



COUNSELING TRAINEES' VIEWS TOWARDS USAGE OF ONLINE COUNSELING IN PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

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Abstract:

Web-based counseling services may become important for mental health professionals and those who are working in this field. For this reason, the purpose of the study is to examine the views of the counselors-in training regarding the use of online counseling. The study group was comprised of 60 students attending to Guidance and Counseling undergraduate programme in 2017-2018 academic year in the state university in the west of Turkey. In the research, the mind maps were the main data collection method and the data were analyzed through qualitative data analysis. Results showed that the views of the students' were organized as themes were identified including "positive aspects of online counseling", "negative aspects of online counseling", "security", "being an online counselor" and "ethics and standards". Based on the results of the study, it was found out that counseling trainees had positive opinions towards the use of online counseling, but they had some hesitations and concerns about the practice.

Keywords: online counseling, mind maps, prospective counselor

1. Introduction

Alongside technology develops rapidly, online services become an indispensable part of our lives. It is possible to say education, business and even relationships are at many people's fingertips. Practically reaching the information and communication via internet on phones, tablets or computers in seconds is impossible to think otherwise for the old or the young. In such an environment, counseling is one of the fields that is affected by computer technology. Online counseling is one of the psychological services based on information technology and internet that is increasing the reaching out the counselors by applying various online support types and including important services

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for help and support (Hooley et al. 2015). Although it seems as a new concept, it dates back to old times. Freud and Morita corresponded with their patients about symptoms and therapy (Witt et al. 2016); telephones were used in crisis lines at 50's (Centore & Milacci, 2008); counseling model was used via video set 60's (Rohland, 2001); the first online therapy service, the first online website that offered counseling help through instant messages was founded at 90's; the services became rapidly common in universities in 2000's (Zeren & Bulut, 2018).

Online counseling is defined as presenting counseling services on cyber field that counselor and client does not exist at the same place physically and they communicate using computer based technologies (Richards & Viganó, 2012). Cyber psychology, e-therapy, e-counseling or cyber-therapy are the terms that are used to define presenting therapeutic interventions on cyber field (Richards & Viganó, 2013). Besides, online counseling is referred to by different terms, such as web counseling, web-based psychotherapy, tele-counseling, distance counseling, avatar-based counseling in the literature (Zeren & Bulut, 2018; Witt et al. 2016). Also, different usages of online counseling are present such as asynchronous e-mail, synchronized e-mail, instant messaging, written messaging and video conference (Barak et al. 2009). There are many evidences about the effectiveness of online counseling (Kraus et al. 2010). Comparing conversations on telephone support, it is seen that chat support is more qualitative and have similar positive effects (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009; King et al. 2006). Chat support is regarded as the most beneficial one due to the similarity to offline (face-to-face, telephone) counseling (Barak and Bloch, 2006). Primarily, chat conversations (for instance, offline counseling sessions) which expose important personal information and which are relieving are considered as more beneficial. A number of studies were conducted to examine the effectiveness of online help. It is found that chat and e-mail support are effective on therapy of such problems as loneliness (Hopps et al. 2003), depression (Richards & Richardson, 2012), panic disorder (Carlbring et al. 2007), sleeplessness (Strom et al. 2004) and cigarette cessation (Stretcher et al. 2005). Mohr et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 12 studies examining telephone-based therapy of depression and they found out that the symptoms decreased significantly related to face-to-face counseling, and Stead et al. (2013) found out that telephone support helped cigarette smokers to stop. Kessler et al. (2009) stated that recommendations based on text helped to decrease depression rates; Wagner et al. (2014) ascertained that positive results on online therapy of depression took longer time than face-to-face therapy. The meta-analysis study related to web-based interventions conducted by Barak et al. (2009) was stated that online counseling is as effective as face-to-face counseling. According to the results of studies which examine the views of counselors and counseling trainees about online counseling, despite their concerns, counselors have positive attitudes and think that online counseling should be applied (Bastemur & Bastemur, 2015; Tanrikulu, 2009; Zeren, 2014). The results of their studies examining the opinions of parents, students and counselors on conducting counseling and guidance over the internet at high schools. Savaş and Hamamcı (2010) stated that while parents and students had positive opinions, the counselors had negative thoughts

