

Application of Fuzzy Delphi Method in Exploring Facebook as a Tool for Writing Therapy Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Social media sites including Facebook are increasingly accessed and integrated in the counselling and psychotherapy profession. As there is a universal escalation of mental and emotional health needs in today's society especially among young adults, Facebook as a popular social networking site for Malaysian youths could be taken advantage as a platform for expressive writing. However, there is a significant deficiency in the available body of knowledge regarding Facebook as a potential online intervention medium. This study aimed at examining the consensus level of 22 experts in the field of counselling and psychology on the suitability of Facebook as a platform for writing therapy intervention in the Malaysian context using the Fuzzy Delphi Method. Findings identified contradictory views among the experts on the survey items, which indicated the inadequate understanding of the applicability of writing therapy via online-based mediums. As the Internet continues to proliferate throughout the world, the potential of Facebook as a medium for intervention should be further tapped into. This study would elicit increased awareness of the applicability of Facebook to help shape the future in the field of psychotherapy and counselling in Malaysia. A sample plan for an exploratory implementation study was established for future research use.

Keywords: *Writing therapy, social media, Facebook, mental health.*

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, mental and emotional health needs have been experiencing constant escalation worldwide; especially among young adults. Face-to-face treatment sessions alone are difficult to meet these increasing demands (van Emmerik, Reijntjes, & Kamphuis, 2013). Possible alternatives are needed to reduce the heavy demand on practitioners in the field of counselling and psychology.

Online intervention has been suggested as a potential complement to the traditional in-person approach (Barak & Grohol, 2011). Facebook as a popular networking site has become one of the main modes of communication among most youths. Besides that, writing therapy could be one of the possible solutions as it allows greater client control along the treatment process instead of being practitioner-centered. Taking advantage of both the potential of writing therapy and the popularity of social media today could be an effective approach to enable more young people in seeking adequate treatment, particularly for those who are uncomfortable in expressing their emotions in face-to-face sessions.

Expressive writing has been suggested as being more effective when applied online (van Emmerik et al., 2013). However, Web-based intervention for counselling and therapy use is generally under researched (Sheese, Brown, & Graziano, 2004). Moreover, social media tools, in particular Facebook, have not been studied to determine their applicability as a platform for writing therapy. This might imply the underestimation of the potential of social networking sites to be a channel for seeking treatment in counselling and psychotherapy.

To our knowledge, no studies on writing therapy have since been conducted in Malaysia; despite the multiple therapeutic benefits it encompasses. This indicates that Malaysian counsellors and psychologists have overlooked the

priority of expressive writing as a tool in counselling, besides having inadequate awareness of its potential. In addition, a study conducted to examine Malaysian counsellors' perceptions with respect to online counselling discerned that most Malaysian counsellors still rely heavily and prefer the traditional face-to-face counselling sessions; although they acknowledge the benefits of online counselling (Zainah Ahmad Zamani, Rohany Nasir, & Fatimah Yusoff, 2010). Therefore, the efficacy of online intervention tools should be made known and explored further to align the field in tandem with the technological advancement in the 21st century.

With the deficiencies outlined as above, this study is aimed at bridging the gap by contributing to the present body of literature on Facebook as a potential medium for online expressive writing. This study is pertinent to Malaysia as it is the first known attempt at exploring online writing therapy. It is hoped to trigger more related studies of this nature in the Malaysian context. Practitioners in this field should keep pace with the needs of the present generation as there is a constant rise in mental and emotional health needs. As the Internet continues to proliferate exponentially across the world, the potential of social media should be further tapped into to help shape the future in the field of psychotherapy and counselling in Malaysia.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the level of consensus among 22 Malaysian experts in the field of counselling and psychology regarding the use of Facebook as a tool for writing therapy, specifically in the Malaysian context using the Fuzzy Delphi Method. The following were the research questions:

