Chapter 14
The Challenges of Online Counseling in a Developing Country

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ABSTRACT
Information and communication technology has expanded the capacity for person-to-person communication and has created opportunities for man to expand knowledge and communicate such. Statistics has shown that the number of individuals having access to Internet is increasing and as such, every field of human knowledge is annexing the opportunity. These opportunities are, however, filled with challenges. The counseling field is not an exception. This chapter has, however, outlined that challenges such as technical know-how, counseling environment in terms of privacy and security, the problem of invisibility and anonymity, and the ethical issues of practice, may hinder online counseling in Nigeria. It is concluded that online counseling is a possibility in Nigeria and other developing countries if certain pertinent issues are addressed.

INTRODUCTION
Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has finally come to stay, expanding the capacity for person-to-person communication irrespective of time zones, geographic location, convenience, and time gaps between sending and receiving messages. This is taken to mean that ICT has become an immediate answer for almost (if there is anything left) everything that man need to achieve—in medicine, transportation, teaching, and governance, to mention but a few. There is hardly a sector of any economy that ICT has not permeated, making all human endeavours
to depend on it. Today, automobile faults are
diagnosed using ICT, patients are treated online,
and the 21st century classrooms are automated.
However, the most recognized ICTs are com-
puter and Internet. Schools, government offices,
and business places have been connected to the
Internet to make information dissemination and
sharing more convenient.

Gore (1998) observed that American govern-
ment has made progress in reaching the goal of
connecting all of the nation’s schools and class-
rooms to the Internet by the year 2000. Goosley
(2001) also pointed out that during the first quarter
of 2001, 27 nations and about 429 million people
have Internet access, with about 41% of them
from North America. Another recent survey by the
Internet World Stats (2009) revealed that Africa
has a population of 991,002,342 out of which
4,514,400 had access to the Internet in 2001 and
that the number increased to about 65,903,900
in 2009, representing 6.7% of the population. In
contrast, North America has about 340,831,831
people in 2001, 108,096,800 had access to the
Internet, while the number increased to about
251,735,500 in 2009, representing approximately
73.9% of the total population. It was further re-
vealed from the report that Nigeria has a popula-
tion of about 149,229,090, with about 11,000,000
Internet users representing approximately 7.4%
of the population. This statistics clearly indicates
that the percentage of those with access to the
Internet in the developing nations is far less than
those in the developing world.

Moving with this development, counseling
profession in the advanced nations has annexed
the opportunity with the introduction of the online
counseling, which was not imagined about one,
two decades ago. However, there are issues that
are pertinent to online counseling vis-à-vis the
developing countries that need adequate atten-
tion before the practice could have much effect.
As could be concluded from the statistics given
earlier, access to Internet will have hampering ef-
facts on the application of ICT to deliver counsel-
ing services in a nation as Nigeria. It should also
be noted that there are no statistics representing
the percentage of this population who will likely
need counseling and of course online counseling.
However, if anyone will need online counseling,
it may likely be among those who have access to
the Internet.

It has been noted that counseling is a profession
that empowers individual and addresses issues
such as gaining perspective on ones behaviour,
emotions and relationships, provides a means
to express ones feelings and identify patterns of
thinking, alleviates anxiety, depression and anger
in their many forms, helps develop communication
skills for dealing with conflict and frustration, and
addresses pain, working through loss and adding
meaning to one’s life (LaCombe, 2008). The plat-
form that facilitates an interaction between clients
and counselor will must thus be well ‘prepared,’
first, by the counselor and ‘understood’ by both
parties. This is because the process has to do with
trust and confidence in an “intimate stranger” as
alluded to by Snow (2001), because they might
have never met one another before.

Counseling is many things, but it will be
proper to clarify that counseling cannot properly
be given a definition. Counseling does not refer
to an activity where a counseling expert analyzes
the client. It is rather an interaction between a
counselor and client that produces a framework to
make positive changes in the client’s approach to
life. It is not also a process or activity that is used
to solve what people regard as major problems.
It simply attends to issues that cause distress for
clients and prevent them from having satisfac-
tion in life. Counseling brings out the strengths
and abilities of clients in order for them to man-
ge life issues and challenges. LaCombe (2008)
believed that counseling helps with problems in
living through an interaction with a trained pro-
fessional, by offering a way to gain perspective
on ones behaviour, emotions, and relationships,
providing a means to express ones feelings and
identify patterns of thinking. Alleviating anxiety,
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