on it. The results of the study, in which Zeren (2017) examined the opinions of counseling trainees who provide online counseling on therapeutic cooperation, suggested that online counseling can be used as an alternative to traditional face-to-face counseling. In their research on the attitudes of counselors towards online counseling evaluated from the perspective of the counselors. Özer et al. (2016) pointed out that counselors do not have neither positive nor negative tendency towards online counseling. In Zeren's study (2015) regarding the satisfaction of clients receiving online counseling, the results showed that clients are contented this process. All the results of studies present that more research should be done on this subject in order for the online counseling to be included in the training programs, to be developed and become widespread through practices. Indeed, Barak, Klein and Proudfoot (2009) highlighted that there is a need for more research and improvement in this field. Because of this reason, the aim of the study is to examine the opinions of counselors in training about the use of online counseling in psychological services. It is thought that this study will contribute to the practice and execution of online counseling.

2. Method

2.1 Research Model

In this research, in order to examine the views of counselor in training who have been studying at Guidance and Counseling Department about the usage of online counseling in psychological services, content analysis was used from qualitative research design.

2.2 Study Group

The study group was comprised of 60 students attending to Guidance and Counseling Department undergraduate program in 2017-2018 academic years in a public university in the west of Turkey. "Purposeful sampling" was used because of to be emphasized the importance of it for exploring and explaining the phenomenon and events (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006).

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, mind maps were used as data collection tool. Before the study, the counselors in training were informed in the previous lessons about what the mind map was and how it could be prepared. Then, after a short reminder before the application, they were asked to draw their mind maps about "the usage of online counseling in psychological services" on the papers. After the application, the data obtained via mind maps was analyzed through content analysis. In this phase, coding the data, finding themes and according to the created codes and themes the interpretation of findings was completed (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). The codes were determined in consensus by two different experts and their frequencies were determined of which themes they could be gathered. 5 themes were determined in this study as "Advantages of online counseling", "Disadvantages of online counseling", "Security", "Being an online counselor" and "Ethics and standards".

3. Findings

Table 1 provides the distribution of themes and codes obtained from mind maps analysis regarding the use of online counseling in psychological services of counselor in training.

Table 1: Views of counseling trainees related to the usage of "Online Counseling"

Theme: Advantages of Online Counseling	f	Theme: Disadvantages of Online Counseling	f
Quick access	26	Negativity in the perspective of counselor-counselee relationship	40
Comfort / Ease	17	*Communication problems/ Weak relationship	16
Time saving	14	*Difficulty of observing the actual reactions (body language) of counselee	6
Technological	14	*The counselee hiding his/her identity or mislead by using fake identity	4
Help	8	*Difficulty of understanding the feelings	4
Prevalence	8	*Difficulty of controlling the counselee	3
Economic	5	*Not able to identify the problem of counselee	2
Modern	3	* Confidence in given information	2
Not creating a feeling of refraining from other people's reactions	2	*The counselor not knowing how to approach	2
		*Inappropriate environment	1
		Not an in-person, face-to-face session	5
		Technology-related problems (video- sound quality, running out of battery, connection problems)	3
		Time consuming	3
		Internet and social media addiction	2
Theme: Security	f	Theme: Being an online counselor	f
In what extent it is safe	12	Opportunity of reaching out many people	9
Secure due to recording data electronically	5	Financial contribution/ Job opportunity	4
Less secure due to being online	3	Freedom of environment (no office opening requirement)	2
Secure	1	Follow up frequency and facility	2
The risk of getting the cyber-attack and be stolen the personal identifying information for using them maliciously	1	Freedom of time	2
		The possibility of encountering more different problems	1
Theme: Ethics and Standards	f		
Appointment	22	The conditions of being an online counselor	6
Session fee	13	Privacy	6
The subjects of counseling services to be provided	12	Selection of counselor by counselee	5
		What kind of methods and techniques do an online counselor use	5
The problem level of the case	10	Is it individual or in group	5
Frequency (Can it be benefitted at any time?)	10	Professionals who will give the services	2

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The population can be benefiting from online counseling service	9	Competing with difficulties Counseling environment	3 1
Is it written or visual	8	Voluntariness	1
Duration of the session	7	Legal regulations	1
Who is the online counselor (Job description)	6		

