

## **Social Media Networks as Interactive Counselling Platform A National Open University of Nigeria Survey**

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### **Abstract**

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Technology and social conditions are constantly and rapidly changing, thereby making obsolete certain practices that used to be valid not too long ago. Today, we are very easily and instantly connected to each other through e-mail, cell phones, social media sites, and a myriad of such technologies. In the field of education, information technology is fast improving and modifying different aspects of open and distance learning by offering a new set of learning tools with their unique set of characteristics. In the area of support services, counselling is one of the critical learner support services available to students of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) at the Study Centres spread across the length and breadth of the country as it is in every other open and distance learning institutions worldwide. With the advent of information technology, there is an increasing need for counsellors to communicate and interact with students beyond the traditional face-to-face medium. Social media networks have continued to evolve rapidly as a technology firmly rooted in time and space; hence the need for counsellors to acquire sufficient expertise to utilise these social media technologies as counselling aids in the face of future developments. With social media sites like face book, e-mail, g-mail, Google talk, twitter, Skype and blogs, information dissemination to and interactions with students is not only simplified but are also greatly enhanced. In this paper, the attitudes, perceptions, views and opinions of NOUN student counsellors and students on the adoption of social media tools in counselling was examined using a survey questionnaire. *Simple percentages and chi-square test were used in data analysis.* Results of the study revealed lack of the use of social media tools in the act of communication and problem solving between NOUN student counsellors and students. The results indicated that students'

engagement with counsellors through social media tools could be academically rewarding and economically cost effective. The findings further advance the urgent need for NOUN counsellors to integrate the use of social media networks into counselling and other learner support services.

**Keywords:** NOUN, social media sites, interactive counselling platform

## Introduction

A lot of research has been conducted on the burgeoning internet social media sites from different perspectives. Social media network like face book enables like-minded people with similar interests to connect, communicate and interact. By 'posting' you can make available what you have written for others to read as well as read what others have 'posted.' You can also comment on people's 'posts' or participate in live chats. Writing on the use of social media in connecting people, Ken *Stevens (2010:108) observes that:*

The last 30 years have brought major changes to the way people can communicate electronically, from text-based e-mail to the present proliferation of social networking and communication tools capable of varied combinations of text, audio, images and video in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. Often called Web 2.0 or the "Read/Write Web" because of the ability of users to both receive and create content as well as to collaborate, share and repurpose content, these tools have provided teachers and learners in ODL programmes with the potential to address some of the perceived social and communication shortcomings of earlier programme models. Their use can reduce isolation and build a sense of community among learners.

In distance education, guidance and counselling is an important learner support service available to students and is integral in determining students' as well as institutional success. In the National Open University of Nigeria, counselling is seen as both a critical success factor and an index of quality assurance.

*Indeed, the technological solutions brought about by the internet have the potential to make the counselling process in distance learning more efficient and effective. Technology facilitates the aims of academic counselling by making it easier for students and counsellors to connect and interact through social networking sites.* Dahl (2005:4) argued that one important area where students need assistance is in academic advising and counselling. He noted that while there are many factors that may determine a student's success, the availability of these services has been associated with students' satisfaction. It is in this regard that Feghali, Zbib, and Hallal (2011: 82) contended that 'introducing technology to the advising (counselling) process aims at leveraging repetitive tasks on software and dedicating time to helping a student plan his/her education road map.'

However, in developing countries where internet connectivity is still low: one of the challenges faced by distance learning student counsellors is the large number of students they have to attend to face-to-face on daily basis. Student counsellors at the National Open University of Nigeria are not immune from this challenge. It is against this background that this paper examines the attitudes, perceptions, views and opinions of NOUN student counsellors and students in relation to the adoption of using social media network for counselling. The author believes that counsellors can, through social network sites, reach out to larger numbers of students efficiently despite the distance in space and time.

