



Openness and Warmth in the Digital World: Examining Therapeutic Relationships in Online Counseling in Javanese Culture

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed counseling practices, including those in Indonesia. This study explores the therapeutic relationships in online counseling, particularly as the cultural values of togetherness and openness characteristic of Javanese society influence them. A qualitative approach, employing a phenomenological study design, was utilized for this research. The subjects included 15 participants, comprising eight counselors and seven clients, selected through purposive sampling techniques. Data collection involved in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. Techniques such as data triangulation and member checking were employed to ensure data validity. The findings reveal that while non-verbal communication barriers and limited personal interaction pose challenges, digital counseling expands access to services. Interestingly, in some cases, clients exhibit greater openness, benefiting from the anonymity and physical distance that digital platforms provide. This study emphasizes the significance of adopting a culturally informed counseling approach to enhance the quality of therapeutic relationships in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Counseling; Therapeutic Relationships; Javanese Culture; Togetherness; Openness

ABSTRAK

Perkembangan teknologi digital telah membawa perubahan signifikan dalam praktik konseling, termasuk di Indonesia. Tujuan Penelitian ini untuk mengeksplorasi relasi terapeutik dalam konseling *online* dipengaruhi oleh nilai-nilai budaya kebersamaan dan keterbukaan yang khas di masyarakat Jawa.

Metodologi penelitian yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif, dengan studi fenomenologi. Subjek dalam penelitian ini adalah 15 partisipan, terdiri dari 8 konselor dan 7 orang konseli. Pemilihan subjek dilakukan melalui teknik *purposive sampling*. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi non-partisipan dan dokumentasi. Teknik keabsahan data dengan triangulasi data dan *member checking*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hambatan komunikasi non-verbal dan keterbatasan interaksi personal tetap menjadi tantangan meskipun konseling digital dapat memperluas akses terhadap layanan. Namun, pada beberapa kasus, keterbukaan klien justru meningkat karena anonimitas dan jarak yang ditawarkan oleh *platform* digital. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya adaptasi pendekatan konseling berbasis budaya dalam rangka meningkatkan kualitas hubungan terapeutik di era digital.

Kata kunci: Konseling Digital; Relasi Terapeutik; Budaya Jawa; Kebersamaan; Keterbukaan

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, advancements in information and communication technology have transformed how individuals interact, particularly in mental health. Counseling can be conducted through two primary modalities: face-to-face and online counseling. Face-to-face counseling involves direct interaction between the counselor and the client in the exact location, allowing for nuanced non-verbal communication and fostering trust and closer relationships (Goss & Anthony, 2003). In contrast, online counseling is facilitated through various digital platforms, which can operate synchronously via video calls, phone conversations, chat or asynchronously through text messages and emails. According to Mulungu et al. (2024), online counseling provides flexibility and accessibility that is not always achievable with face-to-face counseling, making it a particularly viable option during physical restrictions, such as those encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, online counseling is convenient in today's fast-paced world (Blegur et al., 2023; Wibowo et al., 2019; Fadhilah et al., 2021). This trend is also observable in Indonesia, where the rapid rise in communication technology and Internet usage has spurred its development. Numerous counseling applications, such as Riliv, Psikologimu, and Kalm, have emerged, providing digital platforms for individuals to access counseling services with qualified professionals (Mulawarman et al., 2022; Mulawarman et al., 2024).

Although online counseling has gained popularity, a survey by the Indonesian Association of Clinical Psychologists in 2022 found that approximately 60% of users still prefer in-person sessions, compared to 40% who choose online services (APKI, 2022). Digital counseling does provide considerable advantages, particularly in terms of accessibility and convenience for both therapists and clients. Clients value the opportunity to connect without geographical limitations, while therapists appreciate the flexibility in scheduling sessions to accommodate their clients' needs.

