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## **Students' Attitude Towards Online Counselling: The Case of Higher Institutions in the Sunyani Municipality**

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**Abstract:** The study explores university students' attitudes towards online counselling within higher institutions in the Sunyani Municipality, focusing on Sunyani Technical University (STU) and the University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR). As a result of the technological revolution and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, online counselling has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face counselling. This research adopts a descriptive survey design, utilizing a sample size of 380 students selected through simple random sampling. The data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The findings indicate that students generally view online counselling as beneficial, particularly appreciating its convenience and flexibility in fitting into their busy schedules. However, despite recognizing its benefits, students expressed reservations about the actual utilization of online counselling services, citing concerns about the lack of personal interaction, difficulties in establishing trust, and discomfort in discussing personal issues online. Gender-based differences were also observed, with male students demonstrating a more favourable attitude towards online counselling services than their female counterparts. The study underscores the need for online counselling platforms to address trust-building and personal connection issues to be more effective. Additionally, tailored strategies may be necessary to encourage female students to engage more with online counselling. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and educational institutions in designing and implementing more effective online counselling services that cater to the diverse needs of students in higher education.

**Keywords:** Online counselling, Student attitudes, Higher education, Gender differences, Sunyani Municipality

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Counselling services have evolved from face-to-face to electronic-based counselling due to the technological revolution and widespread usage of internet and related internet sources (Aaron, Rochlen, Vogel & Michael, 2005). According to Manhal-Baugus (2001), Counsellors have taken the initiative to optimize internet space because of the internet's potential to provide the necessary framework for building relationships. Through virtual engagement, an alternate service can assist. Cyber-counselling refers to services that assist people in using the internet. Sanders and Rosenfield (1998) define online counselling as using phone, internet, and teleconferencing. According to Barak and Grohol (2011), online counselling is a mental health intervention that uses technology as the mode of contact. Online counselling may be an option for those who can't meet in person. Others use it to supplement face-to-face counselling.

The emergence of the coronavirus, which has limited human contact interaction, has necessitated online counselling and its implications on traditional face-to-face counselling for students. (Liebrenz, Bhugra, Buadze, & Schleifer, 2020). In Bono Region's higher education institutions, where students are extremely busy, scheduling issues may prevent them from participating in typical office-based counselling sessions. Students in higher education might find that the flexible scheduling offered by online therapy is better suited to their hectic lives. In addition, there is a possibility that some students favour the usage of distant contact since it enables them to freely express themselves and, as a result, makes them feel more at ease while expressing their feelings (Awabil & Akosah 2018). Some students may also see online counselling as non-threatening and having an appalling plan (Attridge, 2004). In response to these challenges, assessing the attitude of students towards online counselling is highly recommended. Not only that it will help make their work more efficient but also, help promote the utilization of their counselling services. It is, however, important to note that having access to an electronic gadget is one thing and possessing a positive attitude towards online counselling is another.

Technology and globalization have had an impact on the counselling profession in the twenty-first century, with the introduction of

internet counselling and multiculturalism in the field (Zainah, Nasir & Yusoooff, 2010). Guidance in Ghana began as counsel-giving, as it did in most other African countries (Taylor & Buku, 2006). Ghanaian society has long valued guidance and advice. Ghanaian society has always sought self-knowledge and others' understanding. Younger generations have always been directed by others (often older people). (According to Affum, Kuranchie, and Mensah, 2016). According to Taylor and Buku (2006), the physical presence of two people satisfies emotional demands that cannot be addressed by other means of communication. In 2007, the Ministry of Education emphasised the need to upgrade counselling centres to improve services (National Education Reform Implementation Committee, 2007). Conversely, the first researcher's prior experience as a teacher confirms that some educational counsellors in Ghana are reluctant to adapt to emerging counselling technologies, and this is mainly due to their incapacity to use technology.

According to Robinson and Solley, (2010), the number of clients who prefer individual online counselling increased as the internet and smartphones became widespread. Karlsson and Lindfors (2010) found online therapy as effective as in-person therapy. Again, in Malaysia, Wong, Bonn, Tam and Wong (2018) conducted a study to examine students' attitudes towards and likelihood of using both online and/or face-to-face counselling. These results show that university students from different fields of study have a good perception of knowledge towards online counselling services. The result of the study done by Tannous (2017), states that the students at the University of Jordan have good knowledge of online In contrast, Chang and Chang (2004) investigated the Asian American and Asian international college students' attitudes towards online counselling and found out that students had less favourable attitude towards online counselling as compared to seeking help by traditional face-to-face means. In a related study, Rochlen, Beretvas and Zack (2004) discovered that participants rated face-to-face counselling more positively than online counselling. These studies appear to favour traditional face-to-face over online counselling.