### **Conceptualising Counselling in Distance Learning**

In education, counselling is important because it helps students overcome the difficulties they may encounter in the process of completing their studies. Counsellors assist students with academic decision-making matters. Due to the peculiar nature of distance learning as primarily an educational system for mature individuals, the need to provide these adult students with counselling services cannot be underrated. *Counselling in open and distance*

learning could be remote, face-to-face or *both*. *The British Association of Counselling* (1985:8) *proffered a detailed definition of educational counselling as:*

People become engaged in *counselling* when a person, occupying regularity or *temporarily*, the role of counselor offers. *time, attention and respect to another person or persons temporarily in the role of clients. The task of counselling is to give the client an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more resourcefully and toward greater wellbeing.*

**Writing on the relevance of counselling in distance learning, Caleb Kangalet al.**(2011) citing Tucker (2003) *argue that:*

*Academic guidance and counselling is emerging as a crucial aspect of students' support services especially for distance education students. The Current debate on student support services in general and counselling in particular, has now shifted the attention of researchers from questions like: "Do distance education students need counselling?" "and "Should a distance education institution provide counselling services to its students?" to:" what are the Counselling needs of distance education students?" and "What counselling services should a distance education institution provide and how? "*

Igbafe (2009:39) articulates in detail the philosophical foundation of educational counselling as:

A learning orientated process carried on by a professionally competent counsellor in relevant psychological skills and knowledge, to assist the client with methods within context of the total personnel programme to learn more about herself,

accept herself. and learn how to put such understanding into effect in relation to more clearly perceived, realistically defined goals. to enable the client become a happier and productive member of society.

Thorpe (1993:117) holds that counselling is about 'helping the learner define his or her objectives. This often involves helping the learner resolve problems encountered before, during or at the end of study.' She identifies some of the characteristics of counselling to include:

- listening
- reassuring
- clarifying the individual's needs and feelings
- suggesting questions and ideas the individuals might use in evaluating themselves
- providing information about available systems, courses. qualifications and occupation
- referral to other specialist staff where necessary
- identifying options available to the learner
- facilitating the choice of one or more goal by the learner
- giving advice on ways of meeting achieving the goals identified
- helping the individual decide on a course of action to meet a particular goal
- analysing problems the individual experiences in trying to achieve the goal
- reviewing progress towards goals and setting new priorities(102).

As the student's population of the National Open University of Nigeria continues to grow, the need for counsellors to integrate social media tools in the execution of their duties becomes more imperative, especially with the availability of computers with high-speed Internet access. and the prevalence of hand-held digital devices like mobile phones. In essence therefore, to become relevant, efficient and fully integrated into open and distance learning in today's world, student counsellors must not only prove proficient in the use of new technologies of the 21st century but also able to effectively interface these new technologies in the discharge of their duties.

## **Counselling in NOUN**

**The National Open University of Nigeria has highly qualified and experienced student counsellors whom students contact periodically with respect to enrollment, choice of programme and courses, when and how to study, and when to seek special clinic for academic guidance and various other issues. They offer a range of academic and non-academic advice/guidance to students including using university support services like library, fee payment, timetable and date for completion of assignment. They also provide early warning signals regarding difficulty with studies such that students can take prompt remedial actions.** NOUN counsellors are stationed at the different study centres across the country. Beyond academic guidance, NOUN counsellors also instill confidence in the students, guide them to understand the institution's academic curriculum, procedures, and policies as well as attend to areas of academic difficulties.

With the ubiquitousness of mainstream internet technology, the services offered to students could be rendered using social media tools since virtual communities are known to provide worthwhile interactive experiences especially for students. This, perhaps, informs Haythornthwaite and Kazmer's (2002:431-464) suggestion that social media can be utilised to develop student-to-student and student-to-instructor connections. Social media include: face book, twitter, Skype, e-mail, g-mail, and blogs which can be used by both counsellors and students as interactive hubs. Counsellors can disseminate vital information to students through them and students can also receive information from their counsellors and fellow students by chatting, tweeting and blogging. Murray and Le Blanc (1995:5) opine that very many universities and institutions around the world deploy automated advising counselling systems because they are convenient and beneficial for both counsellors and students. They hold that automated counselling systems help students to make better-informed decisions as well as improve service delivery.

