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TECHNOLOGY AS SUICIDE RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS: FROM COUNSELLING POINT OF VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Rising suicide rates, particularly among adolescents and marginalized groups, are causing increased interest in the development of innovative and inclusive mental health interventions. These interventions include integrating technological advances into mental health counselling. This paper focuses on one area of application for technology in counselling professional helping relationship. This research aimed at exploring association integrating technology in counsellors' professional practices in addressing suicide behaviours. This study utilized a qualitative case study methodology to structure this research. The data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews and selected documents. Eighteen participants involved this in research. Among those include ten professional counsellors, four individuals who experienced incomplete suicide attempts, and three caregivers, all were recruited through purposive sampling. Rigorousness of the data collected were sought. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis to extract meaningful phrases, codes, patterns, categories and themes. Findings emerged from this research include technology to be identified as one of the interferences in service delivery and technology was indicated to be among the risk factors and protective factors for suicidal behaviours. The findings underscored the need to enhance counsellors' best practice in managing suicidal crisis issues that are critical case in Malaysia. Practical and policy recommendations related to this study are discussed.

Keywords: Suicide, Suicidal behavior, Counsellors, Counselling, Technology, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisation in 2018 reports that suicidal behaviours are the leading global cause of death among teenagers aged 15 to 29. In 2020, Malaysia recorded about 872 young people in Malaysia took their lives from January 2019 up to May 2021, as reported by the Royal Malaysia Police. UNICEF in 2021 has notified that Children between 15 and 18 years old made up 51 per cent of the total 1,708 suicide cases recorded in that time. The use of technology in modern life is inescapable as its application

extends beyond digital platforms and mediums, including social media. After all, the use of technology can be both beneficial and detrimental to humankind.

Suicidality refers to suicide-related behaviours and thoughts, including completing or attempting suicide, suicidal ideation, or communications. The model of suicide by O'Connor and Kirtley (2018) through the integrated motivational-volitional (IMV) model deliberated suicide into three phases: the premotivational, motivational and volitional phases. The individuals with suicidality undergo a phase of having events or episodes that could be triggering, then turn into ideation or intention towards suicide and later are followed by behavioural activation. Recently, gadgets were available to individuals of all ages, including youngsters. Suicide risk factors elevate the one's tendency towards suicidal behaviours. A risk factor is referred to as an aspect that pertains to an individual's perpetual thinking of suicide, while suicide warning signals indicate pressing conditions that take place in minutes or days, which can set off suicidal behaviours (Rudd, 2008). Technological usage related to suicide risks can be observed in various forms. In the absence of adequate supervision and screen time restrictions, youngsters playing with technology may expose themselves to cyberbullying (Dorol-Beuroy-Eustache & Mishara, 2021). Youngsters who excessively use digital gadgets for social media and web browsing negatively affect their psychological well-being (Chamarro et al., 2024). The relationship between technology use and suicide risk has been shown in records of online threats (Massing-Schaffer & Nesi, 2020), excessive gaming (Chamarro et al., 2024), trouble sleeping (Hamilton et al., 2023), and abrupt losses resulting in social relationships (Online et al., 2020). These noticeable effects in teenagers who engage extensively in online platforms depicted negative consequences ranging from harassment and threats to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. This may contribute to psychological dysregulation and disconnection from others and compromised wellbeing resulting in further diminished psychological functioning.

Technology offered not only negative implications but benefits too. The benefits are believed to alleviate the suicidal tendency and curb the issues from worsening, known as protective factors. A protective factor is referred as reduce the potential for a person's suicide or suicidal behaviour. Protective factors are referred to as individual dimensions or external conditions that help balance or reduce the risk that they are exposed to (Dias & Cadime, 2016). Protective aspects related to technology might encompass various elements. Technology as protection can be observed from the aspect of having support through online communities (Li et al., 2023) and intervention offerings from internet-based mediums (Erting et al., 2023). Technology hence provides room for us for intervention through digital intervention via accessible apps or programmes found on web pages or media outreach. This can also be enhanced through the availability of online support groups, which can help the affected individuals feel understood. Additionally, the existence of a supervisory system mitigated the risks for adolescents to use inappropriate apps.

While technology and digital platforms have expanded its usage across age and population, both suicide risk and protective factors showed inconsistent results from the context of mental health and counselling. As the interventions involving mobile and web apps showed a reduction in suicidal thoughts and improved psychological wellbeing, research highlighting participants lived experiences and insights on technology and suicidal behaviours and unique conditions was found to be limited. The use of an AI-driven detection system, including NLP models, depicted promising results in detecting

warning signs of suicide, but the best practices and conduct of mental health professional counsellors remained unstudied (Kee et al., 2024).