Transitioning from in-person interactions to digital platforms presents unique challenges in establishing and maintaining therapeutic relationships, which are essential components of counseling (Richards & Viganó, 2013). Various obstacles arise in online counseling, such as difficulties in interpreting clients' nonverbal cues, technical issues like unstable internet connections, and data privacy and security concerns. These limitations can hinder the development of a deep therapeutic relationship, which is crucial for fostering trust between clients and counselors. Such challenges highlight the need for a comprehensive examination of digital interactions in online counseling, especially to understand how effective therapeutic relationships can be cultivated in a virtual environment. Moreover, therapists encounter difficulties interpreting nonverbal cues, raising concerns about the potential oversight of significant emotional signals (Rosyidi & Saputi, 2023). The lack of face-to-face communication restricts therapists' ability to perceive expressions and body language, which is vital for grasping clients' emotions and psychological states. Additionally, clients often find it challenging to articulate complex emotions through text or voice alone, which can compromise the quality of the therapeutic relationship during online sessions (Foley & Gentile, 2010; Li et al., 2013; Paradisi et al., 2021).

An effective therapeutic relationship is typically a gradation of trust, warmth, and openness between the counselor and client. This relationship tends to be more intensive in face-to-face counseling, as it allows both counselors and clients to observe non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, intonation, and body language. These cues contribute to a greater sense of trust and emotional closeness. Research by Dowell and Berman (2013) highlights that face-to-face counseling fosters the development of deep connections, as counselors can directly interpret these non-verbal signals, thus gaining a better understanding of the client's

emotional state. In contrast, online counseling often faces challenges due to the limited accessibility of these cues. Such limitations can negatively impact the quality of the therapeutic relationship and may lead to misunderstandings between counselors and clients (Lin & Anderson, 2024; Bolsinger et al., 2020; Opland & Torrico, 2024).

In Javanese culture, togetherness, harmony, and non-verbal communication foster strong relationships. Javanese culture significantly emphasizes politeness, a sense of *sungkan* (*ewuh pakewuh*), and respect for authority, all of which profoundly influence social interactions, including those in counseling sessions (Geertz, 1961). The concept of reluctance, which refers to hesitation or discomfort in expressing feelings and opinions, is essential in preserving social harmony within Javanese society. This is evident in daily interactions, where individuals often refrain from being fully open to protect others' feelings and maintain the equilibrium of social relationships.

This *ewuh pakewuh* may present challenges in counseling, particularly in fostering client openness with the counselor. These challenges are further complicated by the high value of non-verbal communication, which carries substantial meaning in social interactions. Physical presence and face-to-face contact are viewed as symbols of respect and can create a sense of awkwardness, making the shift to online counseling feel less warm or polite. Consequently, it is vital to understand and study the therapeutic relationship in online counseling further, ensuring that cultural values such as politeness and harmony are upheld despite the differences in communication media.

The value of togetherness plays a significant role in counseling, particularly within Javanese culture, where the pursuit of harmony can foster deeper client engagement and a solid commitment to the therapeutic process, albeit with a gradual increase in openness. As noted by other researchers, including Mulder (1985), while personal openness may be constrained by *ewuh pakewuh*, Javanese individuals often prioritize warmth in relationships and group solidarity, contributing to robust social bonds.

The physical presence often associated with traditional counseling is crucial for fostering warmth and empathy, enhancing the relationship between counselor and client. In contrast, online counseling faces challenges in conveying elements such as body language, facial expressions, and eye contact integral to face-to-face interactions. This raises an important question about how digital counseling can effectively bridge emotional and

cultural distances, particularly in a society that values openness and warmth in social interactions (Mejah et al., 2019; Giordano et al., 2022).

Fostering "warmth and openness" in Javanese socio-cultural relations involves embracing fundamental values such as *tepa selira* and *ewuh pakewuh*. *Tepasalira* embodies empathy and tolerance towards others and is a crucial foundation for nurturing harmonious and understanding relationships. This mindset encourages individuals to respect others' emotions and circumstances, thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships. *Tepang*, *tepa selira* motivates counselors to be attuned to their clients' emotional states and to cultivate a safe space where clients feel accepted and understood—an essential aspect of culturally sensitive counseling (Geertz, 1961).

