

**NAVIGATING ONLINE PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING:  
INSIGHTS FROM PROSPECTIVE COUNSELORS ON  
CHALLENGES, BENEFITS, AND TRAINING GAPS**

ÇEVİRİMİÇİ PSİKOLOJİK DANIŞMANIN  
YÜRÜTÜLMESİ: ADAY PSİKOLOJİK DANIŞMANLARIN  
ZORLUKLAR, AVANTAJLAR ve EĞİTİM  
AÇIKLARI HAKKINDAKİ GÖRÜŞLERİ

S. Burcu ÖZGÜLÜK ÜÇÖK, Merih UĞUREL KAMIŞLI, Özlem ERDEN  
BAŞARAN, Hilal SEDA YILDIZ, Zehra YELER

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### ÇEVİRİMİÇİ PSİKOLOJİK DANIŞMANIN YÜRÜTÜLMESİ: ADAY PSİKOLOJİK DANIŞMANLARIN ZORLUKLAR, AVANTAJLAR ve EĞİTİM AÇIKLARI HAKKINDAKİ GÖRÜŞLERİ

<sup>1</sup> Doktor Öğretim Üyesi, TED  
Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi,  
burcu.ucok@tedu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7464-6136>

<sup>2</sup> Doktor Öğretim Üyesi, TED  
Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi,  
merih.kamisli@tedu.edu.tr,  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8434-1678>

<sup>3</sup> Doçent Doktor, TED  
Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi,  
ozlem.erden@tedu.edu.tr,  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0374-1942>

<sup>4</sup> Doçent Doktor, Arden  
Üniversitesi, Akademik Mesleki  
Gelişim, hyildiz@arden.ac.uk,  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6680-1597>

<sup>5</sup> Araştırma Görevlisi, TED  
Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi,  
zehra.yeler@tedu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8192-6504>

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S. Burcu ÖZGÜLÜK ÜÇOK <sup>1</sup>, Merih UĞUREL KAMIŞLI <sup>2</sup>, Özlem ERDEN  
BAŞARAN <sup>3</sup>, Hilal SEDA YILDIZ <sup>4</sup>, Zehra YELER <sup>5</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Online counseling has become a popular method for providing mental health services with the integration of technology into our everyday lives. Despite the fact that it offers many opportunities, it has also brought certain challenges. This qualitative exploratory case study research aimed to gather in-depth perspectives of 23 prospective counselors (aged between 20-32; 20 women and 3 men) on online psychological counseling via focus group meetings through the use of the Tricky Topics (TTs) technique. Initially, group interviews were conducted. The data collected from concept maps, audio recordings, and behavioral observations during these group sessions were analyzed by the researchers. Communication, technology, ethics, education, and environment were the five themes that emerged from the content analysis of the data. The discussion focuses on the implications and recommendations improving psychological counseling and guidance program curricula in order to facilitate effective online counseling practices and client experiences.

## ÖZ

Çevrimiçi psikolojik danışma, teknolojinin hayatımıza dahil olmasıyla birlikte ruh sağlığı hizmeti sunmanın sıklıkla tercih edilen yollarından biri haline gelmiştir. Çevrimiçi psikolojik danışma, ruh sağlığı hizmeti alanına birçok fırsat sunmakla birlikte bazı zorlukları da beraberinde getirmiştir. Gerek fırsatların gerek zorlukların incelenebilmesi amacıyla, nitel, keşfetmeye dayalı durum çalışması gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışmada zor konular tekniği kullanılarak, odak grup görüşmeleri yürütülmüş ve yaşları 20 ile 32 arasında değişen yirmi üç psikolojik (yirmi kadın ve üç erkek) danışman adayının çevrimiçi psikolojik danışmaya yönelik derinlemesine görüşlerine ulaşmak amaçlanmıştır. Bu amaca ulaşmak için, öncelikle grup görüşmeleri yapılmıştır. Bu grup görüşmelerinde elde edilen kavram haritaları, ses kayıtları ve davranışsal gözlemleri içeren veriler araştırmacılar tarafından analiz edilmiştir. Yapılan içerik analizi sonucuna göre beş tema ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu temalar; iletişim, teknoloji, etik, eğitim ve çevre başlıklarında incelenmiştir. Çalışmanın tartışma bölümü, etkili çevrimiçi psikolojik danışma uygulamaları ve danışan deneyimleri için psikolojik danışmanlık ve rehberlik programı müfredatını iyileştirmeye yönelik çıkarımlar ve önerilere odaklanmıştır.

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of internet technologies has steered the contemporary world to a revolution in various fields, including mental health services. One of the most crucial changes has been the emergence of online counseling, which has become an increasingly preferred way of delivering mental health services (Baker & Ray, 2011). Online counseling services have evolved over the years, incorporating both asynchronous (e.g., e-mails, forum pages) and synchronous (e.g., videoconference, or real-time chat) types of online communication (Yurayat & Seechaliao, 2022). While online counseling has been used as a substitute for or a complement to face-to-face (FtF) counseling (Baker & Ray, 2011), the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of online counseling, making it an ideal method of providing and receiving mental healthcare services (Smith & Gillon, 2021). Along with the increasing prevalence of online counseling, its advantages in several aspects (Hanley, 2021), such as accessibility, cost-effectiveness (Andersson, 2010), freedom from concerns about social stigma (Zeren, 2015), time savings, and eliminating transportation issues, have come forth. However, it faces several ethical problems that limit its usefulness. These include maintaining the privacy of records, emotional and physical distance, trouble reading body language, and the need for new technology (Lewis et al., 2003). In addition, the therapeutic relationship, counselor competence, and clients' access to digital resources have all been the subject of concern due to the transition from FtF therapy to online counseling (Shklarski et al., 2021).

