

Navigating Support Online: A Phenomenological Study of Filipino Counselees' Experiences with Virtual Guidance Counseling

Charmaine Paz Eroles

College of Liberal Arts and Communication-Graduate Studies, De La Salle University, Dasmariñas, Philippines

Email: charmeeepaz@icloud.com

How to cite this paper: Eroles, C. P. (2026). Navigating Support Online: A Phenomenological Study of Filipino Counselees' Experiences with Virtual Guidance Counseling. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 168-179.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.141013>

Received: December 10, 2025

Accepted: January 10, 2026

Published: January 13, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The current study explored the experiences of counselees in the Philippines who participated in virtual guidance counseling sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a phenomenological framework, the study examined how students made sense of the provision of psychosocial services in a fully mediated context characterized by uncertainty and psychological distress. Eleven Filipino university students, aged 18 to 24 and with prior experience as counselees, were purposively selected so they could share detailed accounts of their experiences. The conversations took place through one-on-one, in-depth interviews where students described not only what happened during their counseling sessions but also the personal circumstances surrounding them. Their stories were examined through the main steps of phenomenological analysis—setting aside initial assumptions, considering different layers of meaning, and bringing these insights together to grasp the essence of their experiences. From these accounts, four themes gradually emerged. The first, motivations and pre-conditions for seeking virtual guidance counseling, reflects the personal pressures and needs that led students to reach out for support. The second theme, digital platforms as both enablers and constraints, shows how online tools made counseling accessible but also created limits in forming a genuine connection. The third theme focuses on the barriers to building a therapeutic relationship in a mediated space, including privacy concerns, hesitations in expressing emotions, and the emotional distance created by screens. The final theme, emergent insights and transformations, captures how students slowly developed self-awareness, coping strategies, and a renewed understanding of their well-being. Taken together, these insights illustrate how virtual guidance counseling helped students navigate a difficult period and point to the need for

stronger systems to support online counseling in schools.

Keywords

Virtual Guidance Counseling, COVID-19 Pandemic, Filipino Students, Phenomenology, Mental Health Support, Counselees

1. Introduction

Guidance counseling has always been part of what keeps students grounded in school, especially when they face personal or academic difficulties. For many years, this support mainly happened in person. Students sat with counselors, talked about whatever they were dealing with, and relied on the natural give-and-take of conversation—gestures, pauses, tone—to feel heard (Corey, 2009). As communication technologies grew more sophisticated, however, counseling slowly began to take on new forms. What started as experimental email exchanges or text-based conversations in the late 1990s eventually expanded into a range of online formats, including video calls and chat platforms (Barak et al., 2009). These options made it easier for students to reach out for help, especially younger ones who were already used to expressing themselves online.

Even so, moving counseling into digital spaces has not been straightforward. The benefits of convenience and the potential for wider access are clear, and some students find it easier to share information when they are not physically in a counseling room. However, the implementation of the new way of working brings a number of challenges, many of which appear to be widely acknowledged. Several counselors find it difficult due to the lack of non-verbal communication to be found in the face-to-face experience, while both the client and the counselors might face issues regarding the availability and privacy issues of internet access if the dialogue is to take place in a non-private environment (Kraft & Gumpert, 2017; Richards & Viganó, 2013). Adapting methods of therapy and applying them in the web-based environment requires a skill that in itself has to be developed, while doing the adjustment is difficult for everyone (Mishna et al., 2015). The effect on students is mixed as well, where some find the privacy of the web-based platforms an advantage, while the distance creates a hindrance to an effective therapy relationship in the process for the others.

The Philippine context offers its own considerations. Guidance counseling is formally regulated under the Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004 (R. A. 9258), yet before the pandemic, most schools continued to depend on traditional, face-to-face approaches. Online counseling existed, but usually in limited or informal ways (Rungduin & Mampusti, 2019). When COVID-19 abruptly closed campuses, everyone involved—counselors and counsees alike—had to adjust to a counseling process that suddenly depended on technology. Students had to talk about sensitive matters from bedrooms, living rooms, or wherever they could find a

quiet spot, and counselors had to figure out how to build trust despite physical distance and digital barriers.

The pandemic also intensified the emotional landscape for many young people. University students dealt with shifting academic expectations, reduced social interaction, and ongoing uncertainty about their futures. Such disturbances significantly impacted the students' mental health, causing many to turn to services in order to cope with issues of anxiety, loneliness, or the encompassing and overwhelming changes they experienced (Aristovnik et al., 2020). The studies conducted in this phase mostly investigated the counselors in their adjustment to conducting services through the internet and the strategies to accommodate the students' needs (Flores & Rungduin, 2024). Compared to that, there is relatively less focus on the experiences of the students in the context of the internet-based counseling model.

