

Transforming Counseling Services in Post-Pandemic Indonesia: A Qualitative Study on Counselors' and Clients' Experiences in Online Counseling

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated the digital transformation of psychological and social services, reshaping how counseling is delivered and experienced. This study explores how professional counselors and clients in Indonesia have adapted to online counseling in the post-pandemic era. Using a qualitative design with an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research involved three professional counselors and six adult clients who participated in digital counseling sessions between 2022 and 2024. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom and Google Meet, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal four major themes: digital empathy, reflecting changes in emotional and nonverbal expression; professional adaptation, involving the creation of virtual safe spaces and the reconstruction of trust; client engagement, which balances flexibility with diminished emotional intimacy; and technological challenges, including issues of connectivity, privacy, and ethical boundaries. These themes collectively demonstrate a paradigm shift from face-to-face intimacy to digital trust in therapeutic relationships. The study highlights the need for developing counselors' digital competencies, ethical literacy, and communication sensitivity. It further recommends that higher education institutions integrate e-counseling and teletherapy training into psychology and counseling curricula. Theoretically, this study enriches the Therapeutic Alliance and Digital Counseling Theories by introducing culturally grounded constructs of digital empathy and trust within Indonesia's post-pandemic context.

Keywords: Online Counseling, Digital Empathy, Therapeutic Alliance, Phenomenology, Post-Pandemic Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed one of the most significant digital transformations in human interaction across all sectors, including psychological and social services. As face-to-face interactions became restricted, counseling practices were compelled to migrate rapidly into digital spaces to maintain accessibility and continuity of care (Güngör & Göksu, 2022). This transition redefined not only the modalities of communication but also the very essence of the therapeutic relationship, which traditionally relies heavily on in-person empathy, body language, and shared presence (Anthony, 2018).

In Indonesia, this transformation occurred within a unique sociocultural and technological context. Prior to the pandemic, digital counseling was relatively underdeveloped due to concerns about confidentiality, ethical standards, and the perceived inferiority of online communication (Azmi & Fitriani, 2023). However, post-pandemic realities accelerated the normalization of virtual counseling platforms, forcing both counselors and clients to reorient their understanding of therapeutic processes. The phenomenon illustrates how crisis-driven

adaptation can lead to long-term behavioral and professional changes in the psychosocial domain (Setiawan & Rahardjo, 2023).

This digital transition also intersects with issues of technological literacy, digital empathy, and cultural expectations about emotional expression in Indonesian society. Consequently, understanding how both counselors and clients navigate these new modalities is essential for ensuring that counseling services remain effective, ethical, and culturally attuned in a post-pandemic world.

The central issue addressed in this study is how Indonesian counselors and clients experience and adapt to online counseling services in the post-pandemic era. While numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of online counseling globally, limited research has explored the dual perspectives of counselors and clients within the Indonesian context (Nasir & Prabowo, 2022). Moreover, the shift to digital modes of therapy has not merely introduced new technical challenges but has also reshaped interpersonal dynamics, emotional engagement, and therapeutic alliance quality.

Research Questions: (1) How do counselors perceive the effectiveness and challenges of online counseling in post-pandemic Indonesia? (2) How do clients evaluate the therapeutic relationship and emotional connection in online counseling settings? These questions aim to uncover the lived experiences of both parties involved in the digital counseling process and to identify emergent patterns of adaptation and meaning-making.

This study aims to understand the changes in communication patterns, technological adaptation, and interpersonal dynamics that characterize online counseling interactions in Indonesia after the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) Explore how counselors reconstruct professional boundaries, empathy, and rapport within virtual environments. (2) Investigate clients' experiences of engagement, trust, and satisfaction in the absence of physical presence. (3) Contribute to the development of culturally grounded models of digital counseling competence in Indonesia.

This research posits that digital counseling represents not merely a shift in medium but a transformation in the paradigm of psychosocial service delivery. The move toward digital modalities redefines what constitutes therapeutic presence and necessitates new ethical, communicative, and relational competencies for both counselors and clients (Bambling et al., 2022). The study aligns with a constructivist worldview, emphasizing meaning-making and human adaptation within evolving digital ecosystems.