Although international literature has long documented studies on online counseling, studies on this particular topic have recently increased in Türkiye (Akalin & Güven, 2024; Tanrikulu et al., 2024). The changes in psychological counselors' perception of online counseling as a need, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, has facilitated an increase in studies about online counseling (e.g., Gök Kurşun, 2023; Kiye, 2022; Özkan Ordulu, 2023), but a systematic review, which Bayrı & Kabasakal (2025) examined studies on online counseling, shows that research on online counselling is a relatively developing research area as it has gained researchers' attention since 2016.

This review study reveals four umbrella themes that those studies covered: implications of online counseling, ethics in online counseling, differences between FtF and online modalities, and efficiency of online counseling. When observed, it is seen that international and national literature agree on conspicuous advantages and concerns/challenges regarding online counseling.

For example, a robust therapeutic alliance is a fundamental component of effective psychological counseling; however, there are still unanswered questions regarding the extent to which this therapeutic alliance can be entirely built online. Although online counseling provides accessibility and convenience as an advantage, the lack of physical presence and nonverbal cues can impede the development of rapport and emotional connection between counselors and clients, challenging counselors to accurately interpret their clients' emotions, leading them to rely on facial cues alone. Furthermore, as online sessions require concise, targeted content and thoughtful, introspective responses, counselors may find it difficult to convey warmth through body language and eye contact (Trepal et al., 2007). Supporting this argument, research conducted by Zeren et al. (2020) involving six Turkish participants who had undergone a minimum of six online counseling sessions found that establishing a therapeutic relationship online may not yield the same level of effectiveness for clients compared to traditional in-person counseling sessions. On the other hand, the structured nature of online communication may facilitate self-reflection and motivate clients to express their emotions more effectively (Christensen et al., 2024).

For the therapeutic relationship to be established online, other possible obstacles must also be considered, including the use of technology. When a counselor or a client tries to deal with the technological arrangements at the beginning or during the session, emotional cutoffs will inevitably occur between the counselor and the client. Aslan et al. (2021) mentioned that those barriers also matter in online group counseling. Unstable internet connection, technical problems related to computers or mobile phones, and especially issues with cameras were the outstanding findings of that study. Hence, counselors and clients must possess proficiency in digital platforms to engage in successful online counseling. The ability to employ video

conferencing software, implement data security measures, and adapt counseling techniques to an online format are among the key skills required, as mentioned by Cooper et al. (2019). The studies (e.g., Castelnuevo et al., 2003) show that online psychological counseling requires these competencies to develop practices and conduct effective sessions that cater to clients' needs.

Additionally, the increased use of online counseling has transformed it into a focal point for ethical discussions. A systematic review conducted by Tanrikulu et al. (2024) depicted that psychological counselors and prospective counselors suffer from ethical concerns regarding the online counseling process. Specifically, Pulat and Barutçu Yıldırım's (2021) systematic review of 17 studies on online counseling in the last 20 years identified nine common ethical problems. These include preserving privacy and secrecy, requiring a unique ability to conduct online therapy, providing security, stepping in during emergencies due to physical distances, verifying clients' information, measuring risk assessment, drawing boundaries, and dealing with unclear circumstances originating from malpractices in online counseling. Besides, Tuzgöl (2020) categorized the ethical issues of online counseling as (1) autonomy, (2) well-being, (3) integrity, and (4) informed consent form, which were among the ethical problems listed above. Stoll et al. (2020) listed relevant arguments against online counseling based on specific ethical issues. The most prominent of which are privacy concerns, the need for special competence and training, communication issues stemming primarily from a lack of non-verbal cues, paucity of scientific and practical knowledge, the hardships encountered while intervening in a situation posing a threat to self or others, and vulnerability to misuse.

The environment in which online counseling occurs is another important factor that profoundly affects the counseling process (Kotera et al., 2021). Examining the counseling environment reveals both advantages and disadvantages. Özyiğit and Atik's (2021) study using the critical incident technique suggests that clients feel more comfortable and open themselves more easily due to their comfort in the home environment. However, online counseling faces disadvantages like overhearing, privacy concerns, and disruptions due to clients' eating and

drinking habits. It is believed that online counseling can be conducted if suitable conditions are provided for the counseling process since it is even simpler to implement than FtF counseling due to accessibility and comfort zones.

Overall, online counseling is a viable alternative to FtF counseling, offering advantages and challenges across various aspects of its practice. In the literature, these benefits and challenges have been explored from the perspectives of different stakeholders. For example, a review paper has examined the sample characteristics of online counseling studies in Türkiye (Akalin & Güven, 2024). According to this study, 13 studies have primarily been conducted with clients, 10 with psychological counselors, 5 with psychologists, 5 with both psychological counselors and clients, and only 3 with prospective counselors. Among these studies, there is one study, which has examined the perspectives of prospective counselors in terms of online counseling, and has come up with four main themes: advantages of online psychological counseling, disadvantages of online psychological counseling, and prejudices about online psychological counseling, and factors that facilitate the online psychological counseling process (Eken & Esen, 2022). Tanrikulu (2009) and Bastemur and Bastemur (2015) have also examined the attitudes of prospective counselors toward online counseling and have found that prospective counselors have positive attitudes toward online counseling but do not have the necessary information or training.

