

Students' Perceptions of Online-Based Guidance and Counseling Services: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The digital transformation of education has led to the increasing implementation of online-based guidance and counseling services in schools. While these services are often promoted as flexible and accessible solutions, their effectiveness is frequently evaluated through technical or quantitative indicators, providing limited insight into students' lived experiences. This study aims to explore students' perceptions of online-based guidance and counseling services, identify relational, technological, and psychosocial factors shaping these perceptions, and analyze their implications for engagement and service continuity. Employing a qualitative interpretative phenomenological design, this study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with junior and senior high school students who had participated in online counseling services. Data were analyzed using interpretative thematic analysis to capture patterns of meaning derived from students' experiences. The findings indicate that students' perceptions of online-based guidance and counseling are shaped by accessibility, flexibility, emotional safety, and the perceived depth of interaction. Counselor–student relational quality, clarity of empathetic communication, technological stability, confidentiality, and psychosocial support emerged as central determinants of positive engagement. Conversely, technological disruptions, privacy concerns, and weak relational dynamics contributed to negative perceptions and reduced participation. This study concludes that the success of online-based guidance and counseling services depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on pedagogical, relational, and psychosocial considerations. Integrating students' subjective perspectives is essential for developing online counseling practices that are responsive, trustworthy, and sustainable.

Keywords: online counseling; qualitative study; student perception; guidance and counseling services; digital education

Introduction

The rapid digitalization of education has fundamentally transformed the delivery of guidance and counseling services in schools. Advances in communication technology, combined with the increasing integration of digital platforms into educational systems, have encouraged a shift from traditional face-to-face counseling toward online-based guidance and counseling



services. This transformation accelerated significantly during periods of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when online counseling was adopted as an emergency solution to ensure service continuity (Agoncillo, 2023; Mulungu et al., 2024). In many educational institutions, online guidance and counseling (BK online) has since evolved from a temporary alternative into a sustained mode of service delivery.

Despite its growing prevalence, online-based guidance and counseling is often positioned primarily as a technical response to logistical constraints rather than as a pedagogical and relational practice that requires systematic evaluation. Schools frequently emphasize the efficiency, flexibility, and accessibility of digital counseling platforms, while paying comparatively less attention to how students actually experience these services. Consequently, the success of BK online is commonly inferred from usage rates, satisfaction surveys, or indicators of service availability, rather than from an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences (Shahim, 2021; Ardimen et al., 2023).

From the students' perspective, however, guidance and counseling services are not merely technical systems but relational encounters embedded within psychosocial and educational contexts. Perception plays a crucial role in determining whether students view online counseling as supportive, trustworthy, and meaningful. Research on technology acceptance has shown that students' willingness to engage with digital counseling services is influenced not only by perceived usefulness and ease of use, but also by emotional safety, relational quality, and trust in confidentiality (Anteneh et al., 2025; Osman et al., 2025a). These factors cannot be fully captured through quantitative indicators alone.

The implementation of online-based guidance and counseling also introduces new challenges that reshape counselor–student interactions. The absence or reduction of nonverbal cues, reliance on mediated communication, and variability in digital literacy alter the dynamics of therapeutic relationships. Studies have indicated that students may experience online counseling as either more comfortable, due to perceived anonymity and reduced social pressure, or more distant, depending on how communication is facilitated (Barutçu-Yildirim et al., 2023; Nurasyah et al., 2025). Such ambivalence highlights the need to examine how students construct meaning around online counseling experiences rather than assuming uniform effectiveness.

Another critical issue concerns equity and access. Unequal access to stable internet connections, private spaces, and appropriate digital devices can shape students' perceptions of online counseling services. While online platforms are often promoted as inclusive solutions, they may inadvertently reproduce or exacerbate existing inequalities among students (Leah et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2024). These structural and technological factors interact with psychosocial dimensions, influencing students' sense of comfort, agency, and engagement in counseling sessions.

Existing research on online guidance and counseling remains dominated by quantitative and survey-based approaches. Many studies focus on measuring satisfaction levels, acceptance intentions, or perceived effectiveness using standardized instruments (Kiptala & Kipruto, 2021; Osman et al., 2025b). While these studies contribute valuable insights into general trends, they provide limited understanding of how students interpret their counseling experiences, negotiate relational boundaries in virtual spaces, and assess the meaningfulness of online interactions. As a result, students' voices are often reduced to numerical representations rather than explored as



sources of experiential knowledge.