Conversely, *ewuh pakewuh*, or a sense of *sungkan*, highlights the importance of respect and politeness in interactions, particularly when engaging with elders or those in positions of authority. While *ewuh pakewuh* may sometimes hinder clients from openly expressing their problems, it simultaneously reflects a deep commitment to maintaining positive relationships. This value presents a unique challenge in online counseling, as clients might need the counselor's physical presence to establish emotional closeness. Here, the counselor's understanding of the cultural context becomes vital in creating an environment where clients feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, even without face-to-face interaction.

The warmth and openness inherent in Javanese culture are epitomized by the *andhap asor* (humility), which encourages individuals to avoid standing out and communicate gently. In counseling interactions, *andhap asor* fosters a mutual respect between counselors and clients, allowing clients to feel heard without perceiving any sense of superiority from the counselor. However, this humility must be conveyed in digital counseling through empathetic language and a flexible approach to responding to clients' feelings.

Exploring these Javanese cultural values provides valuable insights into how counselors can bridge the emotional distance often created in online counseling. By understanding key elements such as *tepa selira*, *ewuh pakewuh*, and *andhap asor*, counselors can work to cultivate a warm counseling environment, ensuring that clients feel valued and comfortable even within the constraints of digital spaces. As Naderbagi et al. (2024) noted, adapting to cultural contexts is essential for establishing effective therapeutic relationships in the digital age.

Javanese culture, renowned for its values of togetherness, warmth, and openness, offers a distinctive context for online counseling practices. In this cultural framework, interpersonal relationships are highly esteemed, and warmth in communication is deemed essential for establishing a sense of safety for clients (Zentz, 2014; Gholizadeh & Gorji, 2024). A significant aspect of Javanese culture relevant to understanding relationships is the concept of *tepa selira*, which embodies an attitude of empathy towards the feelings and positions of others. This concept encourages counselors to honor and uphold the emotions of their clients, thus fostering an environment where clients feel comfortable and valued. In practice, *tepa selira* is often expressed through courteous gestures, such as nodding or smiling during greetings, maintaining an appropriate physical distance, and listening attentively without interruption.

The concept of *tepa selira* in Javanese culture embodies essential values of tolerance, empathy, and respect for the feelings and circumstances of others. It can be understood as an individual's ability to comprehend the positions, emotions, and situations of those around them while refraining from behaviors that may offend or discomfort others. In social interactions, this principle fosters a harmonious and respectful environment where everyone feels valued and safe expressing themselves without fearing judgment.

In the realm of counseling, *tepa selira* closely aligns with the concept of warmth, a fundamental element in cultivating a solid therapeutic alliance between counselor and client. Warmth reflects the counselor's acceptance, empathy, and genuine concern for the client, which is crucial for clients to feel at ease and secure when discussing their challenges. By demonstrating *tepa selira*, the counselor not only honors the client's feelings but also exhibits awareness of their emotional needs, enhancing their sense of security and trust.

In a counseling session, the concept of *tepa selira* can be demonstrated through the counselor's attentive listening without interruptions, coupled with nods that express acknowledgment and understanding. The use of empathetic, non-judgmental language further enhances this experience. Such practices convey a sense of warmth, making the client feel genuinely cared for and understood, encouraging them to open up and seek assistance.

In online counseling, where physical contact and complete visibility of body language are absent, *tepa selira* can still be effectively expressed through warm verbal

communication, a friendly tone of voice, and thoughtful responses. This is crucial, as the warmth facilitated by *tepa selira* can help create a supportive virtual environment that enhances the counseling process.