- a) What do experts believe are the potential of writing therapy in the context of counselling and psychology?
- b) How do experts view the suitability of Facebook as a medium for the provision of writing therapy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing Therapy in counselling/psychotherapy

Research has long demonstrated the therapeutic effects of writing. Commonly known as expressive writing or written emotional disclosure, writing therapy is a tool of intervention where one usually writes about an emotional or stressful event for about 20 minutes over a consecutive period of 3 to 5 days (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). A plethora of research studies have drawn attention to the benefits writing therapy could bring about such as improved emotional and physical health and well-being (Baikie, Geerligs, & Wilhelm, 2012); increased levels of self-esteem (O'Connor et al., 2011); declined symptoms of depression (Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006; Krpan et al., 2013) and posttraumatic stress disorder (Meston, Lorenz, & Stephenson, 2013); and fewer sleeping difficulties and inappropriate comparisons of outward appearance among college women (Arigo & Smyth, 2012). As users concentrate upon constructing their stories through reflection, they engage themselves in the treatment and counselling process (Richards, 2009). Nevertheless, it is important to note that writing therapy should be used as a supplementary tool and should not in any way replace any proper treatment or intervention (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005).

As face-to-face intervention alone has difficulty meeting the escalation of various emotional and mental health difficulties, online counselling or therapy has been increasingly seen as the potential alternative to the traditional face-to-face approach. Barak and Grohol (2011) have established positive future prospects of the efficacy and development of online mental health interventions. Several researchers have also suggested the use of Internet as a platform for writing therapy and maintained that expressive writing can be effectively administered online (O'Connor et al., 2011; Sheese, Brown, & Graziano, 2004; van Emmerik, Reijntjes, & Kamphuis, 2013). The many benefits of online therapy interventions include the convenience of access, time and cost-effectiveness, the ability to reach a larger population, and the maintenance of clients' anonymity in comparison with the conventional method (Baikie et al., 2012; Barak & Grohol, 2011). Moreover, the fear of humiliation in expressing one's emotions could be overcome through online intervention, as one is not bounded by "offline social codes" such as developing eye contact, physical appearance and body language; therefore one is able to express emotions confidently (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013).

The controversial shift toward the Web-based approach however, also brings forth ethical issues including privacy and confidentiality, and consent issues (Reamer, 2013). While positive outcomes have been identified among those engaged in expressive writing in most studies, there is a need for more research studies to further affirm the efficacy of writing therapy as an intervention modality for users with various health and emotional needs (Cooper, 2013; Krpan et al., 2013; Sloan, Marx, & Greenberg, 2011).

Facebook as a platform for writing therapy

In recent years, Facebook has grown into one of the most popular social network sites with “1.19 billion monthly active users as of September 30, 2013” (Facebook, 2013). Malaysian users were identified as having the most Facebook friends and spend more time on the site; moreover young adults constitute 62% of the entire population of the Malaysian Facebook users (Balakrishnan & Shamim, 2013).

Adolescents around the age of 18 to 25 are at a stage most prone to difficulties in emotional and mental health compared to those of other age groups (Burns, Durkin, & Jonathan, 2009; Neal, Campbell, Williams, Liu, & Nussbaumer, 2011). However, most with these problems do not receive proper treatment because of their refusal to seek appropriate professional advice (Glasheen & Campbell, 2009). Some of the obstacles to seeking help include social stigma, unwillingness or difficulty in expressing emotions and the lack of access and awareness (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012). Neal et al. (2011, p. 25) have identified a “knowledge gap” in youths’ awareness of the mental health services available online.

The popularity of Facebook could be taken advantage of to increase help-seeking behaviors among youths. Increasing trends of today’s mental health needs highlight the legitimacy and need for a paradigm shift from the conventional face-to-face sessions to Web-based interventions (van Emmerik et al., 2013). Facebook as one of the numerous Web-based tools could be employed to facilitate therapy provision, especially for the generation of “digital natives” for whom technology is part and parcel of life. In tandem with the changes in the preferred mode of communication among youths, the counselling and psychotherapy profession will also change in nature; as many adolescents tend to feel uneasy in a conventional face-to-face treatment session as they are accustomed to online communication (Hoffman, 2013).