Actually, psychological counselors learn counseling skills in academic programs. In 2018, the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) launched the Undergraduate Guidance and Psychological Counseling (RPD) program at faculties of education, including academic and practical courses. The system is expected to give prospective psychological counselors all the counseling skills they may require in their counseling practices (Rust et al., 2013). The Practicum in Individual Counseling course, which is instructed in the fourth year of the academic programs, is important because it gives prospective psychological counselors their first real-world counseling experience. Different programs may administer the course differently, but prospective counselors encounter real clients, provide counseling services, and improve their abilities under

instructor supervision (Güllü & Yelpaze, 2024). As prospective counselors enter their careers after graduation from various universities, this course is vital in helping them develop and improve their counseling skills. The COVID-19 pandemic's remote learning greatly affected this course's execution. The lack of FtF counseling sessions for prospective counselors was a significant drawback. Many students had to conduct online counseling sessions without prior training, even though online counseling requires specific knowledge and skills. In this context, despite the increasing need for online counseling, most education programs had no emphasis on online counseling in their discussions, courses, or materials (Pipoly, 2013). The lack of an online counseling component in education programs caused confusion or misunderstanding among the counselors. It led prospective counselors to graduate from their programs without having online counseling skills (Trepal et al., 2007). Currently, several guidebooks are in the literature (e.g., Erdem, 2020; Yorulmaz et al., 2020) to eliminate the deficiency originating from the distinctions between the nature of online and FtF counseling. One of the guidelines is from the Turkish Psychological Counseling and Guidance Association, which outlines online therapy's definition, methods, and limitations (Erdem, 2020). The Turkish Association of Psychologists' telepsychology guide for online psychological treatments and applications is available to provide effective client sessions (Yorulmaz et al., 2020). Despite these guidelines, undergraduate and graduate programs in mental health and in-service counselor training still lack provisions for online counseling education. There are numerous attempts to improve online counseling practices, but it is necessary to have well-structured programs based on research. Özer et al. (2016) emphasized the need for structured training like a course in the related departments' curriculum to provide the prospective counselors with the knowledge and practices particular to online counseling. Almost six years after Özer et al.'s study, this need still subsists, and Gulden and Polat (2022) suggested that departments should include an online counseling course. Therefore, as Pipoly (2013) also suggests, it is essential to assess prospective counselors' perspectives and experiences in online counseling and determine the support they require to develop proficiency

in this field since their perspectives are essential for identifying deficiencies in current training programs and developing courses that address the specific challenges of online counseling. Amos (2022) and Donat Bacıoğlu and Onat Kocabıyık (2019) propose that prospective counselors' insights could foster innovation and equip future counselors with the skills to navigate the challenges of online counseling environments. Given the literature, this study aims to gather prospective counselors' opinions on online psychological counseling and to investigate their perspectives on providing counseling services online and online counseling education. For this purpose, the following question is used to investigate how prospective counselors think about online counseling practices and their advantages and disadvantages based on their collaborative answers:

1. What are the issues of online counseling encountered by prospective counselors during their compulsory online counseling sessions as part of their counseling training?

## METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as a qualitative exploratory case study, which allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of a condition, event, or phenomenon in its natural setting (Crowe et al., 2011). The study aimed to gain insights into issues in online counseling practices by analyzing the experiences of prospective counselors as part of their counseling training. The initial data for exploring the experiences of prospective counselors in compulsory online counseling sessions were collected through focus group discussions. The Tricky Topics (TT) technique was used in these focus group discussions to enable students to collectively unpack the rewarding and challenging aspects of their online counseling experiences (Cruz et al., 2016). The TT technique as a form of facilitation was preferred since prospective counselors' compulsory counseling practice was transformed to online counseling due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which bears potential critical issues to be discovered.

### Participants Recruitment Procedure

Before participant recruitment and data collection, all the ethical permissions were obtained from the University



Human Research Ethics Committee (E-27535802-100-15322). The data were collected during the 2022-2023 academic year. This study consisted of two phases for recruiting participants. The first phase of the recruitment included conducting a quick demographic survey to find out how many students in the Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance (PCG) had done online counseling as part of their Practicum in Individual counseling course, which was the selection criteria for the study. Although the Practicum in Individual Counseling course is typically offered in the fourth year of the PCG program, some irregular students -who were officially considered as juniors- were able to take that course in the case they fulfilled the ECTS requirements.