Understanding the counselee's viewpoint matters because counseling is not only about offering guidance but also about how that guidance is received. In an online setting, students may interpret the experience differently: some may find comfort in the distance, while others may feel exposed or disconnected. Their comfort with technology, their home environment, and the emotional weight they carry all shape the meaning they assign to counseling. As virtual support becomes increasingly common, it is important to examine how students navigate these mediated encounters and what these experiences reveal about their needs.

In the period following the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholarship on tele-counseling and student mental health has continued to grow, reflecting the ongoing reliance on online psychosocial support in higher education. Several recent studies have shown that virtual counseling can improve access to mental health services and help sustain continuity of care for university students. At the same time, researchers have pointed to continuing challenges, particularly in relation to student engagement, privacy concerns, and the development of emotional connection in online settings (Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2022).

Recent studies further emphasize the need for professionals and institutions involved in online counseling to adopt approaches that are responsive to students' evolving psychological and emotional needs (Xiao et al., 2024; World Health Organization, 2023). Across this body of work, there is increasing recognition of the value of examining students' personal and lived experiences of online guidance counseling, particularly within higher education contexts where such insights are essential to strengthening mental health support services.

Given this context, the current study focuses on the Filipino university student experience regarding virtual guidance counseling sessions conducted during the pandemic period of the COVID-19 outbreak. Using a phenomenology-based methodology, the current study examines how the university students understood the experience, how they coped with the benefits and restrictions associated with online communications, and how the experience affected their well-being. The aim is to add to the ever-growing pool of information regarding virtual counsel-

ing, thereby improving student-centric virtual counseling practices in learning institutions.

2. Research Objectives

The study aimed to understand the experiences of Filipino university students in virtual guidance counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The study sought to address the following research objectives:

- 1) To establish the elements that spurred the students to utilize online guidance counseling services;
- 2) To investigate how the counselees perceived and interpreted the online counseling process;
- 3) To discuss the challenges, they encountered and the conditions that helped them access and feel comfortable with the sessions;
- 4) To understand the perceived benefits of the experience, including any insights, learning, or personal changes gained from the counseling sessions.

3. Research Design and Methods

This study used a phenomenological research design to explore how Filipino university students experienced virtual guidance counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic. A phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows for a close examination of how individuals understand and interpret a shared human experience. Rather than focusing on behavioral patterns or measurable outcomes, the study sought to describe the meanings that students assigned to their counseling sessions and the conditions that shaped those meanings. The approach made it possible to capture both the personal and contextual elements that influenced their experiences as counselees in an online environment.

4. Research Sampling

The purposive sampling method was employed to target those individuals who could provide detailed and relevant descriptions of the phenomenon under study. The qualifications for the study include: 1) they were Filipino university students during the pandemic period; 2) they were between 18 and 24 years old; and 3) they had attended at least one virtual guidance counseling session. This sampling method was appropriate because phenomenological research prioritizes depth over breadth, focusing on individuals who have firsthand experience with the phenomenon. Referrals from student networks, peers, and academic contacts helped identify eligible participants.

5. Research Participants

A total of eleven Filipino university students were involved in the study. All participants belonged to Generation Z and were enrolled in various higher education institutions when the COVID-19 pandemic shifted most campus services online. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years old, and each participant had taken part in

at least one virtual guidance counseling session prior to agreeing to be interviewed. The group came from different courses and personal backgrounds, which contributed a range of perspectives to the study.

Participants in the study were recruited from a range of academic backgrounds within the university. Rather than focusing on a single field of study, participants were enrolled in programs related to the social sciences, education, business, and health-related disciplines. Describing participants at this aggregated level provided clearer academic context while ensuring that no individual participant could be identified.

To protect participants' identities, no names were used in the study. Instead, participants were assigned numerical identifiers (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2). Prior to the interviews, all participants read and signed an informed consent form and were reminded that their responses would remain confidential and be used solely for re-search purposes (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Characteristics	Description
Number of participants	11
Age range	18 - 24
Generation	Generation Z
Counseling experience	At least one virtual session
Acedemic fields	Social Sciences, education, business, health-related programs
Mode of counseling	Online

6. Data Collection

The data collected through one-on-one in-depth interviews conducted remotely through the process of tele-interviews due to restrictions put in place by the pandemic that resulted in inaccessibility of the participants to the researcher. A semi-structured interview guide helped facilitate the discussion, allowing the researcher to explore key areas while remaining open to participants' spontaneous reflections. The candidates engaged in the process of describing the events bringing them to counseling services, their impression of the experience, the challenges they went through, and the lessons they derived from the experience where each session lasted a total of 45 minutes to one hour respectively with the permission of the candidates to be recorded verbally and transcription following afterwards.