While there is a reasonably large amount of literature on the use of Facebook in the medical field (e.g., Antheunis, Tate, & Nieboer, 2013; Huang & Dunbar, 2013; Prasad, 2013), the possibility to positively enhance its usage in the context of counselling and psychotherapy is largely overlooked and under-researched (Veretilo & Billick, 2012). Numerous studies focused on the negative rather than the positive impact of Facebook use among adolescents such as increased risk of depression, addiction and antisocial behaviors (e.g., Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013; Jelenchick, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2013; Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). This lopsided view undermines the potential of Facebook in reaching out to adolescents with mental health conditions or emotional difficulties.

One of the biggest possible barriers to using Facebook as an intervention platform could be the ethical issues associated with it. Privacy issues were the one of the main concerns acknowledged by patients over the use of social media to communicate with health care professionals (Antheunis et al., 2013). Confidentiality and anonymity are major aspects that have to be dealt with carefully. Nevertheless, it is not unfeasible to make use of the potential of Facebook as a complementary tool in counselling and psychotherapy especially for working with youths; provided clients’ privacy is prioritized and strictly maintained while taking into account the guidelines of social media use available (e.g., Birky & Collins, 2011; Reamer, 2013). While recognizing the potential of social media in the process of intervention, Veretilo and Billick (2011) echoed that much care must be given by practitioners while using social media to interact with clients online.

In addition, there exists a major gap whereby the use of Web-based approaches in the current writing therapy paradigm lacks empirical validation (Sheese et al., 2004). Little research has been done with respect to using Facebook as a platform for expressive writing implementation. Present studies have employed web sites (Lange, van de Ven, Schrieken, & Emmelkamp, 2001; Possemato, Ouimette, & Geller, 2009; Possemato, Ouimette, & Knowlton, 2011), e-mails (Baikie et al., 2012; Richards, 2009; Sheese et al., 2004) and blogs (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013) as mediums for therapy provision. Positive findings which showed improved outcomes among users engaged in the expressive writing process have been established in all the above studies, thus underscoring the efficacy and potential of online-delivered writing therapy as an essential complementary intervention to conventional face-to-face treatment sessions. In response to Boniel-Nissim and Barak’s suggestion (2013), this study examined the current online trends including Facebook for online expressive writing.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Ethical issues such as client anonymity and confidentiality are of paramount importance in counselling and psychology. The controversy surrounding Facebook as a medium for therapy provision certainly involved subjective judgement and multifaceted views. Therefore, the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM hereafter) was employed in this study to examine the degree of experts’ consensus using interviews and survey. This technique is known to be effective for

collecting subjective views to reach to a point of decision for controversial matters (Tang & Wu, 2010). Improvised from the traditional Delphi method, the FDM is time and cost efficient, whereby the repeated sessions of feedback are not required (Mohd Ridhuan Mohd Jamil, Zaharah Hussin, Nurul Rabihah Mat Noh, Ahmad Arifin Sapar, & Norlidah Alias, 2013). Furthermore, experts could express their original views freely without having to consider or modify their opinions based on the perspectives of other participants.

Sample of study

The sample consisted of 22 experts in the field of counselling and psychology, including registered and practicing Malaysian counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists in both public and private sectors, university lecturers and psychology officers.

Data Collection

i) First Phase: Interviews

The first phase of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with three experts in psychotherapy and counselling, including a writing therapist based in the United Kingdom and two highly experienced public university lecturers. The interview protocol was prepared beforehand. The emerging themes identified from the interviews were used for developing the ‘Potential of Facebook for Writing Therapy Questionnaire’.

ii) Second Phase: Distribution of Questionnaire

The ‘Potential of Facebook for Writing Therapy Questionnaire’ is made up of 18 survey questions using the 5-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. Experts were required to indicate the extent of their agreement with the statements given. It was constructed based on emergent themes the experts raised from the conducted interviews in the previous phase.