During the initial stage of the research endeavor, a 15-item demographic survey was conducted to ascertain the students' backgrounds, experiences, and demographic information to identify the individuals who would partake in the focus group discussions. Eighty-eight junior and senior students from the Department of Guidance and Psychological counseling comprised the sample for the initial phase. Seventy-four individuals (15.9%) were female, while 14 individuals (15.9%) were male. The individuals' ages varied from 20 to 32 years ( $M = 22.74$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ). Fifty-one students were seniors, while 37 were juniors. Fifty-one students indicated that they had completed the Practicum in Individual Counseling course, which was a prerequisite for participation in the second phase, and they stated that they conducted sessions with clients under their instructors' supervision as part of the Practicum in Individual Counseling course for an academic year as part of the Department of PCG's program. In the second phase of participant recruitment, we asked those who completed their compulsory online counseling practicum to join the focus group discussions. Twenty-three students (20 female participants, 3 male participants), aged between 20-32 volunteered to join focus group discussions. The participants had experience in supervised online counseling practice for two academic semesters. Those who volunteered were randomly placed into a focus group, each of which had a maximum of five people. In total, we had five focus groups.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The Tricky Topics (TTs) were used to collect data for this qualitative exploratory case study. This data collection technique is an application to unpack the critical concepts of a topic (Cruz et al., 2016). TTs, as a data collection technique, also advance the deep exploration of the chosen issue through allowing participants to self-reflect on their professional and life experiences. The concepts discovered during TTs are called Threshold Concepts (TCs), which are specific issues that offer possible solutions to the discovered issues. TTs technique in these focus group discussions enabled participants to unpack their online counseling experiences both individually and collectively. Additionally, this technique allowed them to explore and understand the factors and problems that kept them from getting a deeper understanding of their experiences and or moving on to the next level of finding solutions to their problems. To call a discovered concept, a TC requires meeting at least one of the following characteristics: it must be transformative, irreversible, unifying, limited, or problematic (Meyer & Land, 2003). Therefore, a moderator to guide participants when they have difficulty in moving to a new area of self and group exploration and an observer to monitor the degree of moderators' involvement in participants' self and group exploration were present to ensure the authenticity of participants' responses. The moderator's role included monitoring the interaction of participants during the focus group discussions and encouraging participants to continue their discussions when they had difficulty moving on to the next issue. The observer's role was to monitor the moderators' role to prevent the moderator from sharing her personal opinions. During the data collection, the moderator helped participants concentrate on the key points of their conversation and stay on track and did not share her personal opinions. The moderator of the focus group discussion also had no background in counseling but had expertise in the use of the TTs technique in qualitative research. Therefore, she had no conflicts of interest with the participants as she did not have a background that affected the participants' professional experience in online counseling. Erden Basaran et al. (2023) showed that the

quality of enriched data was dependent on the moderators' experience in the use of TTs technique in qualitative research and was not determined by the moderators' expertise in the subject area.

The focus group discussions were divided into three 30-minute sub-sessions to help participants focus on different aspects of online counseling. There was a 15-minute break between each session. In the first session, the moderator introduced the TTs technique to the participants and encouraged them to talk about online counseling in general. In session two, participants identified threshold concepts related to online counseling and began visualizing the topics and concepts they discussed. In the final session, participants brainstormed solutions to the identified threshold concepts. As a final product of their discussion, they finalized the map they collaboratively created. While the participants were in their sessions, the observer took notes on group dynamics and nonverbal communication along with the moderators' guidance and involvement. After completing focus group discussions and interviews, observers held reflection sessions with participants and moderators to check the authenticity of the discussions.

Overall, this data collection procedure enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the issues related to online counseling practices and to explore possible solutions to the threshold concepts identified.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected through TTs-based focus group discussions included the transcriptions of the voice recordings from the sessions, the images of the participants' mind maps, and observers' notes. All the collected data were categorized and organized in MAXQDA for a thematic analysis. Before the data analysis, the transcripts of the session recording were read by the researchers to gain a thorough understanding of the data and develop a general understanding of participants' online counseling experiences. Later, the researchers examined the other data sets (the images of the mind maps and the observer notes) and debriefed about the overall perspectives of the participants.

After the debriefing, each researcher independently coded the data sets to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the coding process and assess the intercoder reliability. The initial coding conducted was informed by the thematic propositions of the Tricky Topics technique (Cruz et al., 2016), such as the threshold concepts identified by the participants. The coded data reports were debriefed and merged to discuss the convergence and divergence of different codes. The researchers identified the themes by controlling code frequency and distribution. This strategy in thematic analysis enabled the research team to identify patterns in each data set and create meaningful sub-categories.

Lastly, the researchers re-examined the observation notes to explore whether the group dynamics, nonverbal communication, and other factors in the environment could change the main themes. The themes remained the same after separately examining the impact of observation notes. Overall, the use of MAXQDA in thematic analysis enabled researchers to gain a thorough understanding of the issues and themes raised during the focus group discussions about online counseling because of simultaneously analyzing and incorporating various data sets, such as transcripts, mind maps, and observation notes. Therefore, data trustworthiness and credibility were achieved through both investigator and data triangulation.

## **FINDINGS**

As a result of the thematic analysis of three data sets, five themes were defined: (i) communication, (ii) technology, (iii) ethics, (iv) education, and (v) environment. These themes were explained in response to how prospective counselors think about online counseling practices and their advantages and disadvantages based on their collaborative answers.