Yet, counsellors and the utilisation of technological devices require further study, as services in counselling are not only limited to intervention merely but include the administration of psychological tests, need analysis data gathering, record keeping and many others. This service process, though can be eased using technological advancement, yet thorough consideration should be emphasised (Anni, 2018). Additionally, counsellors' training in technological devices or applications limits the use of technology in delivering their services (Deslonde & Becerra, 2018). In the case of technology integration into counselling, ethical boundaries and counsellors' competencies in technological utilisation should be further explored and researched in the context of psychological cases, particularly when the strike of the Covid-19 pandemic at global level (Woo, Dondanville, Jang, Na, & Jang, 2020). These findings, shed light on the need for further exploration of how technological usage and suicidality are tailored to counselling professionalism in Malaysia. This research aimed to explore how technology is embedded in suicidal behaviours tendency from the lens of counselling practices.

METHODS

The use of a qualitative case study approach in this research helped to further explore the issue in counselling contextual events. Data collection was done using both available documents related to addressing suicide and interview sessions. For analysis, researchers read through the documents and transcription verbatim several times before beginning to identify keywords, codes, phrases and the thematising process. Purposive sampling and document gathering were utilised for data collection in this research, and they aimed to enhance the triangulation process. Validation of the data was done through the process of member check. Experts' validation for both interview protocols and emergent themes was conducted to gain further validation. Thematic analysis was employed to generate meaningful themes and subthemes. For ethical consideration, researchers as registered counsellors observed psychological risks displayed by participants and offered emotional support if there was any distress shown by participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three major themes were generated from this study in relation to technological utilisation and suicidal behaviours. Technology was identified as interfering with service delivery, determinant risk factors, and protective factors. The findings shed light on the significance of technology in counselling services provided by counsellors in addressing suicidal cases.

Figure 1 highlighted the themes for this finding by indicating the respective themes associated with it. Three main themes related to technology and suicidal behaviours highlighted three distinctive themes, namely service interferences, suicide factors and suicide protective factors, and the subthemes

additionally deliberate each theme according to its context. The first theme highlighted technology as interference in services, which refers to having inadequate continuous support in technological processes, culturally bound issues when technology is introduced in the counselling services and technologically based supports are newly introduced in the line services. These have been highlighted that technology has interfered with the traditional counselling practices. Secondly, the theme highlighted technology as part of risk factors for suicidal behaviour triggered from excess involvement in social media and involvement technological platforms. The involvement has been depicted as a risk for counselling clients inclined towards suicidal behaviours. Thirdly, technology, in contrast, is indicated to be part of protective factors for suicide behaviours, which the sources of crisis support delivery via online platforms. Technological usage can be perceived as platform of continuous support and its services rendered required strategies and skillsets from counsellors to increase in job competencies in delivering services.

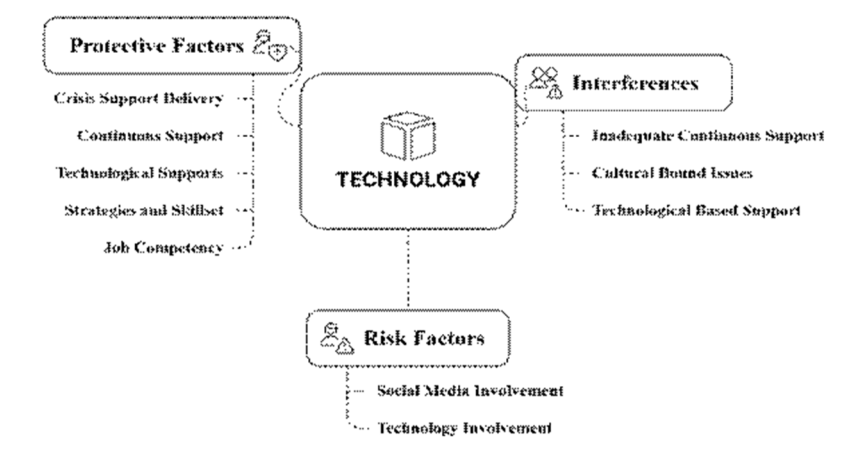


Figure 1.: Technology as suicide risk and protective factors

CONCLUSION

Interferences, suicide factors and suicide protective factors have shed light on the importance of having technology related to the competency of counsellors in addressing clients with suicidal behaviours. Thorough exploration of technology in the counselling field and the context of suicidal behaviours implies that counsellors are required to make themselves ready for the involvement of technology in psychological and mental health cases, irrespective of settings. The evolving of technology is essential to complement counselling supports. Keeping up with advanced interventions embedded with technology will be a challenge to counsellors to sustain the effectiveness of counselling intervention and clients' wellness. In conclusion, this qualitative research offered another insight into technology and counselling practices in addressing suicidal behaviour concerns. The findings are believed to inform counselling practitioners on the critical position of technology, and counselling intervention should be made available to address the issues. It also emphasised the necessity of establishing adaptive and

humanised policy standards, along with an enhanced delivery of holistic mental health services in Malaysia. For future research, findings suggested to explore on the effectiveness or relevancy of technology in suicide prevention and intervention; specified interventions with technology, and artificial intelligence usage are suggested to suit multicultural settings and available resources in Malaysia. It is to suit community-based interventions and update mental health policies enhancement and improvement.

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