This survey was aimed at collecting practitioners’ opinions on the extent to which writing therapy is effective as a tool; and the suitability of Facebook as a potential platform for applying writing therapy. Experts’ views were gathered on issues including the prospects of applying writing therapy through Facebook in Malaysia, ethical issues involved with the use of Facebook, and the advantages and complications of therapy provision to both clients and practitioners.

Data Analysis

The FDM comprises of two integral elements. First, each expert’s responses are converted into triangular fuzzy numbers to identify their stand for each statement. Next, the defuzzification process is conducted to determine the value reflecting the degree of consensus of the respondents.

Triangular Fuzzy Number

The triangular fuzzy number is helpful in the development of a linguistic scale, which is then used to convert the linguistic variables into fuzzy numbers. In this study, the following scale was used:

Linguistic variable	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Likert scale	1	2	3	4	5
Triangular fuzzy number	(0.0, 0.1, 0.2)	(0.1, 0.2, 0.4)	(0.2, 0.4, 0.6)	(0.4, 0.6, 0.8)	(0.6, 0.8, 1.0)

ii) Defuzzification

The ranking for each variable according to the experts’ preference is then ascertained through the process of defuzzification, with the following formula:

$$A_{max} = \frac{1}{3} * (a_1 + a_m + a_2)$$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contribution of writing therapy in counselling/psychotherapy services

Analysis of the experts’ views using the Fuzzy Delphi approach yielded the following findings (Table 1). Based on the analysis, the experts were in agreement and ranked the following aspects as the most important: clients could have

convenient access to writing therapy (highest defuzzification score of 20.7); in-person intervention is more effective than the application of writing therapy (20.44 points); and the ability for users to express their emotions openly (20.3 points). Despite acknowledging several advantages of applying writing therapy, most experts still maintained that traditional face-to-face interventions are more effective compared to the client-controlled writing therapy.

In addition, the experts seemed to be in disagreement with each other pertaining to whether practitioners could analyze and interpret text more systematically in writing therapy (see Items 9 and 10). This indirectly implied inadequate understanding among experts of the expressive writing paradigm. Meanwhile, the analysis shows that experts held differing views on the familiarity of Malaysian practitioners on writing therapy (see Item 9). This indicates that there are a significant amount of counsellors and psychologists in Malaysia who lack awareness of this therapeutic tool of intervention.

Table 1 Potential of Writing Therapy in Counselling/Psychotherapy

Position	Question	Defuzzification Score
1	Clients could have convenient access to writing therapy anytime anywhere.	20.7
2	Face-to-face intervention is more effective than writing therapy.	20.44
3	Writing therapy is suitable for clients who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally.	20.3
4	Clients get plenty of time to reflect upon their stories before writing.	19.84
5	Writing therapy allows clients to express their emotions openly.	19.5
6	Writing therapy is seldom applied in Malaysia.	18.3
7	Clients can express themselves in words without fear of humiliation.	18.3
8	Writing therapy is unfamiliar to most counselors/therapists in Malaysia.	18.04
9	Writing therapy enables therapists/counselors to analyze the text more systematically compared to verbal therapy session.	16.7
10	Writing therapy increases the risk of misinterpretation by therapist/counselors.	15.67

Implication of Facebook as a medium for therapy provision

Web-based counselling is increasingly sought after and significant in a time of rapid technological advancement. However, the Fuzzy Delphi analysis identified that a significant number of experts had strongly negative views about using Facebook as an intervention medium (Table 2). Experts’ perceptions have shown incongruity with respect to Facebook as an effective platform for provision of expressive writing (lowest defuzzification score of 14.04). They also held contradictory opinions on the applicability of writing therapy on Facebook in the Malaysian context (14.57 points). This stipulates a mismatch between the rhetoric of integrating online-based mediums into the field and the reality of its implementation. This is parallel to the Zainah Ahmad Zamani et al. (2010) study findings that Malaysian counsellors still rely on and prefer face-to-face sessions compared to online-based counselling, although they were mainly aware of the potential of online-based approaches.