### **Communication**

Participants acknowledged that there were ongoing issues in online counseling, but at first, they had difficulty highlighting the communication between clients and counselors as an issue because communication was the core of their profession. However, as they began unpacking what hindered them from conducting effective

sessions, they were encouraged to share the importance of communication in their discussions, and they placed the communication issues at the center of their online counseling issues. Based on the discussion in each focus group, the participants reported the importance of counselor and client communication, and therapeutic relationship. One participant reported how she gave considerable thought to the issues of online counseling and came to the conclusion that communication skills were important factors in online counseling:

*There is a distance at the computer. If we were to have normal (FtF) counseling, we would be closer, such as our chairs, where would you like to sit, and what else would you like, for example. Maybe we can show our closeness better when we start the first session. But there is always a distance online. Here, the image is not clear - maybe it is already related to the thing, but I think it is a bit of a problem in itself about communicating, because we cannot communicate face to face, and I think our skills. (S2; Group 2).*

Participants also mentioned that, unlike face-to-face sessions, online counseling requires them to communicate some components of their practice with the client due to the nature of the tools and being physically apart. Lack of in-person practice requires them to inform the client of the object/artifacts they need for their online session meetings. One of the participants explained what she experienced in a mindfulness session when she asked the client to bring a raisin (an object/artifact specific to the activity) for the next session. Her client searched why this particular object was used in online sessions. Another one said, "If you were having that session face-to-face, you would bring raisins to that session yourself. There would be no questioning of the client or investigation of this either."

As stated above, participants were challenged and questioned when they needed to inform their clients upfront about the sessions. They had difficulty using effective communication skills and adapting to the communication differences in virtual environments. During their discussion about the adaptability of their FtF communication skills to online environments, they also underlined the necessity of practicing suitable online communication techniques that could possibly improve the quality of communication

between clients and counselors.

Participants also drew attention to the difficulty of establishing the therapeutic relationship such as building rapport with their clients. For example, one of the participants stated, "...and one of the things that I am most stuck with is that I feel that there is a big obstacle in establishing rapport. You know, you are just a face on the screen" (S4; Group 5). The other groups also mentioned similar issues while establishing therapeutic relationships. The participants emphasized the variation in tone of voice experienced in the virtual environment. As one of the participants stated, "Yes, that tone of voice. I mean, even the tone of voice changes in the virtual environment. It is different from the current tone of voice in the daily conversation" (S1; Group 5).

Participants mentioned having issues in adjusting their voice tone during online sessions as they thought that their clients would not hear them. As one of the participants highlighted, the loud tone made clients feel negative, "I speak loudly so that my voice sounds clearer there. When I speak loudly, my voice becomes thinner. I always think that people may have an antipathy towards this, which was my first counseling, my first client in individual counseling told me this" (S4; Group 5).

Another point made on establishing therapeutic bonds was about the use of non-verbal language such as touching, eye contact, and seeing the clients' body language as a whole. Similarly, one participant shared his concerns about the role of facial expressions in therapeutic relationships with clients. "When there is a minimum level of encouragement, do I convey that to the client or not? You know, we put on a facial expression, but does the other person get it clearly?". Another one agreed, "Since we can't look at them as a whole anyway... we only see faces. It doesn't sound very productive to me either".

### **Technology**

The second theme, technology was related to the lack of competency in technology use and resources. Participants agreed that technological competency is essential in ensuring effective online counseling and suggesting it as a viable alternative to face-to-face practices. However, they also stated that not only the clients but also the counselors



themselves lack technology training. Participants (Group 1) emphasized clients' need for technological competence to benefit from online counseling as follows, "But for the client to get his education to use technological tools... For example, how to turn on Zoom, share screen, turn off the camera, the sound... is about it. Someone who does not know it at all? (posed the question to the group in wonder)". According to the participants, another challenge that arose was that counselors found themselves in need to direct their clients on how to use the technology. Another group (Group 4) declared that having technological competency was the clients' responsibility to ensure before attempting to get online counseling. For example, one participant explained, "There is this, we are in technology, we somehow learn it all at once, he (referring to the client) will learn it maybe in 10th times". Therefore, the lack of clients and counselors' competency in technology was an important issue to be discussed concerning successful counseling practice.

Participants also expressed that lack of resources and insufficiency of available technology were among the issues that influenced their online counseling practices. One of the participants explained how the available online setting he used was challenging him to complete his practice effectively. He said:

*Because I mean, there is no picture, no sound, the internet freezes (DN: At this point, someone says, "The sound is cutting out"), you know, just like that, you say, I'm close, we've come to the main part, then I say, "Can you repeat that, the internet is down," okay (S1; Group 5).*

The experiences of participants showed similarities about access and sustainability of resources. Another participant said:

*One of my biggest problems was related to, um, economic reasons and things, what was the name of it, huh, education. Because twice or so, once last year my computer completely broke down, and this year the computer I bought had a problem with its camera. Therefore, for example, I had to use other people's devices all the time... It was something that affected me a lot and affected the counselor a lot. Um, that is why I say education for economic reasons. (S3; Group 2).*

## Ethics

Participants shared that they needed to reconceptualize ethical aspects in relation to disrespect, consent, and privacy. Among them, disrespect to the time scheduled or to the process in general through various behaviors such as answering a phone call or smoking in the middle of the session, lying down, etc., were outstanding. One participant (S2; Group 3) mentioned disrespect to the time scheduled and suggested that clients tended to reschedule or cancel an online session more comfortably than they would for face-to-face sessions. He said:

*I think the thing is that planning online is more difficult than planning face-to-face. For example, in face-to-face sessions, the possibility of canceling or postponing the appointment you made is not as common.*

Similarly, another participant (S3; Group 3) shared an example of her client receiving a phone call during the session since she used her cell phone to sign in to the online session. She also found it disrespectful because she had warned the client about not using the cell phone in their last meeting.