From the foregoing, it can be realised that online counselling is a modern approach to counselling and if introduced to students in Ghana it would

serve a useful purpose. However, little is known about online counselling in Ghana. It is relatively a new approach to counselling. No study has been conducted to determine whether students' attitude towards online counselling is favourable in the country. Moreover, the Counselling Centre of the University of Cape Coast had introduced online counselling to serve as a complement to the traditional face-to-face approach to counselling, but there is no empirical study to show whether students at the University have a favourable attitude towards online counselling. There is, therefore, a gap in the literature that needs to be filled. This provides a justification for conducting this current research in the Higher institutions in the Sunyani Municipality. Since students are the main beneficiaries of counselling, it was deemed expedient to elicit responses from them concerning online counselling. The study was, therefore, designed to investigate the students' attitudes towards online counselling to ascertain its potential utilization by students.

Studies on university students' attitudes towards counselling were conducted by Awabil and Akosah (2018) who investigated the attitude of University of Cape Coast students towards online counselling. Also, Arku (2015) examined the attitudes of University of Cape Coast male students towards counselling in Ghana. Arguably, these studies appear to have been conducted in different geographical settings, and others concentrated in the University of Cape Coast, leaving the other traditional universities that also employ counselling and online counselling services. This implies that the findings may not be the same if the study is replicated. This is the reason for investigating higher institution students' attitudes towards online counselling in the Sunyani Municipality of the Bono Region.

The following research questions and hypotheses guided the study:

What are university students' attitudes toward online counselling, and how do these attitudes vary based on gender? The hypotheses formulated to direct the research were: H<sub>0</sub> - There is no significant difference in students' attitudes towards online counselling based on gender; and H<sub>1</sub> - There is a significant difference in students' attitudes towards online counselling based on gender.

## 2. METHODS

### Study Area

Sunyani is Ghana's Bono Region and municipal capital. Sunyani's 2010 population was 74,240. The city's population is mostly Bono's. Ghana's 16 administrative regions include Bono. Sunyani Technical University, University of Energy and Natural Resources, and Catholic University College of Ghana are recognized higher-education institutions in the Bono Region (CUCG, Private). Sunyani's suburbs are home to the non-profit University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR) provides courses and programmes leading to bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in a range of subjects. Sunyani Technical University (STU) provides pre-bachelor's degrees (certificates, diplomas, associates, or foundations) in a range of areas. Two Sunyani universities will undertake the research. This is because they are huge higher education institutions that are owned by the state and have a substantial number of students.

### Research Design

In line with this study's aim of examining students' attitudes towards online counselling, in the case of higher institutions in the Sunyani municipality, the descriptive research design was deemed appropriate for carrying out this investigation. The study, therefore, adopted the descriptive survey design, specifically, the cross-sectional design. This is a type of design where researchers are often interested in describing the attitudes and behaviours of a large group of people about a particular topic or issue at a particular point in time (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). This design was deemed appropriate since it was going to describe the current attitudes of higher institutions in the Sunyani municipality students towards online counselling.

### Population of the Study

The population consisted of undergraduate students from two leading universities in Ghana's Bono Region [Sunyani Technical University (STU) and University of Energy and Natural Resource (UENR)]. The population of the study was 13,660. Males and females from both UENR and STU were included in the group from the 2018/19 through 2020/21 academic years. According to its academic record, STU's total population is 6,220 (3,520 males and 2,700 females), whereas UENR's is 7,440. (That is, 4,185 males and 3,255 females).

### **Sample and Sampling Procedure.**

Based on the total population size of the two universities, the sample size for this study was 370 students, with 173 (45.5%) from STU and 207 (54.5%) from UENR. The table of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) was used to guide selecting the sample for the investigation. The minimum sample size for a population of 13,660 people, according to Krejcie and Morgan, is 370. However, the sample size was increased to 380 to account for grossly incomplete responses. The participants for the study were chosen using a simple random procedure. The participants for STU, which numbered 173, and UENR, which numbered 207, were chosen using a simple random procedure.

