



## PERCEPTION OF CODE OF ETHICS ON USE OF ONLINE RESOURCES FOR COUNSELLING IN NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

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### Abstract

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With the introduction of online counselling as part of support services in National Open University of Nigeria in March 2014, via the website [www.nou.edu.ng/CMS/index.html](http://www.nou.edu.ng/CMS/index.html), it has become imperative to ascertain the Student Counsellors' perception of code of ethics guiding the use of online resources. Six research questions and six hypotheses were raised based on the 2014 American Counselling Association Code of Ethics section H. Research methodology used for this research included: Descriptive survey of Ex-post facto design and simple random sampling technique which was used to draw a sample of seventy-two out of student counsellors' population of seventy six. A self-developed Distance Counselling, Technology and Social Media Scale questionnaire (DCTSM) was used for data collection and was pilot tested via Cronbach Alpha correlation, upon which  $r=0.84$  result was obtained. Compared mean scores of the respondents' perception in the six variables, showed that, the highest mean score of 3.604 obtained in client verification while the lowest mean of .857 was obtained in informed consent. Six hypotheses on gender differences were tested via t-test and the results obtained showed no significant differences between female and male in their responses to all the variables. In conclusion therefore, the NOUN student counsellors have high positive perception of the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics, guiding the use of online counselling resources accepts on informed consent.

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**Keywords:** *Perception, student counsellors, code, ethics, online Counselling, National Open University of Nigeria*

## **Introduction**

With the introduction of online counselling in National Open University of Nigeria, in March 2014, online counselling has become obligatory task for all student counsellors not without inherent challenges. For online counselling in NOUN to be successful, it becomes imperative for the student counsellors to be aware and understood the ethical challenges inherent in the implementation of this support sendee. With the lurching of Global System for Mobile communications (GSM), in 2001, many Nigerians now enjoy sendees like mobile television, POS (electronic payment), affordable internet services, cheaper international calls, internet banking and mobile banking. Millions of Nigerians now can access the internet via their GSM phones or a GSM enabled device (Okopi, 2014).

Many Nigerians are on Facebook, Yahoo, Gmail, Twitter, and Google, with millions of them visiting these sites everyday especially among the youths.

The major challenge in the use of online resources for counselling is the breaching of ethical code with regards to blurring boundaries between private and public information. Breaching of ethical code is capable of eroding clients' trust, acceptance and confidentiality of the counselling process, thereby posing serious legal and ethical problems for counsellors. Despite the revolution of communication, counselling practitioners should understand that, it is their primary obligation to protect their clients' confidentiality and confidential information stored in any medium (Okopi, 2014). According to Kaplan (2010) though, it is absolutely ethical for counsellors to use internet or social media, if inherent ethical issues are properly and adequately addressed. For counsellors wishing to engage in online counselling, they must be aware and understood the ethical challenges inherent in the implementation of this support service. It is therefore critical to investigate the NOUN counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of guiding the use of online resources in order to mitigate the deleterious consequences of breaching this code.

Ethics mean moral principles that control or influence a person's behaviour, a philosophical discipline that is concerned with human conduct and moral decision making (Alokan, 2010). According to Akinade (2005) ethics are normative in nature and focus on principles and standard that governs

relationships between individuals, such as counsellors and clients. Omotoso (2008) notes that, at present Counselling Association of Nigeria is yet to come up with categorical, well-articulated and widely publicised statements that detail a broad range of practical standards for ethical professional practices that, reflect core values of this profession. Counselling Code of ethics is intended to provide specific standards to cover most issues of therapeutic relationship between the counsellor and individual clients or group of clients. The goals of this relationship are to cater for the welfare, emotional wellbeing and mental health of the individual client or group of clients within the confinement of ethical standards of the discipline.

Unfortunately, the ethical implications of using online social networks has received little attention in the professional counselling literature, while other disciplines, including nursing, medicine, pharmacy, and education, have discussed this topic to a greater extent (Cain, 2008; Cain, Scott, & Akers, 2009; Guseh, Brendel, & Brendel, 2009; McBride & Cohen, 2009; Witt, 2009), their use can also raise serious issues around boundaries and ethical personal conduct (Boyd, 2007). Counselling codes of ethics revealed that issues surrounding online social networking are not addressed in the American Counselling Association *Code of Ethics* (2005), the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2010), the Australian Counselling Association *Code of Conduct* (2008), or in the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's *Code of Ethics* (2007) or *Standards of Practice for Counsellors* (2008) and Counselling (Bratt, 2010). As stated above, the Counselling Association of Nigeria which is the umbrella professional body for counsellors in Nigeria but as of now, has no code of ethics guiding counselling practice for its members, let alone code of ethics guiding the use of online resources.