7. Data Analysis

The analysis of the interviews followed the general flow of Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological method, but the process unfolded in a way that allowed the researcher to move back and forth between the transcripts as meanings became clearer. The first step involved simply spending time with the transcripts—reading

them several times and noting statements or phrases that seemed to capture something important about the students' experiences. These initial notes eventually became short lists of significant expressions that helped the researcher understand what stood out in each narrative.

As these statements accumulated, they were grouped into clusters that shared a common idea or feeling. These clusters later developed into the themes used in the presentation of results. The grouping process was not strictly linear; the researcher repeatedly returned to earlier transcripts to check if new clusters still fit with what participants had actually said.

Once the clusters were clearer, the next stage involved looking at the experiences from different angles, a process known as imaginative variation. Here, the researcher tried to understand not only what the students experienced but also how these experiences took shape in an online setting. This step made it possible to draft textural descriptions—accounts that summarized participants' experiences—and structural descriptions, which offered possible explanations for how those experiences occurred.

After these individual descriptions were written, they were compared across all participants. The shared elements were combined to form a broader narrative that reflected the common essence of the group's experience. Throughout the analysis, the researcher continuously revisited the transcripts and attempted to set aside personal assumptions to stay close to the participants' own words and interpretations.

In the current study, imaginative variation was used as part of the phenomenological analysis to further understand how research participants constructed their experiences. Rather than treating participants' accounts as fixed or isolated, the analysis actively considered different ways these experiences might be understood under varying circumstances. This reflective process supported deeper engagement with the data and helped move beyond surface-level descriptions toward identifying meaningful patterns across participants' accounts.

For instance, when participants discussed challenges in forming emotional ties during online counseling sessions, the analysis explored how these challenges might be shaped by different conditions. These included scenarios such as counseling conducted face-to-face, access to a private space at home, or variations in the frequency of technological disruptions. Reflecting on these possibilities allowed for clearer identification of recurring elements in the experience, including emotional connection, mediated interaction, and the influence of physical surroundings.

8. Results and Discussion

This section presents the themes that emerged from the interviews with the eleven participants. The themes describe how the students made sense of their experiences in virtual guidance counseling and how these encounters shaped their understanding of support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each theme is discussed

together with its interpretive meaning and its connection to existing literature (Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of emergent themes.

Theme	Brief Description
Theme 1	Motivations for seeking virtual counseling
Theme 2	Digital platforms as enablers and constraints
Theme 3	Challenges in building therapeutic connections
Theme 4	Personal transformations

8.1. Theme One: Motivations for Seeking Help

Many of the students shared that the pandemic created a mix of academic and personal pressures that gradually became difficult to manage. Several spoke about sudden changes in schoolwork, constant adjustments to deadlines, and the general feeling of being cut off from their support networks. These shifts, along with the uncertainty of the situation, left them feeling unsettled and more open to reaching out for help. These overlapping pressures pushed them to look for someone they could talk to, especially when their own ways of coping no longer seemed to work.

Before turning to the guidance office online, a number of students said they first tried to manage their concerns on their own or by confiding in close friends. Some felt that these informal supports helped only for a while, and when the stress persisted, seeking counseling felt like the next reasonable step. The fact that the sessions could be done from home also made it easier for them to reach out, since they did not have to travel or worry about walking into an office at a time when most services had moved online.

Students also mentioned that being comfortable with technology helped lower the barrier to getting started. As digital natives, many of them were already used to video calls, chat platforms, and online communication in general. However, their familiarity with technology did not automatically remove the hesitation they felt about counseling itself. A few admitted they were unsure at first about how the conversation would go, or whether they might be misunderstood. Still, the combination of emotional strain and the practicality of online access eventually made counseling feel like a sensible option when the need for support became more difficult to ignore.

8.2. Theme Two: Digital Platforms as Both Enablers and Constraints

Students shared that using digital platforms for counseling had its good and bad sides. Many appreciated how easy it was to join a session from home, especially when travel was restricted or tiring. Being able to schedule a meeting without leaving the house made counseling feel more manageable for several of them, and some even said it removed the awkwardness they expected from in-person meet-

ings.