### **Research Instrument**

The investigation employed a standard questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to collect data because it's a structured instrument for quickly gathering data from many respondents, especially when the population is public (Amedahe & Gyimah, 2005). Compared to the interview guide, the instrument collects more data at a lesser cost (Osuala, 2005). The data collection instrument was divided into two components for this investigation. The first component gathered information on the respondents' demographic attributes. There were four questions in this section. Gender, age, education level, and marital status were among the questions that respondents were asked to answer.

The second section used a structured questionnaire (Rochlen, Beretvas, and Zack's (2004) Online Counselling Attitude Scales) to examine respondents' attitudes toward online counselling. The scale was developed by Rochlen et al. (2004) to measure individuals' attitudes towards online counselling. OCAS has 10 items and a four-point Likert scale. Five items were measured on a four-point Likert-type scale in each of these domains. 4= Strongly Agree, 3= Agree, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree were the response options. The average mean between the value and discomfort levels is computed and compared based on participant responses. This scale consists of "value of online counselling" and "discomfort with online counselling". Both the Value and Discomfort dimensions contained five items each measured on a four-point Likert-type scale. The response options were 4= Strongly Agree, 3= Agree, 2=

Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree. The cut-off points for determining whether an attitude is positive or negative, is a mean score of 12.5 and 2.5 for a broad scale and a specific attitude respectively. High scores on value indicate a positive attitude towards online counselling. On the other hand, high scores on Discomfort reflect a negative attitude in relation to online counselling. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was .84 for the "value of online counselling" dimension and .80 for "discomfort with online counselling".

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Validity and reliability testing were performed on the instrument. My supervisors were given a sample questionnaire to determine for validity. The supervisors' ideas were used to make the necessary modifications to improve the instruments. Experts in Guidance and Counselling at the University of Energy and Natural Resource's Counselling Centre and Sunyani Technical University tested the instrument's face and content validity. The tool was pre-tested on 40 students at Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi (20 males and 20 females). These students have features similar to those employed in this study by the University of Energy and Natural Resources and Sunyani Technical University. On the data collection day, the purpose of the study and procedure for responding to the questionnaire was explained to the respondents. They were also informed about the voluntary nature of study. Besides, informed consent from participants was sought before the questionnaire was administered. The researchers administered the questionnaires to respondents during normal lecture hours. We were able to retrieve 581 questionnaires, implying there was 96.8% return rate. The instrument's reliability was assessed on a scale using the computer program Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0. The attitude toward the online counselling construct has an overall reliability rating of 0.75. The beneficial subscale had a reliability rating of 0.85, whereas the utilization subscale had a reliability level of 0.62.

### **Data Analysis**

This study's data analysis employed descriptive and inferential statistical methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research findings. Descriptive statistics, specifically mean

scores and standard deviations, were utilized to analyse the data pertaining to the two research questions, offering a detailed summary of the university students' attitudes toward online counselling and the variation of these attitudes based on gender. These measures clearly depicted the central tendencies and dispersion of the attitudes observed in the study. In addition to descriptive statistics, inferential statistical methods were employed to test the research hypotheses. An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in students' attitudes toward online counselling based on gender. This approach allowed for a robust examination of the data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the potential gender-based differences in attitudes towards online counselling among university students.

### 3. RESULTS

#### University Students' Attitudes About Online Counselling

The first question presented for this research study was about the attitude of university students regarding online counselling. To provide an answer to this inquiry, a total of 10 items were selected from a Likert-type scale with four points, with strongly disagree being coded as 1, disagree being classified as 2, agree being coded as 3, and strongly agree being coded as 4. The 10 items were divided into two categories: five questions on whether online counselling is favourable, and five questions on whether students would utilise online counselling. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1: Attitude towards the Beneficial Nature of Online Counselling (N= 380)**

Statement	Mean	SD
Using online counselling would help me learn about myself.	2.79	0.828
If a friend had personal problems, I might encourage him or her to consider online counselling.	2.72	0.905
I would confide my problems in an online counsellor.	2.24	0.904
It could be worthwhile to discuss my problems with an online counsellor.	2.61	0.847
I would consider trying it if online counselling were available at no charge.	2.98	0.787
<b>Mean of Means / Average SD</b>	<b>2.66</b>	<b>0.854</b>