As earlier suggested by Bratt, (2010), the American Counselling Association was expected to come up with Code of Ethics, which would address distance counselling, technology and social media resources for online counselling in its 2014 edition. Expectedly, 2014 American Counselling Association came out with 2014 ACA Code of Ethics which adequately and appropriately addressed the issues of distance counselling, technology and social media in Section H of 2014 the code (developing knowledge and skills

regarding related technical, ethical, and legal considerations e.g. special certifications, additional course work), informed consent, security, client verification, distance counselling relationship, records, web maintenance and social media).

Although in 2013, prior to the introduction of internet counselling in NOUN, a workshop was conducted for some student counsellors on the need to develop basic knowledge, skills and competencies in relation to technical, ethical and legal considerations for online counselling, the student counsellors need more of these knowledge, awareness and understanding of the code of ethics guiding the use of online resources. Meanwhile, in order to draw the attention of counsellors and other helping professionals to be aware and understand the ethical implications of using online resources for counselling purposes, soft copies of 2014 AC A Code of Ethics were sent to all NOUN student counsellors. This research, therefore, investigated the perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics guiding distance counselling, technology and social media by NOUN student counsellors. Whereas perception as applied in this research, was the student counsellors 'awareness, comprehension and understanding of ethical code guiding the use of distance counselling, technology and social media in 2014 ACA Code of Ethics which invariably, would influence their opinions, judgments, knowledge, meanings, and their responses.

Sequel to the foregoing discussion on online counselling, it is important to note that, easy access to publicly post private information on the internet raises several professional and ethical concerns for counselling psychologists and other helping professionals. While the use of online and social networks offers several advantages to counsellors, including tools for maintaining relationships and communication with people living great distances away but precautionary measures must be taken (Okopi, 2014). The most important element in counselling is the establishment of human relationships with psychotherapeutic intension. Counselling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals (MacDonald 2016) - The main concern of this research is how to use online resources to develop, maintain and manage this specialised human relationship with therapeutic intent without breaching the ethical code of

counselling. Egan (1986) acknowledges that, the prime responsibility for creating that relationship called a therapeutic climate lies with the therapist, who must be congruent in the relationship.

The counsellors' understanding and awareness of their additional responsibilities in using distance counselling, technology and social media resources and the need to protect the confidentiality of information given by the clients from the beginning, during and throughout the period of therapeutic process are paramount to successful online counselling (2014 ACA Code of Ethics). Another important ingredient to successful use of online, is for counsellor to make sure that, the counselling process meets any legal and ethical requirements for the use of distance counselling, technology and /or social media resources.

As recommended by 2014 ACA (Section H), counsellors who wish to engage in the use of distance counselling, technology and/or social media must develop knowledge, skills and competency regarding related technical, ethical and legal considerations (e.g., special certification, additional course). In addition, the following issues must be professionally and properly addressed.

1. Clients' freedom to choose whether to use distance counselling, technology and/or media resources within the counselling process or not;
2. Informed consent and security;
3. Client verification;
4. Distance counselling relationship;
5. Records and web maintenance and
6. Social media.

The research was designed to assess the NOUN student counsellors' perception of the above mentioned six areas of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics (Section H) guiding the use of online counselling.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

The introduction of online counselling in the National Open University of Nigeria as part of support services via the university website is of great

significant mile stone in the development of counselling. With this development, it has become imperative on the part of every student counsellor wishing to engage in distance counselling, technology and social media to be aware and understood the code of ethics especially 2014 AC A Code of Ethics guiding the use of online resources.