Several qualitative studies have begun to address this gap, yet important limitations remain. Agoncillo (2023) explored Filipino students' lived experiences of virtual counseling during the pandemic, emphasizing emotional support and accessibility; however, the study was situated within a crisis context that may not reflect post-pandemic institutional practices. Barutçu-Yildirim et al. (2023) examined university students' perceptions of online counseling, but focused primarily on higher education settings, leaving school-level experiences underexplored. Similarly, Tangco-Siason and Paulino (2025) centered on counselors' experiences rather than students' perspectives. These studies collectively indicate growing scholarly interest, yet reveal a lack of qualitative research that foregrounds school students' meaning-making processes in routine online counseling contexts.

Furthermore, there is limited critical analysis of the pedagogical and psychosocial factors that shape students' perceptions of online guidance and counseling. Factors such as counselor communication style, perceived empathy, confidentiality assurances, and institutional support structures are often mentioned descriptively but rarely theorized as central determinants of students' engagement and continuity of service use. Understanding these dimensions is essential, as negative perceptions may lead to disengagement or superficial participation even when online counseling services are technically available.

Based on these gaps, this study argues for the importance of examining online-based guidance and counseling through a qualitative, phenomenological lens that prioritizes students' lived experiences. Rather than asking whether online counseling is effective in general terms, this study seeks to understand how students perceive, interpret, and evaluate their experiences of BK online within specific educational contexts. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on experiential meaning-making, relational dynamics, and contextual influences as core analytical dimensions.

Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) explore students' subjective perceptions of online-based guidance and counseling services, (2) identify relational, technological, and psychosocial factors that shape positive and negative perceptions, and (3) analyze how these perceptions influence students' engagement and continuity in online counseling services. By centering students' voices, this research contributes to a more nuanced and experience-based understanding of digital guidance and counseling practices in schools.

Research methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach with an interpretative phenomenological design to explore students' lived experiences of online-based guidance and counseling services. A phenomenological approach was chosen to capture how students subjectively perceive and make meaning of their counseling experiences in virtual environments, rather than to measure effectiveness through predefined quantitative indicators (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The focus of the study was on experiential depth and interpretative understanding.

Participants consisted of junior and senior high school students who had previously engaged in online guidance and counseling services. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on the type and intensity of online counseling services they had experienced, including synchronous and asynchronous modalities. The study was conducted in educational



institutions that actively implemented online-based guidance and counseling as part of their student support systems.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with students to elicit narratives about accessibility, relational experiences, perceived safety, and engagement in online counseling. Limited observations of online counseling practices and analysis of supporting documents, such as service guidelines and communication media, were used to complement interview data. Data analysis followed an interpretative thematic analysis process involving transcription, initial coding, theme development, and meaning interpretation. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was established through methodological triangulation and member checking, dependability through systematic audit of the research process, and confirmability through critical researcher reflexivity.

Results and Discussion:

The Construction of Students' Perceptions of Online-Based Guidance and Counseling Services

The findings of this study indicate that students' perceptions of online-based guidance and counseling services are constructed through a complex interplay of accessibility, flexibility, emotional safety, and perceived meaningfulness of interaction. Students did not evaluate BK online solely as a technological substitute for face-to-face counseling but as a distinct counseling environment with its own affordances and limitations. This perception aligns with qualitative research suggesting that digital counseling environments actively shape how support is experienced, rather than merely mediating existing practices (Barutçu-Yildirim et al., 2023; Agoncillo, 2023).

A prominent dimension shaping students' perceptions was accessibility. Many students perceived online counseling as beneficial because it reduced logistical barriers related to time, distance, and scheduling. The ability to access counseling from familiar environments, such as home, was associated with increased comfort and reduced anticipatory anxiety. Similar findings were reported by Shahim (2021), who found that students often view online counseling as less intimidating than in-person sessions. In this study, accessibility was not merely understood as technical availability but as psychological ease that facilitated initial engagement.

Flexibility also emerged as a key factor in the construction of positive perceptions. Students appreciated asynchronous communication options, such as text-based platforms, which allowed them to reflect before responding and articulate concerns more carefully. This finding supports Ardimen et al. (2023), who argue that online modalities can expand expressive opportunities for students who struggle with spontaneous verbal communication. For some participants, this reflective space enhanced their sense of control over the counseling process, contributing to perceptions of autonomy and empowerment.

However, perceptions were not uniformly positive. Several students described experiences in which online counseling felt procedural or administrative rather than supportive. When sessions were perceived as brief, scripted, or task-oriented, students interpreted BK online as a formal requirement rather than a meaningful support service. This echoes findings by Kiptala and Kipruto (2021), who noted that students' negative perceptions of counseling often stem from perceived lack of depth and personalization. Qualitatively, such perceptions emerged when



counseling interactions failed to acknowledge students' emotional contexts or individual concerns.