When Table 1 was examined, it was seen that counseling trainees listed the positive and negative aspects of online counseling. They provided the positive characteristics of online counseling as quick access (n = 26), comfort/ ease (n = 17), time-saving (n = 14), technological (n = 14), help (n = 8), prevalence (n = 8), economic (n = 5), modern (n = 3) and it is not creating a feeling of refraining from other people's reactions (n = 2). In addition to its positive characteristics, negativities (n = 40) were also mentioned in terms of the counselor-client relationship. These were communication problems/weak relationship (n = 16), difficulty in observing the actual reactions (body language) of client (n = 6), the client hiding his/her identity or misleading counselor by using fake identity (n = 4), difficulty in understanding feelings (n = 4), difficulty in controlling the client (n = 3), inability to identify the problem of client (n = 2), confidence in the given information (n = 2), the counselor not knowing how to approach (n = 2), and inappropriate environment (n = 1). Besides, these negative characteristics were also mentioned as not being an in person, face-to-face session (n = 5), technology-related problems (video-sound quality, running out of battery, connection problems) (n = 3), time consuming (n = 3), internet and social media addiction (n = 2). An example of a mind map for the positive and negative aspects of online counseling is given below.

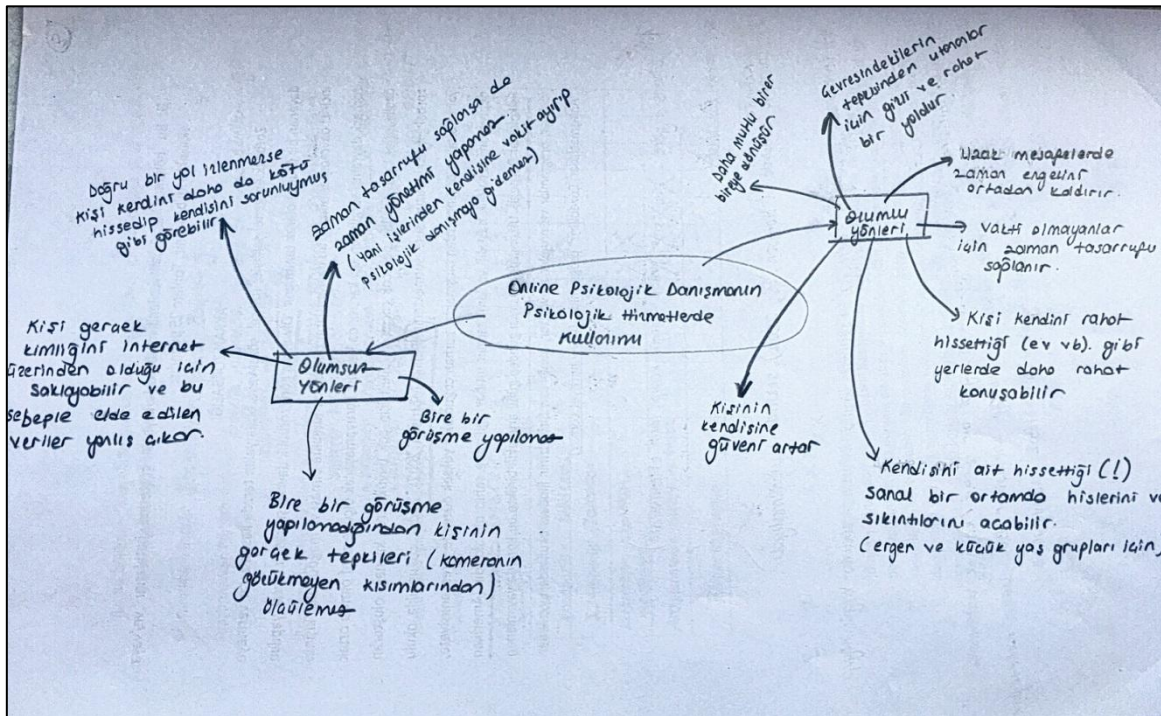


Figure 1: Mind Map for the Positive and Negative Aspects of Online Counseling (in Turkish)

When Table 1 was examined, it was seen that counseling trainees listed their opinions about the security of online counseling. They remarked the expressions about the security of online counseling as in what extent online counseling is safe (control of the counselor-client accounts, site security, etc.) (n = 12), secure due to recording of data electronically (n = 5), less secure of being online (n = 3), secure (n = 1) and the risk of getting the cyber-attack and be stolen the personal identifying information for using them maliciously (n = 1). An example of a mind map for the security of online counseling is given below.