## **Social Media Sites as Interactive Counselling Space**

Andreas and Michael (2010:59-68) define social media as 'a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological

foundations of Web 2.0, and which allow the creation and exchange of content'. These include free social media sites like weblogs, face book, g-mail, e-mail, twitter, Skype, instant messaging, Myspace and blog etc. In her assessment of the role of social media tools in engendering participation, interaction and collaboration in education, particularly e-learning, Anna Kirah (2008) maintains that "virtual environments have come to play a central role in the daily routine within companies... Face book, blogs and document share sites have a huge impact on what we do, and how we learn and hold on new knowledge." For Fuchs (2009), Social Networking Sites (SNS) are:

Typical applications of what is termed web 2.0, they are web-based platforms that integrate different media, information and communication technologies that allow at least the generation of profiles that display information that describes the users, the display of connections (connection list), the establishment of connections between users that are displayed on their connection lists, and the communication between users.

Contextualising the educational value of social media networks, Selwyn (2007:18) argues that social media sites like face book has 'become an important site for the informal, cultural learning of 'being' a student, with online interactions and experiences allowing roles to be learned, values understood and identities shaped.' DeAndrea D.C. et al. (2011:1) opine that social media tools 'may have the potential to reshape communication patterns among their users by enabling online communication and lowering the barriers to face-to-face interaction.' They hold that social network sites have received considerable attention from researchers and the general public alike due to the increasingly large user base for sites like face book. They surmise that research on face book, in particular, has shown that students may reap social benefits from using the site.

Stefanone and Jang (2008:123) reasoned those other forms of social media, Like blogs have been utilised for several educational purposes. Blogs are often personal online journals used to maintain interpersonal ties with

friends, colleagues and families. In the view of Blau et al. (2009: 233) 'blogs in education typically differ from mainstream blogs in that they are less visible to the masses and are written for a specific community. 'Deng and Yuen (2011:2) believe that although 'potentially confined in their scope, blogs can be used in the university environment to connect students, foster social support, and promote self-expression.'

It is therefore obvious that in distance learning environment, free social media networks, such as face book, g-mail, Hi5, e-mail. twitter, Google talk, Skype and blogs could provide alternative ways of offering information as well as guidance and counselling services to distance learners who might be unable to come to a study centre because of their dispersed geographical locations or because of time clashes with their jobs. Generally, social media has the potential to:

- help students and counsellors establish and maintain interpersonal connections
- enable real-time discussion and interaction between students and counsellors
- enable timely dialogue between students and counsellors
- enable learning between course facilitators and students
- afford students the platform to express their concerns and seek out feedback in a 'closed network' from their counsellors
- enable collaboration among students
- promote socialisation.

Integrating technology into the counselling process according to Feghali. Zbjb.and Hallal (201):86) offers:

..certain advantages over the traditional advising process. In fact...advisors(counsellors) can have all the information needed about the - courses taken by each student. about the courses an to be taken, about the changes in the academic requirements as they are decided by the =appropriate committee(s)....

This means that such information can be communicated instantly and directly to students as they are released through social network sites.

### **Face book**

This is one of the most widely patronised social media network sites used by people to reach out to friends, family, and colleagues, Originally, face book began in 2004 as a campus social networking site founded by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes. who were then Harvard students. But today, it has expanded to include everyone irrespective of geographic location. As an aid to counselling, a counsellor can post important announcements, information and quick updates to students on his or her wall or tag them as e-mail notifications which students can see and access immediately, they login to their face book account. Most importantly, counsellors can use face book interactive online chat to connect to students and answer their questions real-time.

### **Twitter**

Twitter is an online social media network site, much like facebook, which counsellors can exploit to connect with students. Twitter users can send and receive messages, popularly called tweets. It is fast, quick and free online service which only requires users to have an account and be connected to a computer. One of the advantages of twitter is that non-registered users can read tweets posted online, while registered users can post and read tweets posted by other users through the platform of the website.

### **E-mail**

This is one of the most popular and widely used means of sending digital information online which educational counsellors can use to reach a large number of students. E-mail messages are quick and fast and can reach a recipient's account within seconds. E-mail users are not required to be online simultaneously. A student, for instance, can access his account at his convenience, and read, and reply to any inbox message.