In counseling, warmth is also reflected in the language used, namely, subtle, polite, and indirect language, so clients do not feel pressured or offended. However, these elements may be challenging to maintain in a digital context. According to Nurlatifah (2016), openness in communication between counselors and clients is essential to building trust, which is the foundation of an effective therapeutic relationship. In Javanese culture, this openness is often expressed subtly in order to maintain respect and *ewuh pakewuh* (feelings of reluctance), which may be challenging to transfer into digital forms of communication that are minimal in non-verbal cues. Thus, the challenge arises in how counselors can maintain these values when using online media so that the therapeutic relationship remains warm and open to the client. Thus, this study aims to explore (1) how openness and warmth can be realized in online counseling; (2) the challenges of Javanese culture in building therapeutic relationships in online counseling; and the potential for adaptation of Javanese cultural values in digital counseling.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of counselors and clients in establishing therapeutic relationships within the context of online counseling in Javanese society. A qualitative method was selected to facilitate a deep understanding of the social and cultural dynamics that shape therapeutic relationships in digital environments, particularly within the solid cultural framework of Javanese culture (Moleong, 1989). The research design adopts a phenomenological approach to gain insight into participants' subjective experiences regarding therapeutic relationships in online counseling. This approach efficiently uncovers the perceptions and meanings that clients and counselors attribute to aspects such as openness and warmth during the digital counseling process (Creswell, 2003).

The study involved 15 participants: 8 counselors experienced in providing online counseling services via platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp, and Google Meet, and seven clients from Javanese cultural backgrounds who had engaged in at least five online

counseling sessions with these counselors. Participants were selected through purposive sampling techniques. Data was collected using in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation.

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To ensure data validity, the study employed triangulation techniques by gathering information from multiple sources—in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. This approach enhances the accuracy of findings by allowing for comparisons between results obtained from different data collection methods. The in-depth interviews followed a structured framework encompassing key indicators, including client openness, perceived warmth from the counselor, communication effectiveness, and cultural adaptation throughout the counseling process. Non-participant observations focused on how counselors conveyed empathy, verbal and non-verbal expressions of warmth, and the level of client engagement during online sessions.

Additionally, member checking was implemented, where the main themes and results interpreted by the researchers were shared back with the participants for their feedback. This process ensured that the researchers' interpretations aligned with the experiences participants intended to convey. Prolonged engagement with participants was also essential to understand the broader context of their experiences. Through this extended interaction, researchers cultivated trust and gathered more authentic data.

Researchers ensure data validity by maintaining an audit trail, which documents every step in the research process, from data collection to analysis. This practice enhances transparency and allows the research to be traceable. Additionally, researcher reflexivity plays a crucial role; researchers engage in self-reflection to mitigate personal biases that may impact data interpretation. This study employed the thematic analysis method based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for data analysis. This approach involves inductively coding the data, identifying recurring patterns, and developing themes linked to openness,

warmth, and cultural adaptation within online counseling. The analysis is informed by cultural theory, situating the findings within a Javanese cultural framework, thereby deepening the understanding of how cultural values shape therapeutic relationships in digital environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study uncovered significant findings regarding how the cultural values of openness and warmth in Javanese society shape therapeutic relationships in online counseling. Through in-depth interviews, observations, and thematic analysis, several key themes emerged that highlight the dynamics of therapeutic relationships within the context of digital counseling. These findings will be discussed in four sections: (1) client openness in online counseling, (2) warmth in digital communication, (3) cultural challenges in establishing therapeutic relationships, and (4) the potential for cultural adaptation in digital counseling.

First, the interview findings indicated that digital counseling fosters an environment conducive to client openness, mainly through anonymity and personal comfort. Many clients felt more comfortable sharing personal challenges in familiar and secure surroundings like their homes. The anonymity associated with online counseling, where clients are not required to reveal their physical identity or engage in face-to-face interactions with the counselor, enhances their sense of safety when discussing sensitive topics. One participant in an in-depth interview expressed, "I feel more comfortable opening up through a screen because I do not have to meet face to face, so I feel less awkward and embarrassed." This perspective indicates that digital counseling while lacking physical contact, can encourage greater openness among some clients.

Supporting these findings, observations from non-participant studies reveal that clients tend to be more active and responsive during online sessions, mainly when using chat. In contrast, video call sessions, which highlight facial expressions, may lead to different dynamics. The chat format is often perceived as more informal and secure, helping to mitigate feelings of awkwardness. This observation tool captures verbal and non-verbal behaviors, showing that clients' frequency and speed of responses are generally more fluid in chat environments than in video interactions. The documentation from counseling

sessions reveals that clients with a Javanese cultural background often exhibit an *ewuh pakewuh* attitude when addressing personal or sensitive issues, particularly during video call sessions. This attitude is reflected in their more formal and cautious language, alongside prolonged pauses before broaching sensitive topics. This documentation, which captures transcripts of client conversations and communication patterns, underscores the enduring influence of cultural factors on clients' willingness to engage. While digital counseling can enhance openness for some individuals, challenges persist—particularly for those who closely adhere to the Javanese cultural norm of "with pakewuh," which views interactions lacking physical contact as more formal and less emotionally intimate.

