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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Alchemists on Screen: Crafting Creative Practices in Online Counseling

Funda Barutçu YILDIRIM[a] Metin PULAT[a] Gizem EKİCİ[b]

[a] Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Türkiye.
[b] Trakya University, Edirne, Türkiye.

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ABSTRACT

Online counseling (OC), which had existed for years but was not widely trusted by mental health professionals and clients, gained widespread acceptance during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the necessity of remote services. Now, it has become indispensable due to its advantages despite its limitations. OC has yet to be studied much and is a phenomenon that can be investigated from different perspectives. This phenomenological study aimed to examine the dynamics of creativity and OC comprehensively. The sample, recruited by purposive sampling, included five female and four male counselors highly experienced in face-to-face and OC. Data were collected with semi-structured interviews recorded with the permission of the participants. After the verbatim transcription, data were analyzed using content analysis. According to the results, emerging themes included fostering creativity, barriers to creativity, advantages of OC, disadvantages of OC, recommendations, and potential creative interventions. These themes indicate that counselors face both challenges and chances to be creative in OC, where the technological environment can restrict but also inspire innovative practices. Findings incorporating the fundamental principles of creativity with the changing dynamics of OC were discussed. This research serves as a valuable resource for mental health professionals seeking to improve their strategies for promoting creativity and optimizing the efficacy of online therapeutic practices.

Introduction

A Shift from Face-To-Face Counseling to OC: Conveniences, Drawbacks, and the Need for Adapting to the Change

Online counseling (OC) refers to the provision of treatment in a virtual setting, where a qualified professional counselor supports and guides the client (Richards & Vigano, 2013). The foundations of OC were laid long before the pandemic, with numerous studies highlighting its accessibility, convenience, flexibility (Chester & Glass, 2006; Mallen & Vogel, 2005; Barutçu Yıldırım et al., 2022), time and cost efficiency (Centore & Milacci, 2008; Koçyiğit-Özyiğit & Erkan-Atik, 2021; Barutçu Yıldırım et al., 2022; Zeren, 2015), and comfort (Alleman, 2002; Koçyiğit-Özyiğit & Erkan-Atik, 2021). It does, however, have certain drawbacks, including maintaining confidentiality and privacy (Chester & Glass, 2006), cybersecurity concerns (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2021), receiving fewer nonverbal cues (Tanrıkulu, 2009), and difficulties identifying numerous dangers during the therapeutic process (Mallen et al., 2011).

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR Funda Barutçu YILDIRIM, barutcu@metu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0003-3630-1019, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Türkiye.

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Considering missing points of OC, such as physical distance from the client, difficulties in observing clients' nonverbal messages, or possible disruptions due to technical issues, establishing a therapeutic relationship in OC also becomes a concern for some counselors (Knott et al., 2020). Previous study shows that counselor candidates have difficulties with establishing bonds (Zeren, 2017). The dropout rate in OC was found to be higher compared to face-to-face counseling (Buyruk-Genç et al., 2019). In their study, Mallen et al. (2011) found that counseling students use the same helping skills in OC more frequently than in face-to-face sessions to compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues in establishing therapeutic relationships. However, OC is beyond the counselors' use of their fundamental skills more frequently. The changing counseling format requires counselors to adapt their skills to the evolving changes accordingly (Khan et al., 2022). In Smith and Gillon's (2021) qualitative study, counselors conveyed that being flexible and adapting their interventions to the virtual environment through technology positively impacted the therapeutic process. Even though counselors experienced some difficulties due to technological issues, they declared that they overcame these challenges by modifying their existing skills with technology and developing new ones.

Studies conducted in Türkiye indicate that many counselors experience significant challenges, such as a lack of competence regarding technology use, platform security, and understanding clients' emotions (Korkmaz & Şen, 2018; Tanrıkulu, 2009). These findings suggest that technical and relational aspects of OC may pose greater difficulties without sufficient training and support. Importantly, such challenges also underscore the need for creative approaches that can help compensate for the loss of nonverbal cues, support emotional expression, and strengthen therapeutic relationships in online settings in which this study aims to explore further.

Creativity as a Valuable Recipe for Change: Its Importance in Both Face-To-Face and OC

One of the paths for counselors to provide effective service in OC might be using creativity. Creativity, defined by Walia (2019) as an attempt to produce something new with the realization of a disequilibrium, has been considered an essential ingredient of counseling for a long time (Gladding, 2011; Lawrence et al., 2015). According to Gladding's (2008; 2011) perspective, despite the importance of applying proven theories and techniques, the enhancement of clients' ability to develop new perspectives and adaptive behaviors highly depends on thinking outside the box with the hunch of being creative. The lack of creative approaches during counseling led clients to fall into maladaptive patterns of dealing with their problems and, as a result, kept them from developing (Gladding, 2011). From this point of view, counseling resembles a collaborative process of being creative to formulate new perspectives and adaptive behaviors to support clients' equilibrium (Gutterman & Aafjes-Van-Doorn, 2022).