The experts agreed with one another that real emotions might be missed (highest defuzzification score of 19.84) as body language and expressions are unseen via Facebook as an online medium (19.54 points). They also acknowledged ethical and privacy issues as the barriers of applying writing therapy on Facebook. The negative views collected are in line with a study by Antheunis et al. (2013), where the key barrier in using social media among most healthcare practitioners was its ineffectiveness.

Table 2 Facebook as a Platform for Writing Therapy Implementation

Position	Question	Defuzzification Score
1	Therapists/counselors might miss the real emotions of clients on Facebook.	19.84
2	Writing therapy on Facebook is not reliable as clients' body language, intonation and facial expression are disregarded.	19.54
3	Ethical issues will limit the potential of Facebook as an instrument for writing therapy.	19.24
4	Confidentiality will affect the use of writing therapy on Facebook.	18.7
5	Clients can control who can have access to their work through the privacy setting on Facebook.	16.47
6	Facebook is not suitable as a platform for writing therapy.	16.14
7	Writing therapy on Facebook is not practical to apply in Malaysia.	14.57
8	Facebook has potential to be an effective platform for the use of writing therapy.	14.04

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent of experts' consensus on the applicability of Facebook as a platform for the provision of writing therapy.

The efficacy of writing therapy as a method for counselling and therapy has been largely acknowledged by numerous research studies. However, the Fuzzy Delphi analysis indicated the lack of awareness and inadequate understanding of the applicability of writing therapy via online-based mediums among some Malaysian practitioners; which might be a factor leading to the unfavorable views of Facebook by most experts as a platform for writing therapy.

The rapid shift in technology emphasises the inevitable necessity to move forward from the traditional approach of in-person intervention (van Emmerik et al., 2013). The ethical concerns of privacy and confidentiality involved with using Facebook should not act as a barrier to the potential of Facebook use as a platform in counselling and psychotherapy. Adhering carefully to the available guidelines outlined (e.g., Birky & Collins, 2011; Reamer, 2013) would help overcome issues concerning client privacy and confidentiality.

A study by Antheunis et al. (2013) pointed out the lack of skills as one of the biggest barriers of social media use among practitioners in the healthcare sector. This might explain the reason behind the negative views of experts in the study. Practitioners who are unaware and unfamiliar with technology and Web 2.0 tools including Facebook tend to have higher doubts on their efficacies and usually prefer to maintain conventional approaches in practice. It is believed that many practitioners are also unexposed to the numerous possibilities of integrating their practice online. All Malaysian practitioners, regardless of their age should be equipped with adequate technological skills to be prepared to keep pace with the necessary changes in the modes of communication in future.

As Facebook increasingly becomes one of the key mediums for communication, its potential should be further tapped into. While online approaches could not fully replace the traditional face-to-face intervention (Zainah Ahmad Zamani et al., 2010), Facebook could be a potential supplementary tool to complement the conventional approach which could result in improved efficacy. The popularity of Facebook is a privilege in providing a channel for more youths who fear being stigmatised and have difficulty expressing their emotions in person to seek adequate treatment through therapeutic writing. Blogs were found to provide platforms for both expressing oneself and room for social exchanges (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013). Similarly, it is believed that Facebook as a "microblogging platform" (Norlidah Alias, DeWitt, & Saedah Siraj, 2013, p. 23) could be maximized to a larger extent. The available settings and functions on Facebook could be taken to full advantage in this context, provided the privacy settings are strictly maintained. Secret groups on Facebook or creating private notes through Facebook are possible channels to develop the expressive writing intervention. Users have options to use an unidentified user name, or control the privacy settings of the extract written, whether to be shared with others.