The study focuses on licensed professional counselors and adult clients who have engaged in online counseling between 2022 and 2024 in Indonesia. The qualitative design limits generalizability but provides rich, contextualized insight into subjective experiences. Factors such as adolescent counseling, group therapy, or institutional e-mental health systems are beyond the scope of this research.

Unlike prior studies that focus solely on practitioners or system design, this research integrates dual perspectives, from both counselors and clients, through a phenomenological lens. This methodological approach provides deeper insight into the lived experience of digital adaptation in counseling. The study contributes to Indonesian scholarship on post-pandemic psychological services and expands global understanding of digital therapeutic transformation in non-Western contexts.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 1 (Introduction) presents the research background, statement of the problem, research questions, objectives, researcher's standpoint, scope, and novelty of the study. Section 2 (Literature Review) discusses key theoretical frameworks such as Digital Counseling Theory, Therapeutic Alliance, and Media Richness Theory. Section 3 (Methods) elaborates on the qualitative phenomenological design, sampling, and data analysis procedures. Section 4 (Findings) presents the main emergent themes from interviews. Section 5 (Discussion) interprets the findings within theoretical and practical contexts. Section 6 (Conclusion) synthesizes insights and proposes recommendations for future research and practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

a. Digital Counseling Theory

The Digital Counseling Theory proposed by Anthony (2018) highlights how digital media can be integrated into therapeutic processes while preserving the authenticity of counselor-client relationships. In this framework, technology is not merely a communication tool but a therapeutic space where the counselor's presence is expressed through virtual presence and digital empathy. Anthony emphasizes therapeutic adaptability, the counselor's ability to modify communication styles, intervention techniques, and ethical practices to suit the affordances and constraints of digital environments.

Within the Indonesian context, this theory is particularly relevant because many counselors still face technological and infrastructural limitations, such as unstable internet connectivity, inadequate privacy, and low digital competence (Azmi & Fitriani, 2023). The theory provides a conceptual basis for understanding how therapeutic quality can be maintained despite the absence of face-to-face contact.

b. Media Richness Theory

Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) explains the degree to which a communication medium can effectively convey information and reduce ambiguity. A "rich" medium allows multiple cues (verbal and nonverbal), immediate feedback, and the conveyance of emotional nuance. In the context of online counseling, this theory is crucial for evaluating which digital platforms are most effective in facilitating interpersonal understanding.

Video-based media such as Zoom or Google Meet are considered high in richness because they enable synchronous verbal and nonverbal exchanges (Nguyen et al., 2022). Conversely, text-based platforms (chat or email) are "leaner," providing less emotional context and immediacy. Despite these limitations, many counselors and clients still prefer lean media due to privacy concerns or accessibility. Thus, this theory offers a framework to analyze how the choice of communication medium affects the depth, warmth, and emotional resonance of digital counseling interactions in post-pandemic Indonesia.

c. Therapeutic Alliance Framework

Bordin's (1979) Therapeutic Alliance Framework identifies three essential components of a successful counseling relationship: goals, tasks, and bond. In digital settings, these elements must often be renegotiated due to the absence of physical presence, reduced nonverbal cues, and the distractions inherent in online communication (Bambling et al., 2022).

The strength of the therapeutic alliance directly influences counseling outcomes. Therefore, understanding how this alliance develops and is sustained online is critical for

effective practice. Counselors must construct a new form of therapeutic presence based on virtual empathy, trust-building, and technological literacy (Prabowo & Nasir, 2022). Integrating this framework helps explain how relational depth, collaboration, and emotional safety are cultivated in virtual counseling spaces.

2.2. Previous Studies

The global shift to digital counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely documented. GÜngör and Göksu (2022) revealed that the pandemic accelerated digitalization across counseling practices but also led to emotional fatigue among counselors due to the intensity of virtual communication. In the Indonesian setting, Azmi and Fitriani (2023) found that online counseling became an essential substitute during social restrictions, though challenges related to privacy, connectivity, and professional ethics persisted.