Emotional safety played a critical role in shaping how students interpreted their online counseling experiences. Some participants described online counseling as a “safe space” that enabled them to disclose personal issues more openly due to perceived anonymity and reduced social pressure. This finding resonates with studies suggesting that digital environments can lower psychological barriers to self-disclosure, particularly for sensitive topics (Mulungu et al., 2024; Leah et al., 2024). For these students, the absence of physical presence reduced fear of judgment and increased willingness to engage.

Conversely, concerns regarding confidentiality and privacy undermined perceptions of safety for other students. Uncertainty about data security, fear of being overheard in shared spaces, and lack of clarity regarding platform confidentiality led some participants to limit disclosure. These concerns align with Kang et al. (2024), who emphasize that technological reliability and perceived privacy significantly influence students' evaluations of online counseling sessions. Thus, perceptions of safety were contingent not only on counseling practices but also on broader technological and environmental conditions.

Overall, this subdiscussion demonstrates that students' perceptions of online-based guidance and counseling services are constructed through experiential evaluations of accessibility, flexibility, emotional safety, and interactional depth. Rather than reflecting a simple acceptance or rejection of digital counseling, students' perceptions reveal nuanced judgments shaped by how online services align with their psychological needs and expectations. These findings address the first research objective by elucidating how students make sense of their experiences with BK online

Relational Dynamics between Counselors and Students in Virtual Counseling Spaces

Beyond individual perceptions of accessibility and safety, the quality of counselor–student relationships emerged as a decisive factor shaping students' evaluations of online-based guidance and counseling services. The findings indicate that relational dynamics in virtual spaces are qualitatively different from those in face-to-face counseling and require distinct communicative competencies to sustain therapeutic engagement. This observation is consistent with qualitative literature emphasizing that digital mediation transforms, rather than diminishes, relational processes in counseling contexts (Nurasyah et al., 2025; Tangco-Siason & Paulino, 2025).

One of the most salient relational challenges identified by students was the reduction of nonverbal cues. Participants noted that the absence of facial expressions, body language, and physical presence made it more difficult to interpret counselors' emotional responses. This limitation sometimes led to uncertainty regarding empathy and attentiveness, particularly in text-based or low-bandwidth interactions. Similar concerns were reported by Barutçu-Yildirim et al. (2023), who found that students often equate relational quality with visible emotional responsiveness, which may be constrained in virtual settings.

In response to these limitations, students placed heightened importance on verbal clarity and explicit expressions of empathy. Counselors who used affirming language, reflective responses, and consistent follow-up were perceived as more supportive, even in the absence of



visual cues. This finding aligns with Osman et al. (2025a), who emphasize that communication quality is a central predictor of acceptance and sustained use of online counseling services. From the students' perspective, empathy needed to be articulated verbally and intentionally in digital environments.

Students also described variability in perceived emotional closeness that did not always correspond to interaction frequency. Some participants reported feeling emotionally connected to counselors despite infrequent sessions, while others experienced emotional distance even with regular online contact. This finding suggests that relational depth in online counseling is shaped less by quantity of interaction than by perceived authenticity and responsiveness. Similar patterns were observed by Agoncillo (2023), who noted that meaningful online counseling relationships depend on relational attunement rather than technological intensity.

Trust emerged as a foundational relational condition influencing students' willingness to engage. Students were more likely to disclose personal concerns when they perceived counselors as consistent, respectful, and attentive to confidentiality. Conversely, perceived delays in response, generic feedback, or abrupt session endings undermined trust and reduced engagement. These findings support Kang et al. (2024), who highlight that technological disruptions and communication inconsistencies negatively affect students' evaluations of counseling sessions.

Importantly, students' narratives indicate that online counseling reshapes power dynamics within counseling relationships. The mediated nature of interaction sometimes empowered students to set boundaries, control disclosure, and disengage temporarily without social repercussions. While this autonomy was experienced positively by some participants, others interpreted it as a lack of relational commitment. This duality underscores the need to understand virtual counseling relationships as negotiated spaces in which agency and distance coexist.

Collectively, this subdiscussion demonstrates that relational dynamics are central to students' perceptions of online-based guidance and counseling services. Effective virtual counseling requires counselors to adapt relational practices, communicate empathy explicitly, and establish trust under conditions of reduced nonverbal feedback. These findings address the second research objective by highlighting how counselor–student relationships are transformed and reconstituted within online counseling environments.