The knowledge, awareness and understanding of these codes of ethics are necessary in order to avoid unethical practices that will erode clients' trust, acceptance and confidentiality of the counselling process. Unethical practices which are likely to pose serious legal and ethical problems for counsellors if not professionally handled. NOUN student counsellors' perception of 2014 AC A Code of Ethics guiding the use of distance counselling relationship, technology and social media resources would be examined in this research. Furthermore, the research would also investigate if there was a significant gender difference among NOUN counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics guiding the use of online resources for counselling.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions were based on Section H of 2014 Code of Ethics of American Counselling Association:

- i. What was NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Counselling Code of Ethics on acquisition of technical knowledge and competency for online counselling?
- ii. What was NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Counselling Code of Ethics on informed consent and security considerations for online counselling?
- iii. What was NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Counselling Code of Ethics on client verification for online counselling?
- iv. What was NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 Counselling Code of ethics on Distance counselling relationship for online counselling?
- v. What was NOUN Student counsellors' perception of Counselling of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on records and web maintenance for online counselling?
- vi. What was NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Counselling Code of Ethics on social media for online counselling?

## **Hypotheses**

- i. There was no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on acquisition of technical knowledge and competency for online counselling.
- ii. There was no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on informed consent and security considerations for online counselling.
- iii. There was no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on client verification for online counselling.
- iv. There was no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of ethics on distance counselling relationship for online counselling.
- v. There was no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on records and web maintenance for online counselling.
- vi. There was no significant difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on social media for online counselling?

## **Design**

This study adopted descriptive survey of ex-post facto design.

## **Population**

The research population included all the seventy-six student counsellors that were serving in NOUN as at March, 2015.

## **Sample and Sampling Technique**

The sample for this research comprised all the seventy-six student counsellors that were working in NOUN as at March, 2015 at the study centres and headquarters. Purposive sampling technique was used and copies of Distance Counselling, Technology and/or Social Media Scale questionnaire (DCTSM) were distributed to all the seventy-six student counsellors. Seventy-two copies of the questionnaire were correctly filled and returned for analysis.

## **Characteristics of the sample**

As at March 2015, NOUN has seventy six student counsellors representing 6.01 % out of 1247 total staff strength. The summary of all the student counsellors according to the six geo-political zones is as follows; North East=5; North West 9; North Central=19; South East=8; South-South=12; South West=19 and Headquarters =4. The sample consisted of thirty four males (44.74%) and forty two (55.26%) females with average age of  $31.11 \pm$  years old and standard deviation of SD 8.69. The segregation of the respondents according to educational qualification showed that, 20 (26.32%) had PhD, fifty-six (73.6%) had master's degree and eight (11.86%) are currently registered for PhD programme in different universities.

## **Instrumentation**

Self-developed Distance Counselling, Technology and Social Media Scale questionnaire (DCTSM) which was based on Section H of 2014 American Counselling Association Codes of Ethics items was used for data collection. The questionnaire items were derived from the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics (Section H) items such as informed consent and security, client verification; distance counselling relationship, records and web maintenance and social media. The choice of 2014 ACA Code of Ethic (Section H) items was based on the premise that, it is the latest code of ethics that comprehensively addressed ethical issues surrounding online counselling. The instrument was pilot tested before use. DCTSM has two sections; Section A was used to obtain the demographic data of the respondents while section B was used to determine the counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethic guiding the use of distance counselling, technology and/or social media. The questionnaire was designed in the Likert graduation format in a descending order of 4 (strong Agree), 3 (Agree), 2 (Disagree), 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 0 (Not aware).

## **Reliability and Validity of the Instrument**

Face, content and construct validities of DCTSM were determined by using counselling psychologists of School of Education in National Open University. The reliability result of  $r= 0.84$ , was obtained using test- retest via Cronbach Alpha coefficient.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

The copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents through the Directors of NOUN Study Centres across Nigeria and were collected back within the interval of two weeks. Responses to the items in the questionnaire were coded and analysed with version 15.0 of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

## **Method of Data Analysis**

In order to provide answers to the research questions and hypotheses, combination of descriptive statistics of mean and T-test were used were utilised to determine if there were differences among student counsellor's responses and if any significant gender difference.