Moreover, several international studies have addressed ethical and privacy challenges associated with online counseling. Bambling et al. (2022) emphasized issues such as confidentiality breaches and the lack of environmental control in clients' private spaces. These concerns highlight the need for national standards and regulatory frameworks to ensure ethical practice in tele-counseling (Nasir & Prabowo, 2022).

Recent research has also focused on digital empathy and the effectiveness of online platforms. Nguyen et al. (2022) argued that digital empathy can be cultivated through specific training and reflective practices, though emotional intensity tends to be lower compared to in-person counseling. These findings suggest that the success of online counseling depends not only on technological adequacy but also on counselors' adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and relational competence.

2.3. Research Gaps

Despite growing international attention, context-specific research on online counseling in Indonesia remains scarce, especially studies exploring both counselor and client perspectives simultaneously. Most existing Indonesian research has examined online counseling's technical feasibility or user satisfaction (Azmi & Fitriani, 2023; Nasir & Prabowo, 2022), leaving a gap in understanding the deeper experiential and relational dimensions of digital therapy.

Additionally, few phenomenological studies have explored how therapeutic relationships, empathy, and trust are experienced and constructed within online environments. Hence, this study addresses these gaps by employing a phenomenological approach that captures the lived experiences (lived experiences) of both counselors and clients in navigating digital counseling interactions.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

This study integrates three complementary theories, Digital Counseling Theory, Media Richness Theory, and Therapeutic Alliance Framework, into a cohesive conceptual model for understanding the transformation of counseling communication and professional adaptation in the digital era.

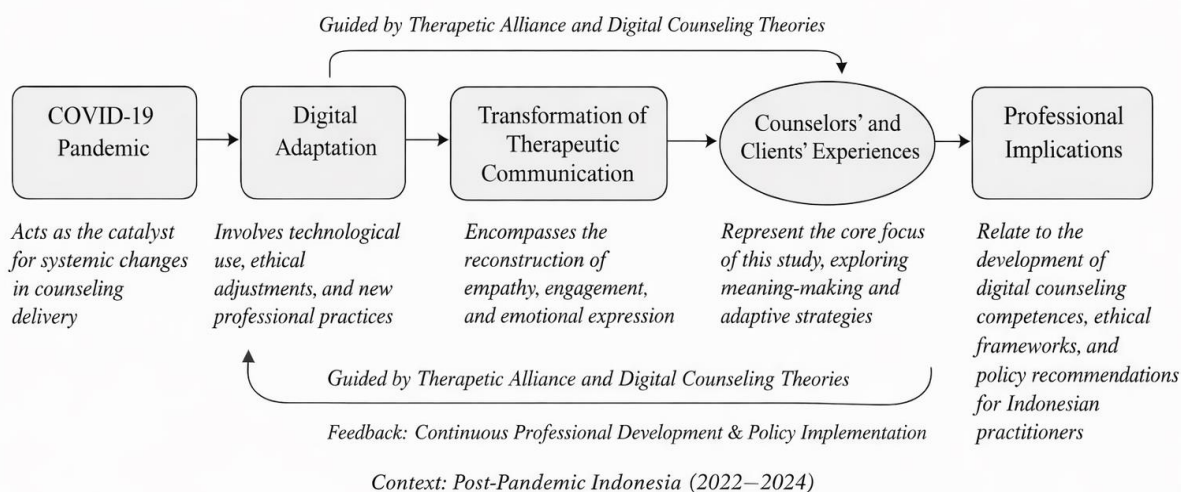


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Transformation of Online Counseling in Post-Pandemic Indonesia

This model illustrates the dynamic relationship between five sequential components: COVID-19 Pandemic, Digital Adaptation, Transformation of Therapeutic Communication, Counselors' and Clients' Experiences, and Professional Implications. It visualizes how the pandemic acts as a catalyst for digital adaptation, leading to a transformation in therapeutic communication. Counselors' and clients' experiences represent the central focus of this study, while professional implications feed back into continuous professional development. The framework is guided by Therapeutic Alliance and Digital Counseling Theories within the context of post-pandemic Indonesia.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative design with an interpretative phenomenological approach (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, IPA). This approach was chosen to explore, in depth, the subjective experiences of individuals and the meanings they attribute to particular phenomena within real-world contexts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this case, the phenomenon concerns how professional counselors and clients experience and make sense of online counseling in post-pandemic Indonesia.