Participants also shared that the recent consent form was not sufficient for online counseling practice. One participant shared the importance of the revised consent form as follows:

*We have a consent form that determines the whole process at the beginning of the sessions. This is something that helps us a lot in determining the boundaries of both the counselor and the client. However, we did not prepare a consent form completely adapted to the online environment and calculate the points there. We presented the consent form that is generally used, which we present to the clients, but I observed that this might change at some point over time in their sessions. For example, we may have difficulty communicating with the client due to the lethargy of the environment. This is how I identified my problem. (S2; Group 5).*

It has been suggested that the consent form include some items directly related to the online sessions, such as cancellation or rescheduling policies and behavioral codes or procedures.

Participants shared that privacy during online counseling practices should be considered as it involves sharing personal and sensitive information with a counselor in a virtual setup. While mobile applications used for the sessions allow people to connect from anywhere, it challenges the counseling process in various ways for both parties. Participants shared that flexibility of access to the internet becomes an issue when privacy is not ensured. One of the participants explained:

*There is something about being in a home environment. Not everyone is necessarily alone at home; for example, when we arrange for the client, the roommate is at home, in the other room. However, she also told me about her problem with her roommate. At this point, maybe ethical issues, that is, how much confidentiality it protects (S1; Group 5).*

Another one said:

*"My father came to the room in the middle of counseling" (S4; Group 1).*

As in the examples, participants experienced potential risks to client privacy due to the physical restrictions of both their clients and themselves.

### Education

The fourth theme, education, consisted of issues stemming from the lack of online counseling education before the pandemic, which also caused methodological challenges. Participants indicated that a lack of online counseling education is why they experienced some challenges during their online practices. They recognized that online counseling requires certain knowledge and skills that are different from traditional in-person counseling. Therefore, the prospective counselors suggest having a separate lesson or an elective course for the online counseling practice where they can learn about ethical concerns, technological skills, and theoretical approaches to online counseling.

For example, one participant explained: "There are techniques that we use, such as the empty chair. We cannot use them in the online environment automatically. Maybe we can call this a problem as well" (S2; Group 5). The experiences of participants suggest that online counseling

requires the adaptation of certain methods used in face-to-face practices or the introduction of new methodologies that would ensure a comfortable and supportive space for online counseling and an enhanced therapeutic experience. The prospective counselors need to feel confident using a variety of methods to enhance communication skills and active listening techniques to compensate for the potential limitations of online communication.

### Environment

The last theme, environment, discusses the issues related to the environmental distractors which hinders quality of online counseling. Participants complained about the physical environment in which they participated in online sessions with the clients. For example, one participant mentioned: "The environment where the counseling took place. When I was doing counseling, the boy was sitting in a café or something (Observation notes: A few students are laughing here, there was noise)" (S4; Group 1). Similarly, another prospective counselor mentioned:

*The client is entering a place outside the house where he will be very distracted. Because I really had many problems. When he entered the mall, when he entered the park, and when he entered the mall, he was standing. So he talked to me standing for 40 minutes. That is why, I guess because he was standing a little bit, he was looking at the passersby, his eyes drifted to another place, and I felt that his attention was distracted a lot. It was like "Let's ask and be done, let's talk and be done". (S3; Group 4).*

So, finding a space where they can have privacy and a technological setup for online counseling has been an issue for them.

Participants noted that their clients would often turn off their cameras, and even the volume during sessions, particularly when someone entered their room or when background noise became disruptive. At that point, one participant mentioned: "The sound is not that much, but the client turns off the camera, either because of the quality of the internet, or because someone is passing by, you cannot focus there". As finding, or arranging a quiet, private space has been an issue for clients, it directly interferes with the effectiveness of the online sessions. One participant

explains the distractors also concerning the issue of privacy and says: "Privacy is breached as when that happens, you share the space with someone else". Regarding the use of the camera, another participant explained how using the camera distracted her as she felt like watching herself from the camera during the session. Another participant mentioned turning the voice off among the distractors. She complained that she had to double-check with the clients. She said she had to keep asking "Do you hear me?" and explained that resulted in, "Not being able to focus, that is".

## **CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study aimed to investigate the issues of online counseling encountered by prospective counselors during their compulsory online counseling sessions as part of their counseling training. The findings that emerged from thematic analyses of the data sets revealed the following five themes: (i) communication, (ii) technology, (iii) ethics, (iv) education, and (v) environment, which are discussed in detail below.

### **Communication/ Therapeutic Relationship**

Among the themes that arose, communication was one of the most outstanding issues participants drew attention to. Thematic analysis depicted that there were challenges with regard to counselor and client communication, and their therapeutic relationship. Participants mostly referred to the physical distance in online counseling sessions, which hinders even the welcoming of the client to the session as it is in FtF counseling. Besides, the participants stated that even their tone of voice was different in online counseling sessions, which they perceived as an obstacle in terms of establishing rapport with their clients. Most importantly, they noted the lack of non-verbal cues transmitted from the body language, being unable to make eye contact, and seeing only the faces of clients instead of making observations on bodily reactions throughout the session, resulting in the inability to establish a healthy therapeutic relationship. Despite its advantages in terms of providing convenience for clients with time constraints and physical distance from the counselor, etc., there are still unanswered questions in the literature about the feasibility and methodology for establishing a therapeutic relationship and alliance online.