## **Blogs**

Researchers, for instance. Deng and Yuen (2010: 51-57) hold that blogs can be used in the academia 'to connect students, foster social support, and promote self-expression.' For Bartome (2008: 1-10) blogs are used as a means of sharing news/information, or sharing personal opinions. He argues that in the field of education, blogs can be used in the following areas:

- teachers use blogs as an easy way to produce dynamic learning environments without previous knowledge of html
- students use blogs as an alterative digital portfolio or as a learning log
- blogs have been used as support for collaborative work.

From the literature review, it is obvious that, social media sites can bridge the 'distance divide' between students and counsellors in open and distance learning. This is the thrust of **Venable's (2011:4) submission** that through social media, 'students find any-time/any-place options not only for their courses, but also for access to support services and career guidance. This is possible because the dynamic nature of digital information means that counsellors can quickly update students on diverse information such as assignment deadline as well as post quick announcements and updates. Beyond this, information dissemination is simplified and greatly enhanced through social media network.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The present study examined the degree to which NOUN student counsellors and students utilise social media tools for interaction and problem solving. Thus, in the light of the issues highlighted in the literature review, the objectives of the study were:

- to characterise NOUN counsellors' perception and use of social media counselling and problem-solving
- to characterise NOUN students' attitudes toward the use of social media in solving their academic and non-academic problems with their counselors

- to evaluate the possibilities of social media sites as an interactive counselling space in NOUN.

## **Research Questions**

The overarching research questions for this study were: Do NOUN counsellors and students use social media tools in counselling and problem-solving? Will NOUN students welcome the use of social media networks in counselling and other students support services? Are NOUN counsellors more likely to use social media sites in counselling and other students support services? Specifically, on the part of the students, the survey solicited the following responses: (i) which of the social media tools do you use? (ii) Do you interact with your counsellors using any social media site? (iii) Would you like to use social media sites to interact with your counsellors? For the counsellors, the following responses were solicited (i) which of the social media networks do you use? (ii) Do you interact with students using social media sites? (iii) Would you like to use social media tools to aid your face-to-face counselling? (iv) Will the use of social media networks reduce the stress associated with face-to-face counselling?

## **Research Hypothesis**

To guide the study, the following hypotheses were formulated and tested using simple percentages and chi-square(x<sup>2</sup>) formula at 0.05 alpha level:

1. Social media network has no significant impact on counselling among the study group.
2. There is significant relationship between stress reduction associated with face-to-face counselling and the use of social media network as a counselling tool.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Participants**

The samples for this study were drawn from NOUN students and counsellors in the Kaduna and Airforce Base Study Centres. While the Kaduna state

study centre has four (4) student counsellors, the Airforce Base 'Special 'Study Centre has one (1) student counsellor. The population was selected because every state in Nigeria has at least one study centre manned by counsellors and other administrative staff. Thus, the population may be assumed to represent the potential for a national sample. Further, participants represented a diversity of demographic variables such as age, sex, and levels of study. The demographic characteristics of respondents are included in the analysis as Table 1. While the profile of respondents by levels of study appears in Table 2, students' use of social media sites is represented in Table 3 and Table 4 shows counsellor's use of social media network.

### **Instrumentation and Sampling Procedure**

This study made use of the structured survey-questionnaire approach to elicit responses on the attitudes, perceptions, views and opinions of NOUN counsellors and students on the adoption of social media tools in counselling and problem-solving. The instrument was validated by the researcher and counsellors at the Kaduna and Airforce Base Study Centres. The counsellors' questionnaire had four forced-choice items while the students' questionnaire also had a different four forced-choice items. Both questionnaires covered their use of social media in problem-solving, communication and interaction. The counsellors' survey questionnaires were distributed to five NOUN counsellors in Kaduna and Airforce Base Study Centres by the researcher while 176 questionnaires were distributed to NOUN students through simple random sampling.

### **Rate of Response**

Rea and Parker (2005) recommended that the development of a survey questionnaire should begin by establishing the constructs or variables to be tested. These variables presented in Tables 3 and 4 were derived from the research questions. Section A of each questionnaire sought for respondents' demographic data while Section B focused on the respondents' use of social media tools. At the end of the sampling period lasting six weeks, all the five counsellors returned their questionnaires while a total of 130 responses were received from the students.