Table 1 shows that all participants provided a uniform affirmative response to the question of whether they would give online counselling a go if it were offered at no cost ( $M=2.98$ ;  $SD=.787$ ). In addition, the participants agree that participating in online counselling will help them in gaining a deeper understanding of who they are ( $M=2.79$ ;  $SD=.823$ ). Also, respondents agreed ( $M=2.72$ ;  $SD=.905$ ) that given the positive nature of online counselling, they may urge their friends to explore online counselling if their friends had personal issues ( $M=2.72$ ;  $SD=.905$ ). However, they indicated ( $M = 2.61$ ;  $SD = 0.847$ ) that discussing personal issues with

an online counsellor would be beneficial. Although respondents agreed with four questions, they said they would rarely confide their issues to an online counsellor ( $M = 2.24$ ;  $SD = .904$ ). Considering all the data that was gathered, we were able to calculate the total averages of means, which came out to be 2.66, with an average standard deviation of 0.854. It was shown that, on average, students had a favourable view of the usefulness of online counselling. This study implies that university students regard online counselling as beneficial for their unique needs.

**Table 2: Attitude Towards Utilization of Online Counselling (N=380)**

Statement	Mean	SD
If I were having a personal problem, seeking help from an online counsellor would be the last option I would consider.	2.60	0.906
I would feel uneasy discussing emotional problems with an online counsellor.	2.59	0.912
I would dread explaining my problems to an online counsellor.	2.58	0.815
I think it would take a major effort for me to schedule an appointment with an online counsellor.	2.57	0.807
I would be afraid to discuss stressful events with an online counsellor.	2.63	0.946
<b>Mean of Means / Average SD</b>	<b>2.59</b>	<b>0.877</b>

From Table 2 The responses from the students indicated that they had a negative attitude regarding the usage of online counselling, which was determined by the survey, according to the mean of means (Mean of means = 2.59; SD = .877). Respondents agreed (M = 2.60; SD = .906) that an online counsellor would be the final choice for personal difficulties. In addition, respondents believed that it required a tremendous amount of work to get started with online counselling (M = 2.67; SD = .807). Respondents also felt uneasy addressing emotional difficulties with an online counsellor (M = 2.59; SD = 0.912). In addition, respondents reported feeling anxiety while attempting to describe their difficulties to an online counsellor (M = 2.58; SD = 0.815). They would, however, be afraid to disclose any unpleasant experiences

with an online counsellor (M = 2.63; SD = .946) due to their fear of seeming weak or vulnerable.

### Attitudes of University of Cape Coast Students Towards Online Counselling to Gender

The second study question sought to examine gender-based differences in university students' attitudes toward online counselling. The data was analysed using independent sample t-tests to comprehend the study topic. The findings were presented according to the sub-constructs that comprised the overall attitude towards the online counselling construct to answer this issue. The statistical tools used for the analysis were the means of the groups as well as their standard deviations.

**Table 3: Attitude towards Online Counselling regarding Gender**

Construct	Gender	N	Mean	SD
Beneficial Attitude	Male	224	2.71	0.573
	Female	156	2.61	0.612
Utilization Attitude	Male	224	2.73	0.549
	Female	156	2.46	0.570

Table 3 reveals, for instance, that although both genders of university students have a good attitude regarding the usefulness of online counselling, male university students (M = 2.71; SD = .573) tend to have a more positive attitude than their female counterparts (M = 2.61; SD = .612). Male university students seemed to have a more favourable attitude (M = 2.73; SD = .549) regarding the use of online counselling than female university students (M = 2.46; SD = .570). This suggests that, while attitudes against the use of online therapy are generally unfavourable, female university students tend to have a more negative attitude than their male counterparts regarding the use of online counselling services. Given a technique to make online counselling

services more enticing, the findings indicate that male university students would adopt it more quickly than female university students.

### Research Hypothesis One

H0: There is no noticeable difference in gender in students' attitudes about online counselling.

H1: Based on their gender, there is a noticeable difference in students' attitudes about online counselling.

An independent samples t-test was used to determine whether students' opinions towards online counselling differed by gender.

