-ins. This accessibility goes beyond client convenience because it can benefit the provider as well. (Poh Li et al., 2013)

Providers can also use digital communication platforms as a way to advocate for mental health issues. (Hartley et al, 2015) Mental health disorders still remain stigmatized. (Hartley et al., 2015) Social media can be used as a tool to inspire conversation, draw attention to social justice issues, and gather support for different causes. It can be beneficial for clients to learn how to advocate for themselves as a therapeutic intervention. Hartley (2015) suggests practitioners educate, facilitate and implement client awareness through the integration of social media.

Online platforms and digital applications can also be used to further therapeutic interventions outside of session. Sites such as *Calm.com* help facilitate daily mediation

right from an individual's phone or computer. *Mindshift* give clients knowledge to practice strategies to deal with anxiety. There are also applications clients who are suicidal can use to lower their risk, cope, and find resources. These interventions and self-advocacy increase a client's sense of self-worth and agency. (Hartley, 2015) While clients can learn to advocate for themselves, practitioners can also advocate for themselves through marketing on social media.

Social media platforms now have "pages" or advertisements related to the searches on an individual's computer that can also help market their services. (Chaudhuri, 2011) While this clearly shows the limitations of confidentiality, it also provides those who are looking for answers to their problems a place to seek help. Providers cannot only market their practices or services through any online platform, but also create their own website. Digital communication is key to marketing success, and if done right, can build relationships not only with clients, but also with other providers and resources. (Gagnon, 2015)

Informed Consent

To make online counseling work effectively and to reduce the ethical concerns and dilemmas listed above, providers must adjust their informed consent to accurately represent their practice. (Rummell, 2010) Like any counseling setting, the informed consent is the cornerstone in which a therapeutic relationship is built. Clients must know the limitations of therapy and confidentiality, and the nature of a counseling session. (DeMille, 2014) Counselors who plan to conduct online therapy must openly link their credentials and informed consent guidelines on their website. (Rummell, 2010)

One addition to the informed consent is the boundaries within the therapeutic relationship. A client must understand what is and isn't appropriate when it comes to contact via social media and other media platforms. (Speight, 2012) Clients should be made aware that they should not "friend" or "follow" their provider's personal social media account and if they choose to follow their professional account or page, what the limitations to confidentiality are. Providers should also inform clients that they themselves would not use social media or other platforms to look up their clients. (Kaplan et al., 2011)

Providers must also explicitly state what type of communication *is* okay such as email, text, or videoconferencing. The informed consent should include information on the security of the medium used and clients should once again be well aware of the limitations of confidentiality and understand the limitations of technology overall. (Reamer, 2013) Clients should have a complete understanding, once again, of the limitations of confidentiality when using these forms of digital communication. Along with this, clients need to be aware of what content should be shared if these forms are used. (Reamer, 2013) An example of this would be the use of email where clients can contact the provider for scheduling requests. (Pollock, 2006) Along with this communication, providers should share when they will be available to have contact and whom the clients should contact in case of an emergency or crisis situation. (Baker et al., 2011)

Providers must clearly state their policy on risk assessment and make sure the client understands the limitations of confidentiality of mandated reporting. Providers and clients must agree on a safety plan and emergency contacts. (Mallen et al., 2005) Providers should obtain a release of information from this contact and any other individual who may

need to be contacted in case of an emergency. (Poh Li et al., 2013) Providers should also clearly state and give clients resources for treatment centers and crisis hotlines. (Reamer, 2013) The client's well-being is at the utmost importance, and taking every precaution available will be beneficial on both ends.

Counselors also need to protect themselves as individuals and professionals. Providers should only use their professional name and credentials in the professional realm. (Rummell, 2010) This allows a distinct separation of identities. Providers should also keep up to date with privacy settings on not only his or her personal account, but also the professional account. (Kaplan et al., 2011) Providers should avoid using unprofessional language or emails on any platform, and should remember that the Internet, no matter how private the settings, is public. (Kaplan et al., 2011) Lastly, it is imperative that providers follow the guidelines or policy set forth by the agency they work for. (Gagnon, 2015) While this paper is a guide, each state and agency will have its own unique standards.

Conclusion

Digital communication is becoming more prominent each day. Services are utilizing online marketing techniques, self-help sites, and online communication to more effectively and efficiently serve the client. (Gagnon, 2015) While this world of digital communication is newer to the counseling profession, it will soon become common practice. Online communication comes with its ethical dilemmas and concerns, particularly in the area of confidentiality. Confidentiality is the cornerstone of what makes a therapeutic relationship work and must be maintained at all cost. (Kaplan et al., 2011) Client must be aware of the

limitations of online counseling and the problems that could arise through digital communication. While the disadvantages and problems can be clearly delineated, online counseling gives opportunity to those without access and give providers one more way to advocate for mental health. Future research on the topic will only further the ethical standards making online counseling part of the new standard. It will take clear boundaries and articulated informed consent to make this form of counseling work, but with the right research and knowledge, online counseling can help extend the range of mental health services.

Author's Note

The world is ever evolving and technology is in constant growth. I find myself checking my texts and emails throughout the day as if I myself have been programmed. Communication has changed and it became evident when looking at the Twitter feed of my younger cousins and family friends. I soon became conflicted about my roles when reading messages or tweets of distress. Messages such as “I hate myself,” “I have no friends,” and “why am I even here” became worrisome for me to read. I questioned whether or not my response was from a clinical stance or a personal stance. Had I heard these statements in session, I may have done a risk assessment. However, these are personal, “in the moment” statements that seem to mean nothing 60 seconds later. What has happened to our communication and what is our responsibility?

This is what led me to pursue research in this area. Any individual working in the mental health field cannot stay ignorant to the evolution that communication is experiencing. Individuals who have been in the field for years need to understand how to utilize and adapt to technology. Incoming professionals, who grew alongside technology, need to understand the boundaries with using this medium.

While researching and writing this paper, I found myself assessing my own communication styles compared to those older than me. I wondered how messages I sent were being perceived by those who were reading it. These thoughts of mine came from a personal perspective, and through writing this paper, I was able to incorporate these thoughts into professional growth. I hope that others who read this paper are able to look

at their own communication from both a personal and professional perspective and develop skills to use when counseling in the 21st century.

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