Interpretative phenomenology assumes that lived experience cannot be separated from the researcher's interpretation of participants' meaning-making processes. Therefore, this study seeks to capture participants' lived experiences and interpret how they construct understanding of the shift from face-to-face to digital therapeutic spaces (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The approach aligns with the constructivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed through interaction, culture, and language. Consequently, the method enables a nuanced understanding of how communication, trust, and empathy are negotiated in digital counseling relationships.

3.2. Participants

The study involved nine participants: three licensed professional counselors and six adult clients who engaged in online counseling between 2022 and 2025. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria as follows:

- a. Counselors hold professional licenses or certifications and have at least two years of experience providing online counseling.
- b. Clients are aged 18 years or older and have attended at least three sessions of online counseling with professional counselors.
- c. All participants voluntarily provided informed consent prior to participation.

The number of participants follows the “depth over breadth” principle (Patton, 2015), prioritizing rich, detailed insights over generalizability. Diversity in participants’ backgrounds, such as gender, age, and level of digital familiarity, was intentionally sought to enrich the interpretative analysis.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted online via Zoom and Google Meet. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to explore predetermined themes while remaining open to participants’ narratives and emerging meanings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Interview questions focused on three main domains: (1) Counselors’ experiences of digital adaptation, empathy-building, and maintaining therapeutic presence online. (2) Clients’ experiences of emotional engagement, trust formation, and comfort in virtual counseling settings. Perceptions of both parties regarding benefits, limitations, and transformations in therapeutic communication. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants’ consent, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This six-phase process enabled systematic and reflective identification of recurrent meanings and patterns across the dataset:

- a. Familiarization: repeatedly reading transcripts to gain an overall understanding.
- b. Initial Coding: generating preliminary codes related to experiences, emotions, and perceptions.
- c. Theme Identification: grouping related codes into potential themes.
- d. Theme Review: ensuring internal consistency and relevance to research questions.
- e. Theme Definition and Naming: refining and labeling core themes that represent participants’ lived realities.
- f. Report Writing: integrating thematic interpretations with supporting quotes from participants.

This analytic strategy allowed the researcher to connect participants’ experiential narratives with broader theoretical perspectives from Digital Counseling Theory and Therapeutic Alliance Framework.

3.5. Data Validation and Trustworthiness

The credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were ensured through multiple strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): (1) Source Triangulation: comparing data from both counselors and clients to capture multidimensional perspectives. (2) Member Checking: providing participants with summaries of their interview data to verify interpretative accuracy. (3) Audit Trail: maintaining detailed documentation of analytic decisions and data management to ensure methodological transparency. These measures enhanced the study’s

credibility, dependability, and confirmability, strengthening the interpretative validity of the results.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical standards for social and behavioral research. All participants received clear information about the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, and they signed informed consent forms prior to participation. Personal identifiers were replaced with alphanumeric codes to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

4. FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis generated four major themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of both counselors and clients in adapting to online counseling in post-pandemic Indonesia. Each theme represents an interpretative synthesis between participants' subjective experiences and the broader transformation of therapeutic communication in digital environments. The themes are: (1) Digital empathy, (2) Professional adaptation, (3) Client engagement, and (4) Technological challenges. These themes reflect the dual nature of online counseling, as both an innovation enabling accessibility and a disruption to traditional interpersonal dynamics.

Theme 1: Digital Empathy, Changes in Nonverbal Expression and the Limits of Body Language

Participants consistently emphasized that the loss of nonverbal communication cues, such as body posture, eye contact, and subtle facial expressions, significantly affected the emotional depth of counseling sessions. Counselors reported difficulties in perceiving clients' affective states due to restricted visual frames on camera and occasional latency in audio-visual responses.

Despite these limitations, several counselors described developing "digital empathy" — the capacity to convey warmth and attunement through tone of voice, pacing, and intentional verbal affirmation. This aligns with the idea that empathy, while traditionally embodied, can also be reconstructed through adaptive communicative behaviors in digital contexts.