For example, there are some findings indicating that FtF counseling is more effective than online counseling in terms of therapeutic alliance. Mercadal Rotger and Cabré (2022) have found that FtF counseling significantly outperforms online counseling in terms of the development of the therapeutic relationship. In addition, the studies in the literature also drew attention to the difficulty of effective communication and therapeutic relationship in online counseling sessions between the counselor and the client pointing out some threats in communication such as lack of body language and the complexity of the reflection of emotions since only the face of the client and the counselor is visible which also hinders counselors to convey warmth and empathy toward their clients (Trepal et al., 2007). Even the absence of direct eye contact may prevent an alliance from being formed between the client and the counselor. Another study (Erdem & Özdemir, 2020) which investigates the perceptions of potential clients on online counseling showed similar concerns. Participants of that study shared their concerns on lack of body language, and non-verbal cues. It has been discussed that lacking non-verbal cues, and difficulties in understanding client emotions and behaviors can block the therapeutic process (Moudatsou et al., 2024; Ochoa et al., 2024). Moreover, some professionals drew attention to its inadequacy in terms of therapeutic alliance while mentioning the convenience of its usage (Korkmaz & Şen, 2018). In this regard, as noted by the prospective counselors in this study, the findings in the literature also refer to the same issues and concerns about developing communication and therapeutic relationships in online counseling sessions. At this point, there are some suggestions in the literature at least to overcome the deficits accompanied by the lack of body language and eye contact. For example, Geller (2021) suggests using a camera and positioning it at a wide angle showing the clients' whole body during the session to eliminate this shortcoming. Counselors are advised to make eye contact with the client by constantly looking at the middle point of the camera although it still does not exactly create the sense of genuine eye contact as the findings of this study indicate. Considering these results, it is recommended that there may be some communicative disconnections in online counseling, and researchers need to continue to offer their suggestions and studies to prevent these obstacles.

## Technology

The other theme that arose in the study was about the challenges related to technology. The participants noted that from turning on the computer and then Zoom to turning on and off the camera and the audio in Zoom, getting and providing online counseling requires some competency in technology, otherwise the counselor takes a role to lead their clients in terms of how to use the technological tools required for conducting the online sessions. Moreover, the insufficiency of resources were among the important findings of the study. The participants stated that when the resources for connecting to an online counseling session are not enough, there emerge several issues such as cuts in the internet, the audio, and the camera.

These findings were consistent with what has been found in previous studies (eg., Ochoa et al, 2024) which emphasize the essentialness of technological competence. Issues related to technology have been discussed (Aslan et al., 2021), and unstable internet connection, problems related to video and audio, or utilizing mobile-phones rather than computers were mentioned as outstanding technological issues. Actually, in the case the aforementioned deficits regarding the technology use and competency in online counseling do not exist, the literature states that online counseling technology provides various advantages such as utilizing an online platform easily, providing convenience, saving both time and cash, and giving the opportunity to get counseling from a psychological counselor whom you would like to see despite miles between you (Yurayat & Tuklang, 2023). Furthermore, it seems indispensable to resist the changes in the digital age while online counseling offers people a wide range of flexibility which can be preferred by different types of clients (Java et al., 2021). However, before reaching these advantages, it is essential to provide training on how to use technological tools to both counselors and clients who may require such assistance.

## Ethics

Arguably, the most challenging issues in providing mental health services online come in the area of ethical concerns. At the forefront of these concerns is the high

risk of privacy and confidentiality invasion (Baker & Ray, 2011) which was among the findings about ethics in the study. Besides, disrespect for example not adhering to the agreed-upon time scheduled for the session, smoking in the session, and lying down came out as essential issues of online counseling in this study. This finding can be connected with the issues of consent. The findings indicate that consent forms can be comprehensive enough to capture every rule of online counseling sessions, by which the issues of disrespect can be prevented. Indeed, preparing and adhering to a consent form is associated with getting training on how to start online counseling and how to terminate it which will be discussed in the following section.

Although some studies (eg., Yazıcı et al., 2021) claim that there is no ethical concern specific to online counseling modalities, since there is a shortage of formal education and unexplored parts of online counseling, ethical issues should meticulously be considered. Overall, a precaution could be to have a comprehensive knowledge of how ethical concerns differ in online counseling compared to FtF counseling. This comprehensive knowledge can be obtained via guidebooks on the ethical dimensions of online counseling. For example, The American Psychological Association (APA), which defines the ethical codes for those working in the field of mental health, formed a task force and published an ethical code for online counseling in 2013. In this published statement, therapists' compliance with the existing ethical codes is mentioned as the most basic rule (Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology, 2013). In Türkiye, the Ethical Regulation was published by the Turkish Psychological Association in 2018 regarding online counseling. However, the ethical rules specified in both guides are not sufficient to address ethical concerns as these practices are unfamiliar to professionals as are their obligations and ethical principles. Therefore, the legal legislation, ethical principles, and standards of online therapy services, which are increasing all over the world, need to be further clarified (Tuzgöl, 2020).