## Method of Data Analysis

Both the students' and counsellors' responses were subjected to two levels of analysis:

- i) simple percentages showing their comparative perceptions, and attitudes in the use of social media sites as interactive counselling space as well as a platform for problem-solving
- ii) the hypotheses were tested using chi-square(x<sup>2</sup>) formula.

## Results

The results of the study are presented below:

**Table 1: Age and Gender Distribution of Respondents**

Age Range	Female	Male	Total	Percentage (%)
23-25 years	14	23	37	28.5
26-30 years	22	18	40	30.8
31-35 years	10	21	31	23.8
35 years & above	9	13	22	16.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>55(42.3%)</b>	<b>75(57.7%)</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100%</b>

Of the total number of respondents 42.3% were females and 57.7% were males. The following were respondents' distribution by age: 23- to 25-year-olds, 28.5%; 26- to 30-year-olds, 30.8%; 31- to 35-year-olds, 23.8%; and 35years and above 16.9%.

**Table 2: Profile of Respondents by Level of Study**

Level of Study	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
100	25	19.2
200	23	17.7
300	20	15.4
400	22	16.9
PGD	24	18.5
Master	16	12.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100%</b>

Based on level of study, 19.2% were first year students; 17.7% were second year students; 15.4% were third year students; 16.9% were fourth year students; 18.5% were postgraduate diploma students and 12.3% were Master Degree students.

**Table 3: Students' Use of Social Media Network**

Type of Social Network	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
E-mail/G-mail	130	100
Face book	85	65.4
Twitter	28	21.5
Blogs & others	11	8.5

As shown in Table 3, the use of E-mail/G-mail is widespread as all the student respondents (100%) have accounts and access their mail constantly. While 65.4% use face book, 21.5% use twitter. Only a negligible 8.5% have personal blogs. This result implies that most students possess significant internet exposure and access, hence capable of exploiting the opportunities provided by social networks to reach their counsellors.

**Table 4: Counsellor's Use of Social Media Network**

Type of Social Network	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
		(%)
E-mail/G-mail	5	100
Face book	3	60
Twitter	Nil	-
Blogs & others	Nil	-

The Table above reveals a range of interesting findings. All the counsellors (100%) have E-mail/G-mail accounts, 60% are on face book but none either tweets or blogs. Perhaps not surprising, none of the counsellors has ever engaged students online through face book. The study shows that if more awareness and necessary logistics are provided by the university, both

counsellors and students can find social media network a useful and helpful platform for problem-solving.

## $\chi^2$ Chi-square Test

**Tables 5: Contingency Table for Observed and Expected Frequency for Chi-square Analysis**

F.(Frequency observed)	F <sub>e</sub> (Frequency expected)	F <sub>o</sub> -F <sub>e</sub>	(F <sub>o</sub> - F <sub>e</sub> ) <sup>2</sup>	$\frac{(F_o - F_e)^2}{F}$
130.00	130.87	-0.87	0.76	0.01
05.00	4.12	0.88	0.77	0.19
85.00	80.47	4.53	2.52	0.26
03.00	2.53	0.47	0.22	0.09
28.00	27.15	0.85	0.72	0.03
00.00	0.85	-0.85	0.72	0.85
11.00	10.66	0.34	0.12	0.01
0.00	0.34	-0.34	0.12	0.35
$\chi^2$ cal:1.79				

**Decision Rule:** At 0.05 significance and 3 degrees of freedom if  $\chi^2$  calculated is greater than  $\chi^2$  tabulated, the hypothesis will be rejected.

As stated earlier, the research hypotheses were tested using chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) formula. Thus, from the table above, at 0.05 level of significance, the  $\chi^2$  calculated 1.79 <  $\chi^2$  tabulated 54.51 value at 3 degree of freedom. Therefore, the first hypothesis which states that social media network has no significant impact on counselling among the study group is accepted. As could be seen from the responses, NOUN counsellors and students do not utilise social media sites for interaction and problem-solving. As the chi-square analysis indicates ( $\chi^2$  cal.1.79 <  $\chi^2$  tab 54.51 at 0.05 significant level), even though NOUN counsellors reported having laptops and internet access for personal use, the fact that it is personal limits the options for use in student-wide interaction. The reason is that the two study centres had no internet access for counsellors; hence the counsellors bear the cost of their internet subscription and usage.