The second theme that emerged from the study was the importance of warmth in digital therapeutic communication. In Javanese culture, warmth is often conveyed through non-verbal cues, such as smiling, maintaining eye contact, and exhibiting friendly body language. In face-to-face counseling, these elements are crucial for establishing a strong emotional bond between counselor and client. The findings indicated that counselors with solid communication skills can successfully convey warmth through text or voice messages despite the visual limitations that diminish the non-verbal aspects of interaction. One counselor remarked, "I have to be more expressive in my choice of words and tone of voice, as there is no physical contact or body language to reinforce my message." However, some clients felt more emotionally distant during digital counseling sessions. They noted that while verbal communication was effective, there was a noticeable loss of intimacy and empathy typically experienced in face-to-face interactions.

Third, the Javanese culture, which places a strong emphasis on politeness, hierarchy, and respect, poses particular challenges in the realm of online counseling. Some clients, especially those older or deeply rooted in traditional values, need help to forge meaningful connections with counselors in a digital environment. They have expressed feeling less confident in the professionalism and authority of counselors without a physical presence, as these qualities are often associated with appearance and proximity in Javanese culture. Likewise, Counselors encounter difficulties interpreting clients' emotions and body language, which are crucial for identifying unspoken issues. One counselor remarked, "In face-to-face sessions, I can observe gestures or facial expressions that indicate a client's

discomfort or a desire to discuss specific topics. However, these cues are significantly harder to discern in a digital setting."

The last theme, despite the challenges, the study's results indicate promising potential for cultural adaptation in digital counseling. Younger clients, often more comfortable with technology, have demonstrated an increased ability to adjust to online counseling. They tend to be more flexible in their communication and appreciate the convenience digital platforms offer, which helps them establish connections with counselors more easily. Moreover, counselors recognizing these cultural differences have devised strategies to foster strong client relationships. These strategies include using local language, incorporating expressions that convey warmth, and occasionally utilizing video platforms to maintain limited visual communication. Another significant finding is that, in certain instances, the physical distance inherent in digital counseling can reduce the feeling of *ewuh pakewuh*, which often inhibits openness in Javanese culture.

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of openness and warmth in communication between counselors and clients in fostering an effective therapeutic relationship within the context of online counseling, particularly in Javanese culture. Consistent with the theory proposed by Alt et al. (2022), open communication significantly enhances trust, the cornerstone of the therapeutic alliance. The significance of openness and warmth is further underscored in Javanese culture, where interpersonal interactions are deeply influenced by values such as *tepa selira* (mutual respect) and *ewuh pakewuh* (feelings of reluctance). This indicates that digital counseling can be a valuable resource in societies with solid interpersonal norms, like Javanese culture, provided that counselors adapt their communication style to be more empathetic and responsive to the emotional needs of their clients (Irrazaval & Kalawski, 2022; Finset & Ornes, 2017).

Digital counseling can be an effective tool within the Javanese cultural context, particularly when counselors adapt their communication strategies to maintain warmth and openness, even in a digital format. However, the significant role of non-verbal communication in this culture presents a considerable challenge. Counselors should focus more on verbal elements that can help compensate for the lack of non-verbal interactions during online sessions.

Research by Perez et al. (2023) highlights that refined and tailored verbal communication skills can effectively address the challenges posed by the absence of non-verbal cues in online counseling, especially in Asian cultures that prioritize harmony and order. The study further underscores that while online counseling has limitations in physical presence, a culture-based approach can foster a more personal and comfortable experience for clients. Counselors who engage in active listening and provide supportive verbal responses are more likely to establish a solid therapeutic relationship despite the constraints of physical distance. Digital platforms hold significant potential for expanding access to counseling services (Richards & Viganó, 2013), but they also necessitate a deep understanding of the client's cultural context (Naderbagi et al., 2024). In cultures with solid interpersonal norms, such as Javanese culture, digital counseling can provide flexibility while requiring a culturally sensitive approach (Ilmi et al., 2022).