One counselor shared: "I feel I've lost the ability to truly read the client's emotions through body language... so I focus more on tone and pauses to connect." (Counselor 1)

Clients likewise reported that while online sessions lacked physical immediacy, they still felt supported when counselors used active listening and emotional validation effectively. Thus, digital empathy emerged as a redefined form of connection, limited by technology, yet sustained through conscious communicative effort.

Theme 2: Professional Adaptation. Managing Virtual Space and Building Trust

The second theme highlights counselors' adaptive strategies to maintain professionalism and establish therapeutic trust in digital environments. Many participants noted that online sessions blurred the boundaries between personal and professional spaces, as both counselor and client often joined from home.

Counselors developed new techniques to create a "safe digital space", such as using consistent backgrounds, minimizing distractions, and explicitly addressing privacy expectations at the start of each session. Ethical awareness and confidentiality protocols became more salient in this new context.

One participant explained: “I had to build a digital safe space, not only by maintaining privacy but also by showing my presence through consistent attention and structure.” (Counselor 2)

This theme also underscores the redefinition of professionalism in counseling, shifting from spatial control (in the counseling room) to relational intentionality in the virtual sphere. The adaptation process reflects a growing digital literacy among counselors, where technological competence is integrated with psychological sensitivity.

Theme 3: Client Engagement. Temporal Flexibility and Emotional Distance

Clients expressed appreciation for the flexibility of online counseling, particularly in managing time, cost, and accessibility. They reported that digital sessions allowed them to seek help more regularly, without the logistical constraints of traveling or scheduling conflicts. However, this flexibility came at the expense of emotional intimacy. Many clients felt that the screen created a “psychological distance” that hindered deeper emotional disclosure. Some also noted distractions from their home environments, which reduced session focus and authenticity.

One client stated: “I like that it’s flexible, I can join from anywhere. But sometimes it feels less personal... like something is missing in our connection.” (Client 4)

The findings reveal a paradox of digital engagement: while online formats enhance accessibility and continuity, they simultaneously dilute the embodied aspects of therapeutic presence that underpin traditional counseling relationships.

Theme 4: Technological Challenges. Internet Stability, Privacy, and Technical Disruptions

The fourth theme revolves around technological barriers that interfered with the counseling process. Both counselors and clients cited unstable internet connections, sudden disconnections, and background noise as frequent sources of frustration. Privacy concerns also emerged as a recurrent issue, particularly for clients who lacked access to private spaces at home. Interruptions from family members or surrounding noise often disrupted the flow of sessions and affected the sense of safety necessary for therapeutic openness.

A client shared:

“Sometimes my connection drops, or people at home walk in... it breaks the moment when I was trying to express something deep.” (Client 2)

Counselors likewise reported anxiety about maintaining professional presence during technical disruptions. These findings reinforce the need for technical readiness and environmental preparation as integral components of digital counseling practice.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Key Narratives

Theme	Description	Key Excerpt
Digital Empathy	Adaptation of emotional communication amid limited nonverbal cues	“I feel I’ve lost the ability to truly read emotions through body language...”
Professional Adaptation	Strategies to manage virtual space and maintain professional boundaries	“I had to build a digital safe space.”
Client Engagement	Flexibility in access but reduced emotional intimacy	“It’s flexible, but sometimes it feels less personal.”
Technological Challenges	Connectivity issues, privacy, and disruptions	“The internet dropped just when I was opening up about something important.”

Overall, the findings illustrate a transformative shift in therapeutic communication. The counselors' and clients' experiences demonstrate that digital counseling is not merely a substitute for face-to-face interaction, but a distinct relational modality requiring new competencies, digital empathy, ethical flexibility, and adaptive professionalism. While online platforms democratize access to psychological support, they also challenge foundational aspects of the counseling relationship, particularly trust, presence, and emotional resonance. The emergent themes converge on one insight: post-pandemic counseling in Indonesia represents a hybrid transformation, merging human connection with technological mediation.

As shown in Figure 1, the transformation of online counseling is represented through the interaction between four experiential domains that converge toward the establishment of digital trust.