**Table 4: Statistical Analysis of Attitudes towards Online Counselling Based on Gender**

Construct	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Beneficial Attitude	Male	224	2.71	0.573	1.579	378	0.115
	Female	156	2.61	0.612			
Utilization Attitude	Male	224	2.73	0.549	4.573	378	0.000
	Female	156	2.46	0.570			

The first sub-construct, (beneficial attitude) from Table 6 shows that there is no statistically significant difference. The result indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in

the attitude of male students (M = 2.71; SD = .573) and female university students (M = 2.61; SD = .612);  $t(224) = 1.579, p = .115$  (two tailed) towards online counselling. This is

because the probability value (p-value) of 0.115 is greater than the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, based on the result, the null hypothesis is retained. This means that the attitude towards the beneficial nature of online counselling is the same between male and female students. Hence the mean difference observed in the descriptive statistics can be due to chance. The second sub-construct (attitude toward usage) from Table 6 likewise reveals a statistically significant difference. Male university students' ( $M = 2.73$ ;  $SD = .549$ ) and female university students' ( $M = 2.46$ ;  $SD = .570$ ) attitudes toward online counselling differed significantly ( $p = .000$ , two-tailed). Mean difference = .27, 95% CI: .152 to .381 (eta squared = .24). As a result, given that the value of the probability, or p-value, is 0.000, which is less than the significance threshold of 0.05. The null hypothesis is thus rejected based on the findings. This indicates that university students' attitude toward online counselling does not substantially vary between male and female students. This is particularly true regarding the attitude that university students have toward the utilization of online counselling.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The study discovered that students, on average, had a favourable view of the beneficial use of online counselling. This study implies that university students regard online counselling as beneficial for their unique needs. If online counselling is a replacement for face-to-face counselling, students will have no objections to attempting it. The results of this research are per those discovered by Adebowale (2014), who conducted a survey of busy professionals and found that the majority of respondents believe that online counselling may be beneficial, Sussman (2004) also found that college students had the opinion that receiving counselling over the internet is useful and According to Awabil and Akosah (2018), University of Cape Coast students have a favourable attitude toward online counselling. On the other hand, the results of this study go counter to those of Cook and Doyle (2002), who discovered that receiving counselling online is not useful. The current finding is not surprising. This is because students' busy schedules would not permit them to frequently honour their appointments with counsellors physically, unlike online counselling, where they sit in the comfort of their hostels and receive counselling via the

Internet. This would save a lot of time and other resources. The current result implies that students have the potential to utilize online counselling.

The study also found that students indicated that they had a negative attitude regarding the usage of online counselling, which was determined by the survey. Although a preceding study found online counselling to be favourable for students, they expressed concern about it being used. This study's conclusion is consistent with the conclusions of prior research. Menon and Rubin (2011) found that despite the multiple benefits of online counselling, it still faces major utilisation challenges as more and more individuals become cautious about its use. Chope (2009) remarked that owing to cost constraints, online counselling is employed less often around the globe. This demonstrates a negative outlook on the usage of online counselling. When the research was narrowed down to the setting of the university, Rochlen, Beretvas, and Zach (2004) found that undergraduate students had higher positive attitudes about face-to-face counselling services than they did toward online counselling services. Awabil and Akosah (2018) also said that university students have a negative attitude about the same scale used for assessing the use of online counselling. Respondents agreed that arranging an online appointment with any of these therapists would take time. This argument makes online counselling difficult for university students, resulting in a negative attitude. Perhaps respondents in the current study are used to traditional face-to-face counselling where they meet counsellors physically and share their concerns with them. Another reason that could account for this finding is that in online counselling, trusting and confidential relationships are more difficult to establish than in traditional face-to-face counselling. Therefore, confiding in somebody with whom they do not have physical contact could be a barrier to online counselling.

For gender, the study revealed that although both males and females showed positive attitudes towards online counselling, females had a more negative attitude towards online counselling than their male counterparts. Male university students seemed to have a more favourable attitude regarding the use of online counselling than female university students. This suggests that, while attitudes against the

use of online therapy are generally unfavourable, female university students tend to have a more negative attitude than their male counterparts regarding the use of online counselling services. Given a technique to make online counselling services more enticing, the findings indicate that male university students would adopt it more quickly than female university students. The present study's findings are consistent with those of Awabil and Akosah (2018), who discovered that there is a difference between male and female students' unfavourable attitudes regarding online counselling. According to their descriptive data, male university students had a more unfavourable view of online counselling than their female counterparts. In contrast to Awabil and Akosah (2018), the male participants in this study tended to have a more negative outlook on the use of online counselling than their female counterparts.