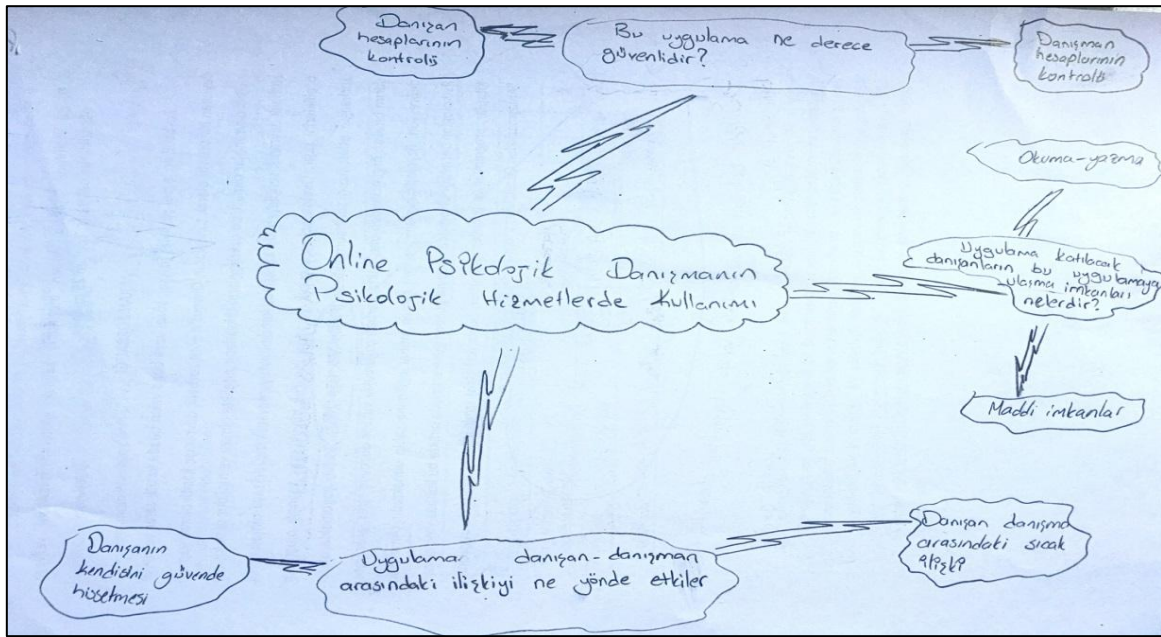


Figure 2: Mind Map for the Security of Online Counseling (in Turkish)

When Table 2 was examined, it was seen that counseling trainees listed the elements related to being an online counselor. They mentioned the opportunity to reaching out many people (n = 9), financial contribution / job opportunity (n = 4), freedom of environment (no office opening requirement) (n = 2), follow-up frequency and facility (n = 2), freedom of time (n = 2) and the possibility of encountering more different problems (n = 1). An example of a mind map for being an online counselor is given below.