At the same time, the same technology brought its own frustrations. A number of students talked about unstable internet connections, noise at home, or the lack of a quiet corner where they could talk freely. Others admitted that they sometimes felt unsure about how to express themselves when they were limited to a screen. Without the usual flow of face-to-face conversation, a few found it difficult to show emotion or understand the counselor's reactions.

Some students also pointed out that the platform they used affected how the session felt. A few said that video calls sometimes came across as a little formal or "too serious", while messaging felt almost the opposite—too casual for conversations that were supposed to be personal. Their reactions reflect what other researchers have noted about how difficult it can be to establish rapport when communication happens through digital tools (Kraft & Gumpert, 2017). Although online platforms made counseling possible during the pandemic, they also brought technical and emotional challenges that shaped how students experienced the sessions.

8.3. Theme Three: Challenges in Building Therapeutic Connections Online

Some students said that during online sessions, they sometimes felt that the counselor could not fully "read" them. Without the usual eye contact or body language, a few felt unsure about how much of their emotion was actually coming across. This made it a bit harder for them to open up in the way they normally would.

Privacy also shaped how comfortable they felt. Several students had to attend their sessions in shared areas at home, which meant that someone in the household might overhear parts of the conversation. Because of this, they tended to hold back when talking about more personal matters. This experience is similar to what earlier studies have pointed out about how privacy affects trust and openness in counseling (Mishna et al., 2015).

Some students mentioned that certain moments in the session took on a different tone online. When the counselor paused to think, glanced away, or wrote something down, it sometimes felt more noticeable or awkward on a screen. Small things like these occasionally disrupted their train of thought. Still, a number of students shared that after a few sessions, they gradually felt more at ease, especially when they sensed the counselor was genuinely engaged.

8.4. Theme Four: Personal Transformations

Students described different kinds of learning from their sessions. Some talked about small but helpful changes in their daily routines, like finding ways to organize their tasks or becoming more comfortable sharing their feelings. Others said the conversations gave them a sense of reassurance that they did not often get at home. For many of them, this steady emotional support mattered just as much as any specific strategy they learned. Similar points have been raised in previous

work, which also notes that online counseling can encourage reflection and emotional development even when it takes place through mediated communication (Flores & Rungduin, 2024).

A few students also shared that their view of counseling shifted as they continued with their sessions. At first, joining a meeting online felt unusual or slightly uncomfortable, but after some time, the process became something they leaned on when things became too heavy to manage alone. Eventually, several of them began to see counseling as part of caring for their overall well-being rather than something meant only for moments of crisis. Their experiences suggest that meaningful takeaways can still emerge in virtual counseling, even with the distance and technological limits that come with it.

When considered together, the four themes reflect how students' experiences with virtual guidance counseling unfolded over time rather than occurring as separate or isolated events. Students were initially driven to seek support due to increasing academic demands and emotional strain during the pandemic. Access to online counseling platforms made support possible, yet these same platforms also shaped how interactions were experienced, sometimes supporting engagement and at other times limiting emotional connection. As students attempted to form therapeutic relationships in these digital settings, concerns related to privacy, emotional distance, and mediated communication became part of the counseling experience. Despite these challenges, continued participation in virtual counseling allowed many students to develop greater self-awareness and coping strategies. Seen as a whole, the findings suggest that students' journeys through virtual guidance counseling involved an ongoing process in which motivation, digital context, relational challenges, and personal growth were closely linked.

9. Summary

This study set out to understand how Filipino university students experienced virtual guidance counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a phenomenological approach, the research focused on how students made sense of meeting with a counselor online at a time when many aspects of their lives were disrupted. Interviews with eleven participants revealed four themes that described why they sought help, how they used the technology available to them, what challenges they encountered, and what they took away from the experience.

Students reached out for counseling for different reasons. Several spoke about the stress they felt during the pandemic—changes in schoolwork, worries about the future, and the difficulty of dealing with these concerns on their own. Being familiar with digital tools made online sessions easier to access, although the shift from in-person conversations to screens still felt unusual at first. While the online setup offered convenience, it also brought obstacles such as unreliable internet connections, limited privacy at home, and the absence of face-to-face cues that usually help build connection.

Even with these challenges, many students shared that the sessions were helpful.

Some became more aware of their emotions and patterns of coping, while others learned small habits that made their daily routines easier to manage. Several participants said the conversations gave them reassurance during a time when they felt isolated. As they continued with the sessions, a number of students began to see counseling not only as something for moments of crisis but as part of taking care of their well-being.

Overall, the students' perspective reveals that the significance of the online sessions to the students was maintained even in the midst of the pandemic. Despite the fact that the interactions took place through the medium of the screen only, the meetings served as a platform for expression and resolving the emotional experience in the process.