However, statistical analysis indicated a statistically significant difference between the attitudes of male university students and female university students toward online counselling. The result indicated no statistically significant difference in the attitude of male and female university students towards the beneficial nature of online counselling. According to Awabil and Akosah (2018), there is no statistically significant difference between male and female students' favourable opinions regarding online counselling. This shows that the present research agrees with the findings that gender does not alter undergraduates' attitudes about online counselling. The research conflicts with Adebowale (2014), who showed a statistically significant change in undergraduates' attitudes about online sex counselling. Given that the attitude towards the benefits of online therapy lies under the general attitude towards online counselling, Adebowale's (2014) research indicated that gender affects students' attitudes towards online counselling.

The result indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the attitude of male students and female university students towards the usage of online counselling. Male university students' and female university students' attitudes toward online counselling differed significantly. This indicates that university students' attitude toward online counselling does not substantially vary between male and female students. This is particularly true with

the attitude that university students have toward the utilisation of online counselling. The results of this research contradict the conclusions of Awabil and Akosah (2018), who discovered that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female students' unfavourable attitudes regarding online counselling. This explains why the present research contrasts with the finding showing gender doesn't alter university students' attitudes about online counselling. The findings coincide with Adebowale (2014), who reported a statistically significant difference in undergraduates' attitudes toward online sex counselling. Adebowale's (2014) research indicated that gender affects students' attitudes towards online counselling based on their use of it.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study explored university students' attitudes towards online counselling within higher institutions in the Sunyani Municipality, focusing on Sunyani Technical University (STU) and the University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR). The findings revealed that students generally view online counselling as beneficial, particularly appreciating its convenience and potential to fit into their busy schedules. This positive attitude underscores the flexibility and accessibility of online counselling, which could significantly enhance students' mental health support. However, despite recognizing its benefits, students expressed reservations about the actual utilization of online counselling services. Concerns about the lack of personal interaction, difficulties in establishing trust, and discomfort in discussing personal issues with an online counsellor were prominent. These apprehensions highlight the need for online counselling platforms to address trust-building and personal connection to be more effective. The study also revealed gender-based differences in attitudes towards online counselling. While both male and female students showed a generally positive attitude towards its benefits, male students demonstrated a more favorable attitude towards utilizing online counselling services than female students. This finding suggests that tailored strategies may be necessary to encourage female students to engage more with online counselling. While online counselling is perceived positively and holds significant potential for addressing the mental health needs of university students, its effective utilization



requires addressing specific concerns and barriers. Enhancing the personal connection in online counselling and developing gender-sensitive approaches could foster greater acceptance and usage among students. The results from this study provide valuable insights for policymakers and educational institutions in designing and implementing more effective online counselling services that cater to the diverse needs of students in higher education.

### FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study on students' attitudes towards online counselling in higher institutions in the Sunyani Municipality provide several important implications for the future development and implementation of mental health services in educational settings. Firstly, the positive perception of the benefits of online counselling suggests that there is a significant potential for these services to be expanded and integrated into the existing mental health support systems in universities. Institutions should invest in robust online counselling platforms that ensure confidentiality, security, and ease of use to encourage more students to seek help. Secondly, addressing the concerns related to the utilization of online counselling is crucial. Future developments should focus on improving the user experience by incorporating elements that foster trust and personal connection between students and counsellors. Training programs for online counsellors should include techniques for building rapport and effective communication in a virtual environment. The current study was conducted in two higher public universities from the Sunyani Municipality in Ghana. It is expected that the findings of this study would motivate other researchers to explore the attitude of students towards online counselling in other educational institutions. Consequently, it would enable many students to have access to counselling to address their academic, career, social, physical and psychological needs in a timely manner.

Furthermore, the gender differences observed in the attitudes towards online counselling indicate a need for gender-sensitive approaches in promoting these services. Universities should consider conducting further research to understand female students' specific barriers and develop targeted strategies to encourage their engagement with online counselling. Additionally, the rapid advancement of technology offers opportunities to enhance

online counselling services through the use of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and other innovative tools. These technologies can provide more interactive and personalized counselling experiences, making it easier for students to connect and engage with their counsellors. Finally, continuous evaluation and feedback mechanisms should be established to monitor the effectiveness of online counselling services. Regular assessments will help identify areas for improvement and help adapt the services to meet the evolving needs of students.

In conclusion, the future of online counselling in higher education holds great promise. By addressing current challenges and leveraging technological advancements, educational institutions can create a supportive and accessible mental health environment that caters to the diverse needs of their students. The insights gained from this study can guide the development of effective online counselling programs that contribute to university students' overall well-being and academic success.

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