Again, as indicated in the responses and the chi-square analysis ( $\chi^2$  cal.1.79 <  $\chi^2$  tab 54.51 at 0.05 significant level), it was seen that there was

significant relationship between stress reduction associated with face-to-face counselling as result of the use of social media network as a counselling tool. This could be inferred from the counsellors' affirmative response to the question if the use of social media networks would reduce the stress associated with face-to-face counselling. Thus, the second hypothesis which states that there is significant relationship between stress reduction associated with face-to-face counselling and the use of social media network as a counselling tool is accepted. It would be recalled that one of the major stresses associated with face-to-face counselling includes repetition of same information to different students ad *infinitum*.

## Discussion

The present study provides a survey of the use of social media sites for counselling, problem-solving and interaction between NOUN counsellors and students. First, the findings reveal that NOUN counsellors and students do not use social media sites in communication and problem solving. Although the counsellors confirm having laptops and access to internet for personal use, the fact that it is personal might limits the options for student-wide interaction. However, as can be inferred from the responses, NOUN counsellors are much more likely to use social media sites like *face book and e-mail* in counselling, since this will reduce the stress associated with face-to-face counselling, thereby making counsellors have more positive attitude towards students. Moreover, complementing face-to-face counselling with social media network will give counsellors more time to focus on students' academic and career development which is at the core of their job specification.

As the results further show, 65% of student respondents use Facebook while (100%) use e-mail/g-mail, for interpersonal communication and interaction. Respondents say they interact with their colleagues on facebook and through e-mails. This implies that NOUN students might have positive bias towards the use of social networking in counselling. It is also envisaged that students' engagement with counsellors through social media could be academically ding and economically cost effective as this will reduce the troubles of odic visits to study centres to solve one minor academic problem or other. Another reason advanced by students for the integration of social media in counselling has to do with *the attitudes and emotions of counselors*.

*The overwhelming sentiment of most respondents polled in the study regarding counsellors' behaviour shows that they see their counsellors exhibiting grumpiness most of the time. The study found out that this could be attributed to stress and job fatigue arising from handling various support services including counselling to many students, some with the same problem and others with different problems, and in most cases, repeating the same instruction and information ad infinitum. The findings and lessons from this study point to the fact that NOUN counsellors should integrate social media tools in their job to meet the ever-growing academic and non-academic needs of students.*

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

The ultimate goal and aim of the paper was to evaluate and recommend the use of social network platforms in problem-solving between NOUN counsellors and students. The paper argues that counselling is indispensable in distance learning as students need diverse academic and non-academic assistance from counsellors to succeed. The paper submits that some of the services being offered by counsellors through traditional face-to-face contact with students can be seamlessly done online using the most prevalent social media tools like face book, twitter and Myspace. Therefore, it is incumbent that as the capabilities of technologies change, NOUN counsellors must in addition to conventional face-to-face intervention, continue to explore the opportunities provided by social media network to offer efficient counselling advice to students.

The findings of the study advance the need for NOUN counsellors to integrate the use of social media networks into counselling and other learner support services. It is worth restating that the findings of the study do not in any way imply that opportunities for face-to-face meeting between counsellors and students be discarded. It is here that Steele, Leonard, Haberle and Lipschultz' (2000:15) advice remains instructive when they hold that technology may be helpful to both educational counsellors' and students because it assists them in making informed decisions. However, technology should not replace face-to-face interactions. Rather, counsellors should see technology as a tool to enhance the counselling experience and not a substitute for it.

Arising from the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- The National Open University of Nigeria should develop a web-based support system that would allow and enable student counsellors and students interact seamlessly.
- NOUN counsellors should be adequately trained in and equipped with the emerging technology-based counselling systems that can be used in distance learning such as the chatting interface of face book, twitter. and blogs etc.
- For counsellors to integrate social media network as a platform for counselling and problem-solving, the authorities of NOUN should equip the study centres with enough numbers of computers and internet facilities while the student counsellors are exposed to adequate training that will equip them with the skills required for internet counselling.
- NOUN should create more awareness among student counsellors and students on the potentials of social media networks as virtual counselling platform.

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