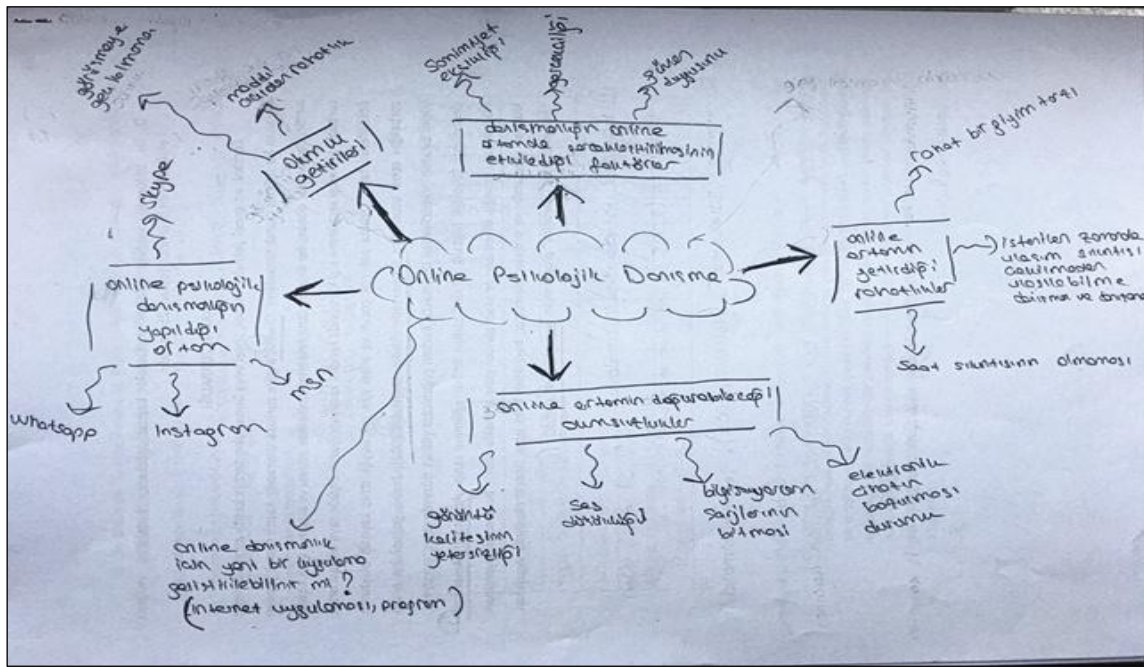
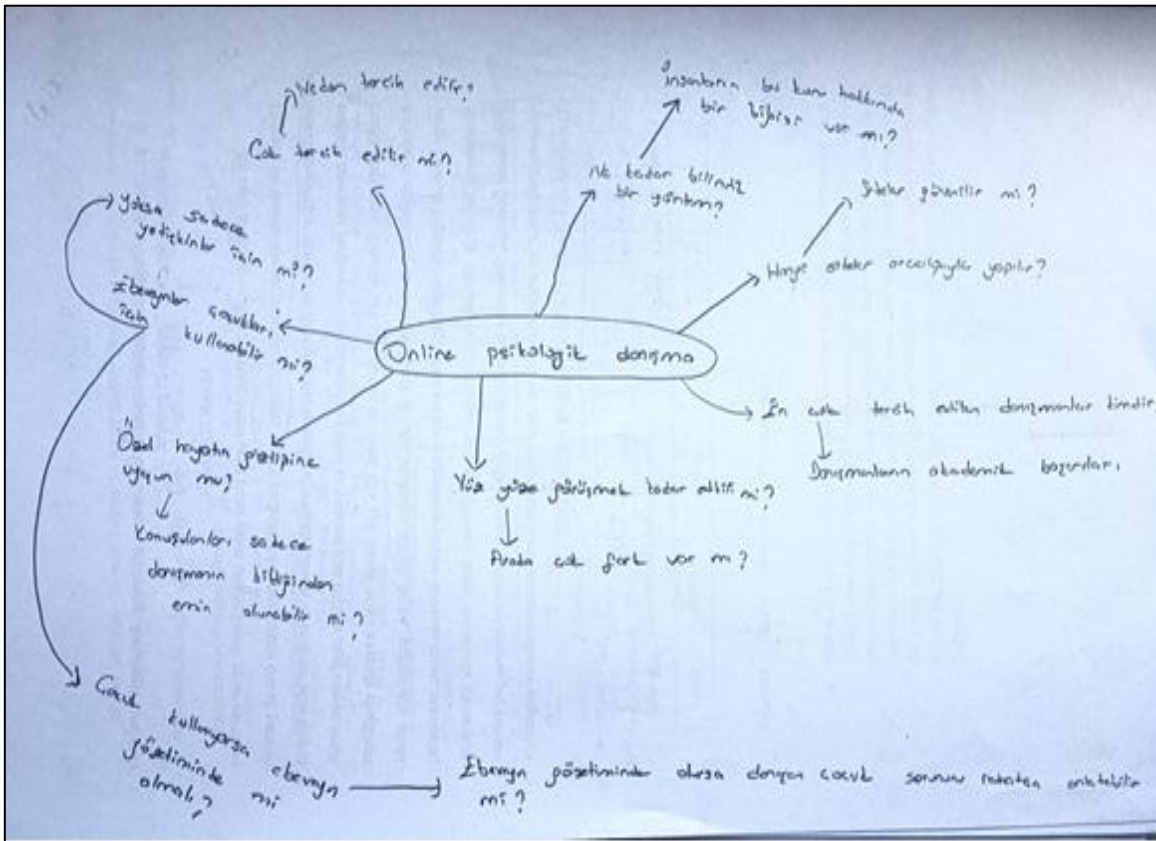