Practical communication skills and the ability to create a warm connection are essential for counselors to foster therapeutic solid relationships with clients. Farjantoky (2018) emphasizes that Javanese cultural values—such as togetherness, warmth, and openness—are crucial in establishing effective therapeutic relationships. Counselors must prioritize warmth and openness in their communication with clients, employing strong communication skills to enhance these relationships. This aligns with the findings of Barak et al. (2009), who highlight the role of effective communication in online counseling for building solid counselor-client relationships. Moreover, this study supports the positions of Naderbagi et al. (2024) and Nagayama et al. (2019), which assert that online counseling approaches must be adapted to the client's cultural context to remain effective. In societies with solid interpersonal norms, such as Javanese culture, while digital counseling offers flexibility, it also requires more nuanced communication adjustments, including polite language, friendly intonation, and attentive delivery. Counselors operating on digital platforms should be mindful that the limitations of non-verbal communication in online settings can be compensated for by giving greater attention to word choice and message delivery to sustain an atmosphere of warmth and openness.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of cross-cultural counseling by illuminating how local cultural factors, particularly Javanese values, influence therapeutic relationships within the framework of digital counseling. It supports the notion that

communication adaptation is crucial for maintaining the effectiveness of therapeutic relationships in cultures that prioritize warmth and openness (Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012; Lee et al., 2021). Furthermore, this research addresses a gap in the literature concerning the implementation of online counseling in communities rooted in communal cultures, underscoring the significance of cultural sensitivity in digital counseling practices.

The findings of this study can significantly aid counselors in Indonesia by highlighting the importance of communication strategies that align with clients' cultural values in fostering a robust therapeutic relationship. Specifically, counselors engaged in digital platforms should focus on verbal communication techniques that enhance the warmth and openness typically conveyed in face-to-face interactions. This may involve selecting supportive language and maintaining a gentle tone during telephone or video call sessions. These insights are precious for online counseling practitioners working with clients from similar cultural backgrounds or those who share communal cultural norms. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study, including the small sample size and the restricted range of digital media utilized. Most participants engaged primarily through chat and video call platforms, which may only partially capture the diverse experiences of clients using other formats, such as email or voice messages. Additionally, the study did not incorporate perspectives from counselors working with clients from different cultures, meaning the findings are primarily relevant to the Javanese cultural context and warrant further investigation to assess their applicability to other cultural groups.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of openness and warmth in communication between counselors and clients as crucial components in fostering an effective therapeutic relationship within online counseling, particularly in Javanese culture. Cultural values such as *tepa selira*, *ewuh pakewuh*, and the significance of non-verbal communication play a vital role in shaping interactions between clients and counselors. While online counseling provides flexibility and anonymity that can encourage client openness, it poses challenges, particularly in preserving the warmth and closeness typically conveyed through non-verbal cues. Consequently, counselors must adapt communication styles to maintain a solid therapeutic relationship, even in digital interactions. The findings of this study underscore

the considerable potential of digital counseling in societies with solid interpersonal norms, such as Javanese culture, as long as the communication strategies employed are culturally sensitive. Additionally, this research contributes to the understanding of the necessity of maintaining elements of warmth and openness in digital counseling practices in Indonesia. The study recommends that online counseling practitioners in Indonesia develop communication guidelines attuned to local cultures, particularly Javanese culture. These guidelines should focus on implementing verbal communication strategies to substitute for non-verbal cues, enhancing warmth in counseling sessions. Counselors should also seek to improve their skills through specialized training in verbal communication techniques for online counseling. Furthermore, it is recommended that online counseling application developers incorporate features that facilitate non-verbal expressions, such as emojis or audio messaging options, enriching emotional communication and supporting warm, open therapeutic relationships.

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