## **Limitations**

One of the limitations of the research was the unavailability of Counselling Association of Nigeria code of ethics or ready developed and validated instrument to measure the perception of counsellors on the use of online resources for counselling purposes. Another limitation was relying solely on 2014 ACA Code of Ethics for the research. This was because 2014ACACode of Ethics which was as the only available code that addressed the use of online resources for counselling. To minimise the effect of the DCTSM questionnaire which was derived from it, on the reliability of the research, pilot tested was conducted before use. Four copies of the questionnaire were not filled. This could be attributed to the few student counsellors that were recruited after Enugu workshop in 2013. Another important limitation was that, little attention was given to ethical implications of using online resources for counselling in the professional counselling literature, making it expedient for the present researcher to rely on 2014 ACA Code of Ethics as theoretical base. However, despite these limitations, the researcher is of candid opinion, that the outcomes of this research were not in any way affected adversely.

## **Results**

Research Question 1: What was NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on acquisition of technical knowledge and competency for online counselling?

**Table 1: NOUN Student Counsellors' Perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on Acquisition of Technical Knowledge and Competency for On-line Counselling**

Variables	Strongly Agree(4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not aware (0)	Mean	STD
Knowledge and Competency	33(45.83%)	35(48.6%)	2.67(3.72%)	0.67(.93%)	0.67(.93%)	3.426	.478

Table 1 shows mean score of 3.426 out of maximum mean score of 4 and Standard Deviation of .478 respectively, indicating NOUN Student Counsellors' high positive perception of on the need for counsellors to have knowledge, skills and competency in relation to technical, ethical and legal issues involved in the use of online resources, before engaging in their use.

Research Question 2: What was NOUN student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on informed consent and security considerations for online counselling?

**Table 2: NOUN Student Counsellors' Perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on Informed Consent and Security Considerations for Online Counselling**

Variables	Strongly Agree(4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not aware (0)	Mean	STD
Client Verification	28.5(39.6)	35.5(48.3)	8(11.15%)			3.604	0.537

Table 3 shows the mean score of 3.604 out of maximum mean score of 4 and Standard Deviation of 0.537 respectively, indicating NOUN student counsellors' high positive perception of the need to verify the client's identity at the beginning and throughout the period of therapeutic process while using online resources

**Research Question 4:** What was NOUN student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA code of ethics on distance counselling relationship for on-line counselling?

**Table 4: NOUN Student Counsellors' Perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on Distance Counselling Relationship for Online Counselling**

Variables	Strongly Agree(4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagreed)	Not aware (0)	Mean	STD
Distance Counselling Relationship	38(54.34)	29.63(40.69%)	2.63(3.66%)	0.88(1.23%)		3.549	0.324

Table 4 shows the mean score of 3.549 out of maximum mean score of 4 and Standard Deviation of 0.334 respectively, indicating NOUN Student Counsellors' positive high perception on counsellors informing clients of the benefits and limitations of using online resources in the provision of counselling services.

**Research Question 5:** What was NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on records and web maintenance for online counselling?

**Table 5: NOUN Student Counsellors\* Perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on Records and Web Maintenance for Online Counselling**

Variables	Strongly Agree(4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not aware (0)	Mean	STD
Records and Web Maintenance	28(34.94%)	35.5(45.74%)	5.63(7.83%)	2.38(3.3)	1.75(2.45)	3.130	0.683

Table 5 shows, the mean score of 3.130 out of maximum mean score of 4 and Standard Deviation of 0.683 respectively, indicating NOUN Student Counsellors' high positive perception of counsellors' maintenance of electronic records in accordance with relevant laws and statutes and informing clients on how records are maintained.

**Research Question 6:** What was NOUN student counsellors' perception of counselling Code of Ethics on social media for online counselling?

**Table 6: NOUN Student Counsellors' Perception of Counselling Code of Ethics on Social Media for Online Counselling**

Variables	Strongly Agree(4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not aware (0)	Mean	STD
Social Media	39.5(54.88)	23.5(32.63)	7.25(9.38)	2 (2.8%)	.25 (0.41)	3.3958	0.697

Table 6 shows the mean score of 3.395 out of maximum mean score of 4 and Standard Deviation of 0.697 respectively indicating a high positive perception of counsellors wishing to maintain a separate professional and personal web pages and profiles clearly distinguish between the two kinds of virtual platforms.

**Hypotheses Testing**

Ho: 1 there was no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on acquisition of technical knowledge and competency for online counselling.