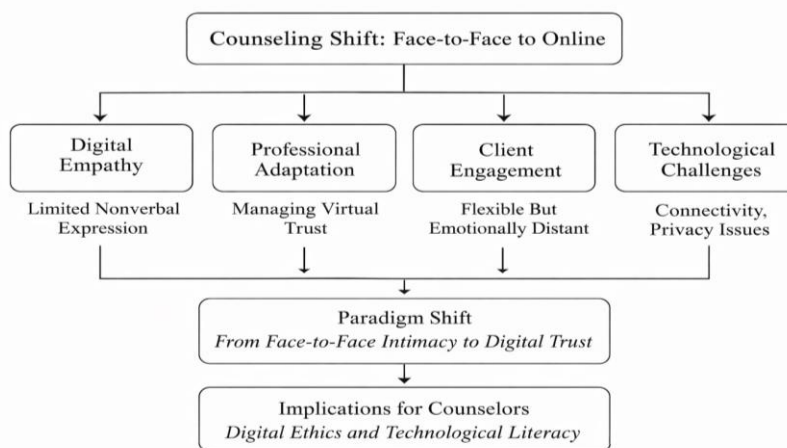


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Transformation of Online Counseling in Post-Pandemic Indonesia

This model illustrates the dynamic interrelationship among four central themes, Digital Empathy, Professional Adaptation, Client Engagement, and Technological Challenges, which collectively shape the process of therapeutic communication transformation, culminating in the development of Digital Trust within post-pandemic online counseling practice.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a significant reconfiguration of the therapeutic alliance (Bordin, 1979) in the context of digital counseling. According to Bordin's framework, the alliance comprises three core components: goals, tasks, and bond. While the first two components, shared goals and collaborative tasks, remain largely intact in online counseling, the emotional bond undergoes substantial transformation due to the absence of physical co-presence and nonverbal cues.

In line with Maheu et al. (2022), therapeutic presence in digital settings requires heightened intentionality. Counselors in this study reported consciously using verbal empathy, voice modulation, and explicit affirmations to compensate for the limited emotional bandwidth of virtual communication. These findings resonate with McKenna and Oliver (2020), who observed that digital counseling relationships often evolve from being "emotionally intuitive" to "cognitively mediated."

In the Indonesian context, however, the bond element takes on a unique form grounded in cultural warmth and politeness. Counselors expressed empathy through courteous language,

respectful gestures, and culturally sensitive expressions, behaviors reflecting Indonesia's collectivistic communication norms (Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2022). Thus, therapeutic connection in online counseling becomes both a technological and cultural achievement.

From the perspective of Digital Counseling Theory (Anthony, 2018), technology is not merely a tool but an active therapeutic medium that shapes how empathy, trust, and professional ethics are expressed. The emergence of digital empathy aligns with Finfgeld-Connett's (2021) notion of technological attunement, in which counselors develop the ability to emotionally resonate despite spatial distance. This theoretical synthesis suggests that online counseling is not a diluted version of traditional practice but a reconstructed relational paradigm mediated by digital presence.

A central insight of this study concerns the paradigm shift from face-to-face intimacy to digital trust. Before the pandemic, in-person interaction was considered the ideal modality for counseling, fostering immediacy, embodied empathy, and deep emotional resonance (Bambling et al., 2022). Post-pandemic realities, however, have normalized telepresence as a legitimate form of therapeutic connection.

The findings reveal that digital trust, defined as confidence in the counselor's ethical reliability and emotional presence through digital means (Mishna et al., 2023), has become the new foundation of effective therapeutic relationships. This trust is not derived from physical proximity but from consistent engagement, timely responsiveness, and transparent communication.

Counselors who demonstrated reliability in managing online sessions, maintaining confidentiality, and conveying steady emotional attunement were perceived as more trustworthy. These results echo De Witte et al. (2021), who found that online therapeutic alliances can match in-person alliances when counselors balance technological fluency with relational warmth.

Culturally, digital trust in Indonesia is shaped by collectivist values such as respect, sincerity, and mutual care. Counselors' cultural empathy, expressed through politeness and attentiveness, reinforces clients' willingness to engage, even in the absence of face-to-face intimacy. This finding expands global teletherapy literature by emphasizing that digital trust is a culturally mediated construct, influenced by social norms and moral expectations unique to local contexts.