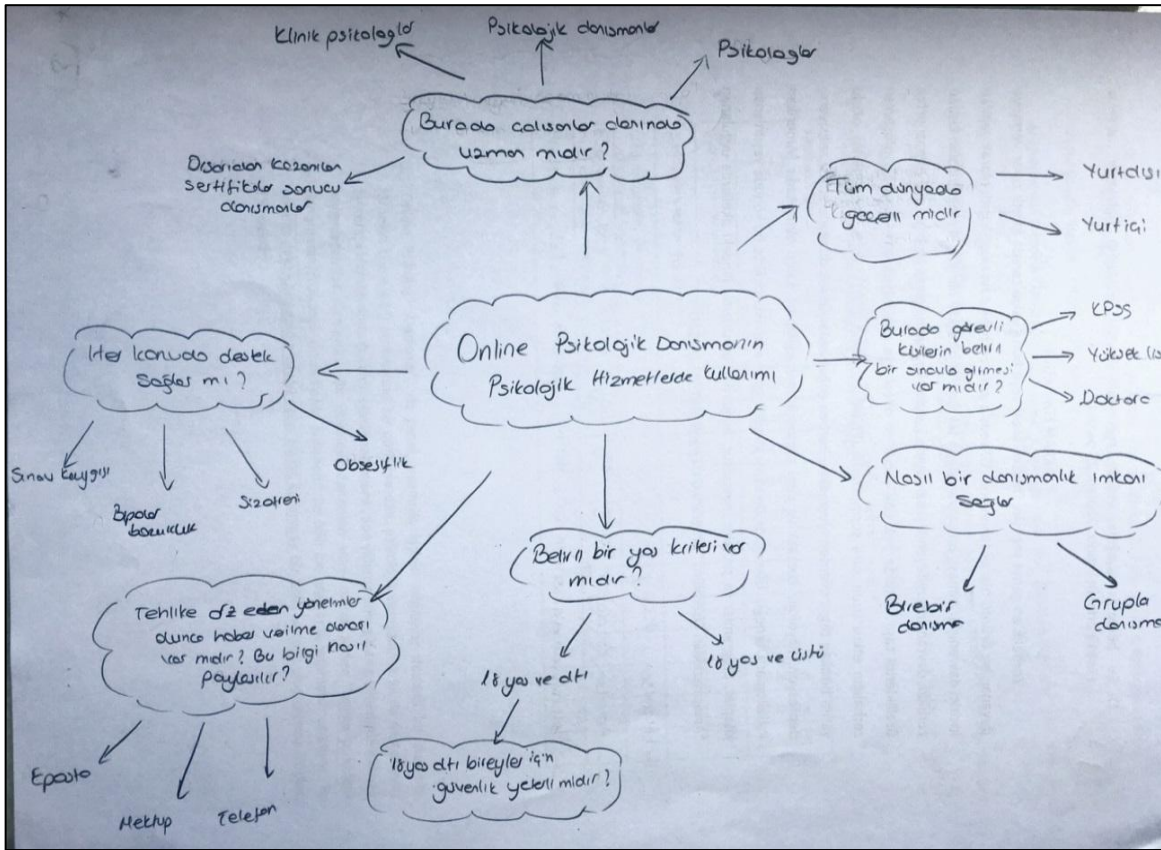