## Education

The fourth theme, education, includes challenges stemming from the lack of online counseling education before the



pandemic and the methodological difficulties that arose as a result. Participants attributed the challenges of online counseling to their lack of training on conducting sessions virtually and managing the issues that arise during them. They said that the skills and knowledge required for online counseling are different from the ones in FtF counseling. Besides, adapting the principles and techniques of FtF counseling to online counseling has challenged them. These highlighted issues experienced by the prospective counselors-sample of the study are aligned with the literature. For example, Trepal et al. (2007) posit that counseling skills needed for FtF counseling may greatly differ from the ones needed for online counseling sessions. A similar conclusion was reached by Richards and Viganó (2013). They underlined that online counseling has its unique dynamics, and formal education is necessary for counselors to be equipped with the particular skills needed during online counseling. Damar (2019) also proposed that it is necessary for the counselors to particularly educate themselves, and to have a familiarity to utilize the technology if they want to serve better in online environments.

Additionally, Pipoly (2013) points out the lack of emphasis in undergraduate or graduate programs' curricula on online counseling and suggests adding materials and courses to the programs where prospective counselors under the supervision of their instructor find a ground to discuss their challenges, develop alternative ways of handling these challenges, and developing materials adaptive to the nature of online counseling. Besides, as aforementioned, in Türkiye there are some guidebooks for example on the ethical principles of online counseling on the definition, methods, and limitations of online counseling (Erdem, 2020), and on providing effective online counseling sessions with clients (Yorulmaz et al., 2020), of which the prospective counselors may utilize.

To summarize, online counseling has become more alluring to professionals as the likelihood that it is a realistic career option rises. However, undergraduate, graduate, and in-service mental health programs still do not offer enough online counseling coursework. There are many initiatives to enhance online counseling practices, but well-structured, evidence-based programs are essential.

## Environment

The last theme is related to the issues regarding the environment where the online counseling sessions are held. For sure, the emergence of online counseling brought comfort to clients because they do not need to get prepared for an FtF counseling session or they do not need to take a ride to the psychological counseling center where the session will be held, which brings ease to sign in a session home. These brought savings in time and money besides the advantages of feeling more comfortable disclosing themselves in their comfort zone- for example their home (Moudatsou et al., 2024; Özyiğit & Atik, 2021). However, as the study's findings reveal, clients may sign in to a session in a mall, in the car where there may be lots of noise and distractors for both the client and the counselor in addition to clients' smoking, drinking, eating something in their customary habitat, someone's entering into the room at home in the middle of the session threatening the privacy, confidentiality, and the immediacy of the session. Similarly, Ochoa et al. (2024) mentioned that there might be reduced engagement during online counseling sessions due to the nature of the digital environment. Although Özyiğit and Atik (2021) posit that despite these challenges since online counseling provides more accessibility and comfort zone to the clients, it is easier than FtF counseling if suitable environmental conditions are supplied. We in this regard suggest that the rules and the boundaries regarding where the online counseling sessions will be held on behalf of both the counselor and the client should be determined ahead of the sessions, ensured with the consent forms delivered to the clients.

## Limitations and Recommendations

In addition to potential contributions to the literature such as having collected enriched and in-depth data from prospective counselors on the issues of online counseling and introducing a very up-to-date, new data collection method on tricky topics, this study has some limitations that warrant further research. Due to the qualitative research design adopted, the data-driven by the study can't be generalized to the whole population in Türkiye. Hence, future studies may extend the findings of this study to a larger sample utilizing a quantitative research design. The study used the Tricky Topics technique to gather



comprehensive data by having participants attend three 30-minute focus group discussions with 15-minute breaks. This took about two hours of commitment. Despite the motivation and learning from peers, there was a risk of dropout, which was not experienced in the study. Future researchers should consider this potential risk when using Tricky Topics for data collection. Also, this study only sheds light on the prospective counselors' views on online counseling. Future research could adopt a more holistic view by including supervisors and clients of prospective counselors. Hence, it would provide a stereoscopy and deeper understanding.

### **Practical Implications**

Advancements in technology and the ease of online counseling, particularly for younger generations, are expected to increase due to client and counselor needs and the changing world. Psychological counselors must establish standards for supervision and practice. In line with the findings of the study supporting the literature, the basic issues identified are therapeutic relationships, technology, ethics, education, and environment. We think, psychological counselors who have recently graduated and who have previously finished graduate-level study may utilize continuing education programs or instruction in the intricacies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the unique ethical conundrums of online counseling. Since the basic ethical issues that arose among the findings of the study were disrespect, consent, and privacy/confidentiality, the psychological counselors may take a glance at their sessions to determine whether they experience these issues or not and refer to guidelines on the ethics of online counseling or get consultation and/or supervision.

Another implication might be designing a formal course curriculum on online counseling. Future researchers and counselor educators could fruitfully utilize the findings of this study. Considering similar recommendations of past literature, and fast-paced changes in technology, it is inevitable that prospective counselors, and also professional counselors should be equipped with the necessities of the time. Although its effectiveness has been debated, formal education seems like a must to mitigate its weaknesses.

Lastly, we know that in online counseling sessions non-verbal cues and body language except facial expressions cannot be observed. These situations challenge establishing a rapport and an effective therapeutic relationship between the client and the psychological counselor. In this regard, cognitive-behavioral interventions are suggested since the other techniques may suffer

from the lack of non-verbal cues. Also, further interdisciplinary studies can be designed to mitigate the negative effects of the online environment, and to facilitate the interaction and communication. Mental health professionals and software developers can work together to develop a particular digital environment for online counseling. This study might provide a good starting point for designing such a project.

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#### Authors' Contribution Statement

All authors contributed equally to this study.