10. Limitations

When interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to note several limitations of the research. Specifically, this study used a purposeful sample comprising Filipino university students who shared prior experience using virtual guidance counseling. Using a purposeful sample is consistent with the goals of a phenomenological study, which aims to interpret lived experiences in depth, although it limits the generalizability of results for Filipino students.

This study was done during a specific time influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden shift to online guidance counseling. Because of this, the accounts of the participants were written in a context that posed unique challenges and circumstances, and there may be different experiences with online guidance counseling during more stable or post-pandemic periods.

Additionally, the results are based on participants' self-reported reflections, which provide insight into their personal interpretations of experience. Nevertheless, despite some limitations, this study is significant in providing insights into students' experiences with virtual forms of guidance counseling, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of mediated psychosocial support systems in higher education.

11. Recommendations

The students' experiences point to several ways schools can improve virtual guidance counseling.

This recommendation is informed by findings from Theme Three: Challenges in Building Therapeutic Connections Online, which highlighted difficulties related to emotional distance and reduced nonverbal cues in online counseling settings. One area that requires focus is the level of support given to counselors working in an online setting. Several students reported that it was harder to feel understood in an online setting because the normal cues from eye contact and body language were absent in the session. The institutions should provide a refresher course that gives counselors the tools to adjust their methods of communicating in an online setting. The application of simple methods of showing that one is

engaged in an online session will produce a significant effect because some cues are absent in an online session.

Findings from Theme Three also emphasized the importance of privacy in facilitating open and meaningful therapeutic engagement. Another issue raised by the participants was the challenge of finding a private space at home. Institutions might help by giving students practical reminders before sessions—such as choosing a quiet area, using headphones, or scheduling sessions at times when the household is less busy. Small adjustments like these can make students feel safer and more willing to talk openly.

This recommendation directly responds to findings from Theme Two: Digital Platforms as Both Enablers and Constraints, which revealed that technological issues often disrupted students' counseling experiences. Students also mentioned that technical problems affected how comfortable they felt during counseling. Unstable connections, audio delays, or confusing platforms often disrupted the flow of conversation. Schools may want to review the digital tools they use and consider providing options that are more stable or easier for students to navigate.

Insights from Theme Four: Personal Transformations showed that students came to view virtual counseling as beneficial beyond moments of immediate crisis. Finally, several students eventually saw counseling as helpful even beyond moments of crisis. With this in mind, schools may consider keeping virtual counseling available along-side in-person services. Providing both options can offer flexibility and may encourage students who feel hesitant about face-to-face sessions to seek help in a format that feels more comfortable for them.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the participants who took the time to share their experiences for this study. Gratitude is also extended to the academic mentors whose insights and feedback contributed to strengthening the quality of this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Aristovnik, A., Keržič, D., Ravšelj, D., Tomaževič, N., & Umek, L. (2020). Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students: A Global Perspective. *Sustainability*, *12*, Article 8438. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208438>
- Barak, A., Klein, B., & Proudfoot, J. G. (2009). Defining Internet-Supported Therapeutic Interventions. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, *38*, 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-009-9130-7>
- Békés, V., & Aafjes-van Doorn, K. (2022). Psychotherapists' Experiences with Online Therapy during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, *32*, 203-216.
- Corey, G. (2009). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (8th ed.). Brooks/Cole.

- Flores, P. J. G., & Rungduin, T. T. (2024). Lived Experiences of Counselors on Online Counseling. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, *12*, 258-273.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.1211018>
- Kraft, E., & Gumpert, G. (2017). Psychological and Interpersonal Considerations in Teletherapy. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, *35*, 99-117.
- Mishna, F., Bogo, M., Root, J., Sawyer, J., & Khoury-Kassabri, M. (2015). "It Just Crept in": The Digital Age and Implications for Social Work Practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *43*, 142-151.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. SAGE Publications.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>
- Richards, D., & Viganó, N. (2013). Online Counseling: A Narrative and Critical Review of the Literature. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *69*, 994-1011.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.21974>
- Rungduin, T. T., & Mampusti, M. A. (2019). Exploring the Use of Online Platforms in Providing Guidance and Counseling Services to Students. *Research in Education and Psychology*, *3*, 15-27.
- World Health Organization (2023). *Guidelines on Mental Health at Work*.
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240053052>
- Xiao, H., Zhang, Y., Kong, D., Li, S., & Yang, N. (2024). Online Mental Health Services for University Students: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, Article ID: 1298743.