Figure 3: Mind Map for Being an Online Counselor

When Table 3 was examined, it was seen that counseling trainees listed the elements related to ethics and standards. They mentioned the expressions such as appointment (n = 22), the session fee (n = 13), the subjects of counseling services to be provided (n = 12), the problem level of the case (n = 10), the frequency (can the client benefit at any time?) (n = 10), the population can be benefiting from online counseling (n = 9), is it written or visual (n = 8), duration of the session (n = 7), who is the online counselor (job description) (n = 6), the conditions of being and online counselor (n = 6), privacy (n = 6), the selection of counselor by the counselee (n = 5), what kind of methods and techniques do an online counselor use (n = 5), is it individual or group (n = 5), professionals who will give the services (psychologist, psychiatric, counselor) (n = 2), competing with difficulties (n = 3), counseling environment (n = 1), voluntariness (n = 1) and legal regulations (n = 1). An example of a mind map for ethics and standards is given below.



Figures 4: Mind Map for Ethics and Standards of Online Counseling

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, the views of counselors in training about the use of online counseling in psychological services were examined through mind maps. The first theme of the study was determined as the positive and negative aspects of online counseling. It was seen that students expressed both positive and negative opinions about online counseling which was a quite new concept for them. Although online counseling service is perceived as positive due to its characteristics such as quick access, comfort/ease, time-saving, technological, help, prevalence, economic, modern and not creating a feeling of refraining from other people's reactions; it is perceived as negative due to its characteristics such as the counselor-client relationship, not being an in-person, face-to-face, technology-related problems, time consuming, internet and social media addiction and inappropriate environment. This result can be interpreted as counseling trainees can find online counseling services attractive, on the other hand they have concerns about how and in what way the professional service can be given on the screen and on the internet. When examining the studies in this subject, it was seen that, similarly, positive and negative aspects of online counseling were handled together. In the studies conducted by Haberstroh et al. (2007), Kotsopoulou et al. (2015) and Tanrikulu (2009), the differences of online counseling from face-to-face counseling were ranged under the titles as technological obstacles, web-based risks, inexistence of a personal presence that limits the therapeutic relationship, not having non-verbal clues that limits the diagnosis of problem on the client side, being limited with online counseling techniques and sessions and its speed. In one hand, cost reducing, providing convenience and improved record keeping make online counseling attractive (Rochlen, Beretvas & Zack, 2004); on the other hand, lack of therapeutic control, visual clues and concerns about failure to intervene in a crisis make many professional counselors not to adopt online counseling as an acceptance method (Ballesteros & Hilliard, 2016). Conversely, online counseling can help alleviate some of the barriers of getting face-to-face counseling such as time problems, shyness, self-disclosure and financial concerns (Givens & Tjia 2002; Joyce 2012; Mowbray et al. 2006; Yorgason et al. 2008).

In a study conducted on university students, it was concluded that individuals with higher levels of self-stigmatization exhibited more positive attitudes towards online counseling (Ballesteros & Hilliard, 2016; Joyce 2012). Similarly, McKenna and Bargh (2000) found in their research that clients who had anxiety and social isolation tended to establish deep relationships in online counseling according to face-to-face counseling (Bathje et al. 2014). According to Andersson (2010), the most positive aspect of online counseling was to increase access to mental health services. Because counselors thought that scales or surveys could be applied online, their perspectives on the use of technology in their profession were also positive. On the other hand, the counselors stated the negative aspects as the effectiveness of therapy was reduced and there was a risk of confidentiality violations because of not being in the same environment by being online. The reason for these negative opinions can be explained by the lack of ethical standards, inadequate techniques and already having negative

thoughts about the effectiveness of online counseling (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998). Bozkurt (2013) emphasized that there is a need to overcome the hesitations experienced by the experts who want to perform practices and those who want to get service in this environment in order to spread the web-based remote psychological services that emerged as a new trend in the changing world.

The second theme of the research was security. Counseling trainees often emphasized in what extent the system is safe. The question of “in what extent online counseling is safe” can be explained by the fact that it is a web-based service. Each web-based service focuses on the importance of informed consent, particularly on privacy limits, privacy exceptions and threats to security (Behnke, 2008). Leibert, Archer, Munson and York (2006) presented that while the clients enjoyed the privacy of online communication, their satisfaction scores showed that online communication was not as reliable as face-to-face. The risk of cyber-attack is relevant for all of today's technological services, for which it is necessary to use software, to use password to protect the confidentiality of the client, to verify the identity of the counselee through encryption, to provide an alternative means of communication with the counselee when he/she is offline or there is a technical problem as preventive- protective methods.