Technological and Psychosocial Factors Influencing the Acceptability of Online-Based Guidance and Counseling Services

Beyond relational dynamics, students' perceptions of online-based guidance and counseling services were strongly shaped by technological and psychosocial conditions surrounding service delivery. The findings indicate that technology does not function as a neutral medium in counseling practices; rather, it actively mediates students' sense of safety, agency, and engagement. This supports existing qualitative and mixed-methods research emphasizing that technological infrastructures and psychosocial contexts are integral components of digital counseling experiences (Kang et al., 2024; Leah et al., 2024).

Technological stability emerged as a foundational factor influencing students' acceptance of online counseling. Students reported that unstable internet connections, platform glitches, and audio or video disruptions significantly interfered with emotional flow and concentration during counseling sessions. Such disruptions were not perceived as minor inconveniences but as



interruptions that undermined the continuity and depth of counseling interactions. This finding aligns with Kang et al. (2024), who demonstrated that technological issues negatively affect session evaluations and perceived counseling quality. From the students' perspective, technological instability translated into emotional distance and reduced trust in the counseling process.

Closely related to technological stability was the issue of confidentiality and data security. Students' willingness to disclose personal concerns in online counseling was contingent upon their confidence in platform privacy and environmental control. Participants expressed anxiety about being overheard in shared home environments or having digital records accessed without consent. These concerns echo findings by Shahim (2021) and Mulungu et al. (2024), who identified confidentiality as a central determinant of students' engagement in online counseling. Qualitatively, perceived threats to confidentiality constrained emotional openness and led students to self-censor sensitive issues.

Psychosocial factors further shaped students' perceptions of online-based counseling services. Digital literacy emerged as a significant determinant of comfort and confidence in virtual counseling spaces. Students with higher familiarity with digital communication tools described greater ease in navigating platforms and articulating concerns, whereas those with limited digital skills experienced anxiety and hesitancy. This finding supports Anteneh et al. (2025), who emphasize that intention to use digital counseling services is strongly influenced by perceived competence and technological self-efficacy.

Social support within students' immediate environments also influenced acceptability. Students who received encouragement from teachers, school administrators, or family members were more likely to view online counseling as legitimate and valuable. Conversely, lack of support or negative attitudes toward counseling, particularly in family contexts, undermined students' engagement. This aligns with Osman et al. (2025b), who argue that acceptance of counseling services is shaped by social norms and institutional endorsement as much as by individual attitudes.

To synthesize these technological and psychosocial dimensions, **Table 1** presents key factors influencing students' acceptance and engagement with online-based guidance and counseling services.

Table 1. Technological and Psychosocial Factors Shaping Students' Perceptions of Online-Based Guidance and Counseling

Dimension	Key Factors	Influence on Students' Perceptions
Technological Stability	Internet reliability, platform functionality	Determines continuity and emotional flow of sessions
Confidentiality & Privacy	Data security, private physical space	Shapes sense of safety and willingness to disclose
Digital Literacy	Familiarity with digital tools	Affects confidence and comfort in participation
Psychosocial Support	Teacher and family encouragement	Enhances legitimacy and sustained engagement



Institutional Support	School policies and infrastructure	Reinforces trust and service continuity
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Analysis of Table 1 illustrates that students’ acceptance of online counseling services is co-constructed through technological readiness and psychosocial environments. Even well-designed counseling interactions may be perceived as ineffective when technological or contextual conditions undermine safety and engagement. Conversely, supportive environments and reliable platforms can compensate for some relational limitations inherent in virtual counseling.

These findings underscore that online-based guidance and counseling should not be evaluated solely as a digital service innovation but as a socio-technical practice embedded within broader educational and psychosocial systems. By addressing technological reliability, privacy concerns, and social support structures, schools can enhance the experiential quality and acceptability of online counseling services.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that students’ perceptions of online-based guidance and counseling services are complex, contextual, and deeply shaped by experiential, relational, technological, and psychosocial factors. Students do not evaluate BK online merely based on its availability or technical efficiency but through their lived experiences of emotional safety, relational quality, and meaningful engagement. These findings challenge assumptions that digital counseling services are inherently accessible or effective by virtue of their technological nature.

The findings further reveal that the success of online-based guidance and counseling is contingent upon the quality of counselor–student relationships, explicit communication of empathy, and the assurance of confidentiality within virtual environments. Technological stability, digital literacy, and social support from schools and families function as enabling or constraining conditions that shape students’ willingness to engage and sustain participation in online counseling services.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on digital guidance and counseling by advancing a qualitative, experience-based perspective that foregrounds students’ meaning-making processes. Practically, the findings suggest that schools and counselors should move beyond technical implementation toward pedagogically and relationally grounded designs of online counseling services. Integrating students’ perspectives into service evaluation and development is essential for ensuring that online-based guidance and counseling services are not only accessible but also psychologically safe, relationally meaningful, and educationally responsive.

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