The limitations of this study include the inconsistencies in the years of experience and positions of each expert, which might be the factors contributing to the largely negative findings of the study. As pointed out by Antheunis et al. (2013), younger practitioners would be more receptive to the use of social media in practice compared to the older experts. Argument could also be made that a practitioner who is in the public sector will probably hold differing opinions from one in the private sector. Meanwhile, psychotherapists, psychologists, school counsellors and university lecturers

might all have multifaceted perspectives on the use of Facebook in practice. Future research should take these important aspects into account. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine whether there is a correlation between the age of experts and their perceptions toward the integration of technology-based applications in practice. Due to the small number of respondents, the findings of this study are inconclusive and are not necessarily representative of other professionals in the field across the country.

On the other hand, due to the heterogeneity of the respondents' expertise their level of understanding about writing therapy varies. The inconsistencies of knowledge about the research focus among several experts carried a certain degree of influence toward the accuracy of their perspectives in the study. A possible strategy for future studies is to ensure all participants' sufficient understanding of the subject matter before the study. Selecting practitioners who have had significant level of experience with the intervention approach and having a balanced number of experts with similar job scope will also be helpful in improving the validity of the findings.

This research study will hopefully elicit more related studies in the Malaysian field of counselling and psychology. More rigorous studies are needed to further affirm the efficacy of the expressive writing paradigm and the use of social media on Malaysian samples. Implementation of other intervention approaches via Facebook to aid therapy or counselling processes could also be studied.

We need more exploratory implementation studies in the future to further investigate the efficacy of online writing therapy particularly in the Malaysian context. A sample series of intervention sessions has been established as a reference as to how Facebook could act as a supplementary platform for expressive writing alongside the conventional face-to-face approach (Appendix 1). Usability evaluation, specifically user retrospective as employed in the study of Norlidah Alias (2010) would then be conducted with the users through semi-structured interviews to obtain their feedback in using Facebook as an online therapy medium.

In conclusion, technology should be incorporated to a larger scale in the counselling and psychology field in line with societal needs today. The awareness of writing therapy should be further heightened among all Malaysian practitioners through training programs and workshops. The provision of expressive writing online would lessen the high demand for the conventional face-to-face intervention, while providing an effective alternative to the field and allowing greater client control on their intervention processes. With appropriate attention paid to the ethical concerns, Facebook could potentially be an effective platform for developing online expressive writing especially among young adults.

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Appendix 1

Sample Plan for an Exploratory Implementation Study

Steps	Procedures	Description
Step 1	Identify participants	4-6 Participants should have problems or difficulties of similar nature (e.g., childhood abuse).
Step 2	Conventional face-to-face intervention up to 5 sessions	Practitioner continuously establishes rapport with participants. When adequate trust has been developed between client and practitioner, writing therapy approach on Facebook is clearly introduced and demonstrated to participants. Each participant engages in expressive writing on Facebook about their traumatic or emotional experiences for 15-20 minutes each across a period of 4 days consecutively. The following pathways could be used: Private message to practitioner’s Facebook account (not personal account) Creating a note. Privacy settings controlled by user (e.g., only visible to practitioner).
Step 3	Writing therapy sessions on Facebook	The typical writing instructions according to Pennebaker’s basic expressive writing paradigm (as cited in Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005, p. 338) as follows could be employed: For the next 4 days, I would like you to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life or an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I’d like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends or relatives; to your past, your present or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or about different topics each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don’t worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. The only rule is that once you begin writing, you continue until the time is up.
Step 4	Follow-up face-to-face intervention	Practitioner analyzes texts written by participant and gives appropriate intervention/feedback.
Step 5	Usability evaluation through user retrospective	Semi-structured interview is conducted with each participant to evaluate feedback pertaining to the use of Facebook as an expressive writing platform.
Step 6	Analysis of findings	Transcribe interviews and identify emergent themes.
Step 7	Draw a conclusion	Conclude on the suitability of Facebook as an online intervention platform based on users’ feedback.