The third theme of the research was to be an online counselor. Counseling trainees reported that online counseling provided the opportunity to reach many people, financial contribution/job opportunity, freedom of environment, follow-up frequency and facility, freedom of time and the possibility of encountering different problems. Online counseling provides great convenience for time and environment. People can connect to the internet from different places with smartphones and tablets. It means there is no expense for counselors such as renting the office and other related expense, parking and secretary (Zeren, 2018). There is a need for online counselors to have the skills to be able to use internet tools and computers, access to the information via internet, use the computer programs that help to test, diagnosis and selection of profession about the counselee (Sabella, Poynton and Isaacs, 2010: cited in Zeren, 2018).

The fourth theme of the study was the ethics and standards in the online counseling. Counseling trainees often stated the subjects as appointment, session fee, the subjects of counseling services to be provided, the problem level of the case, the frequency of consultation, written or visual, the duration of the session, the selection of client-counselor, is it individual or in group, the professionals who will give the service. On the other hand, counselor in training expressed their concerns by stating who is an online counselor (job description), what kind of methods and techniques do an online counselor use and how they compete with the difficulties. It can be said that the counselor in training need information on qualifications of being an online counselor and its job description. Tanrikulu (2009) found that despite the counselors, who had participated in their research, had concerns about online counseling, none of them were trained in online counseling, yet all of them were willing to learn more about online counseling by taking courses or attending workshops and seminars. Many mental health workers are already applying online counseling and the number of online counselors is expected to increase gradually (Barak & Grohol, 2011; Rochlen, Zack &

Speyer, 2004). With this growth, it is necessary to explain the state legal regulations and ethical standards that lead web-based psychotherapy (Barnett, 2011; Barnett & Scheetz, 2003). In APA (2002) Code of Ethics 4.02(c) article (Discussing the Limits of Confidentiality) states that *“Psychologists who offer services, products, or information via electronic transmission inform clients/patients of the risks to privacy and limits of confidentiality”*. Since the beginning of e-therapy, the counselor should provide information to the counselee on the confidentiality and its limits and take any possible precautions when confidentiality is under the certain risks. Among the first standards established by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) for online counseling practices, counselors provide services only through secure websites and encrypted e-mails to ensure confidentiality on the internet (Shaw and Shaw, 2006; Ross, 2011). The American Psychological Counseling Association (ACA) handles online counseling services in the ethical codes booklet. Zeren and Bulut (2018) examined the subjects as counselor-client relationship, confidentiality and privacy, professional responsibility, relationships with other professionals, measurement and assessment, research and publishing, technology usage in online counseling, social media and the solution of ethical dilemmas in the light of principles set by the American Psychological Counseling Association (ACA), as well as collecting the principles of organizations such as the Association for Counseling and Therapy Online (ACTO), International Society for Mental Health Online (ISHMO) and NBCC. In conclusion, how and by whom the online counseling will be provided should be presented within the framework of standards and ethical principles. Besides, these services should be audited by the authorized institutions to ensure that they are provided in compliance with the standards and ethical principles, and legal sanctions should be put into effect if there is any non-compliance.

Based on the results of the study, it was found out that counseling trainees had positive opinions towards the use of online counseling, but they had some hesitations and concerns about the practice. Considering the place and importance of technology in our lives today, it is possible to say that online counseling service is necessary and it can be a good alternative to face-to-face consultation. For this reason, it is considered that online counseling should take place in the curriculum as a course in counseling training and the knowledge and skills of online counseling would be transferred by providing in-service trainings or courses to the professionals working in this field.

Conducting this research with counseling trainees may be considered as a limitation. Including online counseling in the courses as principles and techniques of counseling and application of individual counseling and guidance education, further research may be conducted on the experiences of counseling trainees about online counseling. Comparative experimental studies can be done in cooperation with experienced institutions which provide special counseling services.

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