The transformation of counseling into digital formats entails profound implications for professional practice. The findings underscore the urgent need for enhanced digital ethics and technological literacy among counselors. First, digital ethics, encompassing data security, informed consent, and confidentiality, must be integrated into counselor education and practice (American Psychological Association [APA], 2021). Cummings et al. (2020) warn that ethical lapses in telecounseling often arise from unawareness of digital privacy risks rather than intentional misconduct. This study supports that observation: participants highlighted uncertainty about data protection and privacy management when using commercial video platforms. Second, technological literacy is increasingly regarded as a core professional competency. As Polizzi et al. (2021) argue, technological fluency enables counselors to sustain therapeutic presence despite disruptions. The counselors in this study who were most effective demonstrated not only empathy but also confidence in managing digital platforms, troubleshooting technical issues, and ensuring continuity of care. Third, counselor education

institutions and professional associations must develop training programs in e-counseling and teletherapy, equipping future practitioners with practical and ethical competencies. Gentry et al. (2022) found that simulation-based digital training enhances counselors' confidence and ethical awareness when navigating virtual therapeutic environments. Accordingly, Indonesian counselor education programs should embed digital professionalism into both theoretical and practicum components.

This study's findings align with and extend global research on post-pandemic counseling transformations. Consistent with Norcross and Wampold (2022), the results affirm that online counseling can be equally effective as in-person counseling when a strong therapeutic alliance is established. However, this research contributes a culturally grounded perspective by situating the digital counseling experience within Indonesia's sociocultural framework. The study reinforces Güngör and Göksu's (2022) observation of digital fatigue among counselors while adding evidence of adaptive resilience and innovative professionalism among Indonesian practitioners.

Moreover, while much of the existing literature has been Western-centric, this study highlights how local cultural dimensions, such as communal support, politeness, and contextual spirituality, mediate how empathy and trust are expressed digitally. This makes a distinct contribution to global counseling theory by demonstrating that digital adaptation is not a universal process but one deeply rooted in cultural communication patterns.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size, three counselors and six clients, is relatively small, limiting the generalizability of findings. Second, the study reflects experiences during a specific period (2022-2024), which may evolve as technology and telehealth infrastructure advance. Nevertheless, these limitations are consistent with the interpretative phenomenological approach, which prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of representation (Smith et al., 2009). Future research could expand this study through longitudinal designs or mixed-methods approaches to explore changes in digital counseling dynamics over time.

Theoretically, this study enriches the Therapeutic Alliance Framework by introducing two emergent constructs, digital empathy and digital trust, as critical components of alliance formation in virtual contexts. These concepts challenge traditional assumptions that empathy and connection require physical presence. Instead, they propose that relational presence can be intentionally cultivated through digital platforms.

Furthermore, this study extends Digital Counseling Theory (Anthony, 2018) by emphasizing its sociocultural dimension. In collectivist societies such as Indonesia, digital counseling is not merely a technical adaptation but a cultural transformation of therapeutic interaction. The findings thus advocate for a more context-sensitive global theory of digital counseling that integrates technology, ethics, and cultural nuance.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that online counseling services in post-pandemic Indonesia have undergone a fundamental transformation in their therapeutic dynamics. Both counselors and clients have actively adapted to the digital format, reconstructing new ways of communicating empathy, trust, and emotional presence. This shift demonstrates that online

counseling is not merely a technical adjustment but represents a deeper paradigm change in the practice of psychosocial support, from physical intimacy to digitally mediated connection.

However, the adaptation process remains challenged by issues of digital empathy, technological readiness, and emotional engagement. To sustain the quality of therapeutic relationships in virtual settings, professional counselors must strengthen their digital competence, ethical awareness, and communication sensitivity. Educational institutions are therefore encouraged to integrate e-counseling and teletherapy training into psychology and counseling curricula, ensuring that future practitioners are equipped with the necessary skills to navigate digital platforms while maintaining therapeutic integrity and cultural sensitivity.

7. END SECTION

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Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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