**Table 7: Gender Difference among NOUN Student Counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on Acquisition of Technical Knowledge and Competency for Online Counselling**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Know	Female	40	3.4500	.48068	.07600	.474	70	.637
	Male	32	3.3958	.48221	.08524			

Results on table 7 indicates the mean score of female counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on acquisition of technical knowledge and competency for on-line counselling to be 0.760 while male counsellors mean score is .085. With this result, the male counsellors mean score is slightly higher than that of the females. However, the t-test result shows that, there is

no significant gender difference among the NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on acquisition of technical knowledge and competency for on-line counselling  $t = 0.474$ ;  $df = 70$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

*Ho 2: There was no significant gender difference among Student Counsellors in their perception of Code of Ethics on informed consent and security considerations for on-line counselling.*

**Table 8: Gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of Code of Ethics on informed consent and security considerations for on-line counselling.**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Inf	Female	40	.8625	.12017	.01900	349 TO	399	
	Male	32	.8490	.12055	.021131			

Results on table 8 indicates the mean score of female counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on informed consent and security considerations for on-line counselling to be 0.863 while male counsellors mean score is 0.8490. With this result, the female counsellors mean score is slightly higher than that of the males. However, the t-test result shows that, there is no significant gender difference among the NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on informed consent and security considerations for on-line counselling ( $t = 0.474$ ;  $df = 70$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

*Ho 3: There is no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of Code of Ethics on client verification for online counselling*

**Table 9: Gender Difference among NOUN Student Counsellors in their Perception of Code of Ethics on Client Verification for Online Counselling**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Clie	Female	40	3.6125	.57163	.09038		70	.884
	male	32	3.5938	.49899	.08821			

Results on table 9 indicates the mean score of female counsellors' perception of 2014 AC A Code of Ethics on client verification for on-line counselling to be 3.613 while male counsellors mean score is 3.594. With this result, the female counsellors mean score is slightly higher than that of the males. However, the t-test result shows that, there is no significant gender difference among the NOUN Student Counsellors' perception of 2014 AC A Code of Ethics on client verification for on-line counselling ( $t = 0.146$ ;  $df = 70$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

*Ho 4: There was no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of ethics on distance counselling relationship for on-line counselling.*

**Table 10: Gender Difference among NOUN Student Counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on Distance Counselling Relationship for Online Counselling**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Dist	Female	40	3,5406	.34829	.05507	.232	70	.817
	male	32	3,5586	.2961	.05235			

Results on table 10 indicates the mean score of female counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on distance counselling relationship for on-line counselling to be 3.541 while male counsellors mean score is 3.559. With this result, the male counsellors mean score is slightly higher than that of the females. However, the t-test result shows that, there is no significant gender difference among the NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on distance counselling relationship for on-line counselling ( $t = 0.232$ ;  $df = 70$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

**Ho; 5:** *There was no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on records and web maintenance for on-line counselling.*

**Table 11: Gender Difference among NOUN Student Counsellors in their Perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on Records and Web Maintenance for online counselling**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Rec	Female	40	3.125	.64736	.10236	.072	70	.943
	Male	32	3.1367	.73531	.12999			

Results on table 11 indicates the mean score of female counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on records and web maintenance for on-line counselling to be 3.125 while male counsellors mean score is 3.1367. With this result, the male counsellors mean score is slightly higher than that of the females. However, the t-test result shows that, there is no significant gender difference among the NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on records and web maintenance for on-line counselling ( $t=.072$ ;  $df = 70$ ;  $p>0.05$ ).

*Ho 6. There is no significant gender difference among NOUN Student counsellors in their perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on social media for on-line counselling.*

**Table 12: Gender Difference among NOUN Student Counsellors in their Perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on Social Media for Online Counselling**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Soci	Female	40	3.3938	.68145	.10775	.028	70	.978
	Male	32	3.3984	.72640	.12841			

Results of table 12 indicate the mean score of female counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on social media for on-line counselling to be 3.3938 while male counsellors mean score is 3.3984. With this result, the male counsellors mean score is slightly higher than that of the females. However, the t-test result shows that there, is no significant gender difference

among the NOUN Student counsellors' perception of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics on social media for on-line counselling  $f_t = .028$ ;  $df = 70$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

## **Discussion of the Findings**

NOUN student counsellors' perception mean score on the need for counsellors to acquire technical knowledge and competency in using online was 3.426 out of maximum mean score of 4. The counsellors' perception mean score on the need for clients to have the freedom to choose whether to use on-line resources for counselling or not and the need to include freedom of choice in the informed consent process was 0.857. Also the counsellors' perceptions mean score on the need to verify the client's identity at the beginning and throughout the period of therapeutic process while using online resources was 3.604 out of the maximum mean score of 4. Counsellors' perception mean score on the need to inform clients of the benefits and limitations of using on-line resources in the provision of counselling services was 3.549. Counsellors' perception mean score on maintaining electronic records in accordance with relevant laws and statutes and inform clients on how records are maintained was 3.130. Counsellors' perceptions mean score on counsellors wishing to maintain separate professional and personal web pages and profiles clearly distinguishing between the two kinds of virtual platforms were 3.394.

On the whole, the counsellors' perception mean scores in all the variables were positively high except on the need for clients to have the freedom to choose whether to use on-line as counselling resources or not and the need to include freedom of choice in the informed consent process. NOUN Student Counsellors' high positive perception of the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics guiding the use of online resources for counselling could be attributed to:

- i. sensitisation workshop on online counselling organised by the Directorate of Learner Support Services for NOUN Student Counsellors held in Enugu from 26th to 30th August, 2013. Sixty- nine Student Counsellors participated in the workshop.
- ii. Copies of 2014 ACA Code of Ethics sent to NOUN Student Counsellors prior to the commencement of the research.

The low mean score of NOUN student counsellors on the need for clients to have the freedom to choose whether to use on-line as counselling resources

or not and the need to include freedom of choice in the informed consent process could be attributed to the fact that, with the introduction of on-line counselling in 2013 as part of support services, they saw it as obligatory support service to be provided for students. With this mind set, the counsellors saw no need to obtain client-informed consent.

To determine whether there were significant gender differences among NOUN Student Counsellors in their responses to dependent variable or not, t- test analysis was used. The t-test results in all the variables were as follows: technical knowledge and competency ( $t= 0.474$ ), informed consent and security ( $t= 0.849$ ), client verification ( $t= 146$ ), distance counselling ( $r=, 232$ ) records and web maintenance ( $t= 0.072$ ) and social media ( $t= 0.028$ ) at .05 alpha levels. The results showed no significant gender differences in all the variables. This result could be attributed also to the male and female NOUN Student Counsellors participation in Sensitisation Workshop conducted in August 2013 whereby issues concerning on-line were thoroughly discussed.

The foregoing discussion is in tune with the recommendation of 2014 AC A (Section H) that, counsellors who wish to engage in the use on-line resources for counselling, must develop knowledge, skills and competency regarding related technical, ethical and legal considerations. They must also make sure that the counselling process meets any legal and ethical requirements.

## **Conclusion**

It is imperative on the part of every counselling psychologist using on-line resources, to be conversant with codes of ethics guiding their use. The research therefore, specifically recommend 2014 ACA Code of Ethic Section H that, deals with online counselling in order to avoid unethical practices. Counsellors should be wary of breaching the ethics guiding the use of online resources for counselling in order not erode clients' trust, acceptance and confidentiality in the counselling process and which are likely to pose serious legal and ethical problems.

## **Recommendations**

- i. Counsellors must develop knowledge, skills and competency relation to technical, ethical and legal considerations before using online resources.

- ii. Workshop on online counselling should be organised for newly employed counsellors within the first two weeks of their resumption of duty, focusing on development of knowledge, skills and competency and also with emphasis on code of ethics guiding the use of internet.
- iii. In the same vein, institutions wishing to use online platforms for counselling purposes, must endeavour to train her counsellors in the use of these resources.
- iv. Counsellors should not, discuss confidential information on listservs or status updates on their social networking profiles. Details of disclosure in the case of research or consultation should be discussed during the informed consent process.
- v. Counsellors must be aware that confidential relationships do not take place in public and should make efforts to minimise any intrusions on privacy including. They should make efforts to channel conversations on social networks, people contacting them in public forums (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, blog comments, etc.) to a private forum without drawing attention to the fact that they are being contacted for professional services.
- vi. Counsellors should create, maintain, and store records related to their professional work in order to facilitate counselling processes by them or other professionals and to ensure of compliance with legal requirements.

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