The spontaneous, playful, and flexible form of creative interventions that goes beyond the traditional approaches in counseling offers clients an emotionally corrective experience (Carson & Becker, 2004) and an opportunity to develop new perspectives by helping them to sense their counseling experience as lively as possible (Vermeire & Van den Berge, 2021). These creative interventions also help clients to experience hard-to-access emotions by stepping outside their rational minds to enhance empathic understanding and a sense of togetherness (Rouse et al., 2015), expand connection and closeness between the counselor and the client (Duffey et al., 2009). The shortcomings of OC, such as a lack of physical presence, difficulties in observing nonverbal cues, and managing risky and emotionally deep situations, make creative interventions even greater necessity in OC to establish emotional connectedness with clients (Smith & Gillon, 2021).

Ingredients of Creativity in OC: Intervention, Personal Aspects, Obstacles, and Training

Within the Componential Theory of Creativity, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study, Amabile (2011) characterizes the creative process as influenced by both individual factors and the surrounding environment. According to this model, the setting in which individuals operate can foster or hinder their creative abilities. While environmental conditions play a significant role in encouraging creativity, the model also emphasizes the importance of individuals' technical knowledge, personal traits, and motivation as crucial contributors to their creative output (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012). Additionally, apart from environmental influences, specific characteristics exhibited by counselors, such as flexibility, openness to new experiences, and a drive to learn, further stimulate their inclination toward creativity (Gutterman & Aafjes-Van-Doorn, 2022; McGhee et al., 2019).

Considering the increased use of technology, its integration into counseling sessions may become a creative and meaningful way of connecting with clients. To exemplify, Koltz and Tarabochia (2014) suggest that using cell phones, social networking sites, and MP3 players as creative therapeutic tools with reflective practices offers counselors fresh ways of understanding their clients' subjective world. Despite its drawbacks, OC offers far more opportunities for counselors to engage in creative interventions through technology than face-to-face counseling. For instance, Bolton et al. (2021) provided potential creative applications of technology in OC with children, such as integrating video games into sessions and creating virtual offices filled with various materials. Vermeire and Van den Berge (2021) declared that an opportunity to enter clients' environments via screen provides some potential ways of applying interventions nourished by clients' belongings in their environment. In their review, Ong et al. (2022) discussed how pairing OC and virtual reality might increase healthcare providers' treatment techniques and contribute to better support for clients by indicating possible barriers to this partnership. Although different technological applications and formats can help practitioners, the usage of creativity might be beyond the technological and situational opportunities.

In addition to the technological and environmental facilitators, being creative is also nourished by personal factors. For instance, reviewing previous findings, Gutterman and Aafjes-Van-Doorn (2022) found that openness to experience, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to risk-taking, cognitive flexibility, and emotional awareness are common characteristics of creative people. In a qualitative study conducted among 142 marriage and family therapists, participants mentioned a sense of humor, spontaneity, and self-confidence as essential characteristics of creative therapists (Carson et al., 2003). Creative counselors are also strongly motivated to expand their knowledge by learning new things and continuously developing themselves (McGhee et al., 2019). Counselors' creativity in their professional work is also affected by the activities they engage in their personal lives. According to Özcan and Ümmet's (2023) qualitative study, counselors perceive art, literature, and nature as contributing interests to their creative work in sessions.

Even though creativity is viewed as an integral component of counseling that should be encouraged, some barriers limit counselors from engaging in creative interventions. Limited time during and outside the sessions, perceived client resistance, excessive paperwork, lack of energy, and lack of appropriate space and materials (Carson et al., 2003), being a beginning counselor, and desire to achieve quick results (Özcan & Ümmet, 2023) are potential barriers that keep counselors from being creative. However, a series of high-quality training that prepares counselors adequately for OC practices may help them overcome both internal and external barriers to creativity.

A counselor who is competent in face-to-face counseling may not automatically possess the necessary qualifications or skills for effective OC (Zack, 2008). Evidence-based research on effectively incorporating technology use into counselor education and training remains limited (Woo et al.,2020). To deliver effective services, counselors expected to have a range of technological competencies. These competencies are clearly defined in the ethical guidelines published by the Turkish Psychological Counseling Association (2021). According to these guidelines, counselors should be able to effectively use online applications, programs, and communication software, possess knowledge about digital tools such as e-mail, video conferencing and recording devices, use original and up-to-date antivirus software, and consider clients' access to technology. Moreover, counselors should also be aware of the emerging developments in information and communication technologies, have knowledge of data safety, be aware of the limitations of the social platforms and must comply with professional account usage in social media platforms (Turkish Psychological Counseling Association, 2021).

Although the shift from face-to-face to OC is a significant change and creates different needs, current counselor education is still based on the skills and techniques developed for traditional face-to-face counseling; only a few research discussed integrating skills, techniques, and approaches to virtual environments (e.g., Khan et al., 2022). The situation of creativity in counselor training is similar. The scarcity of training programs for equipping counselor trainees with creative thinking and problem-solving abilities shows that counselor education does not prioritize creativity (Hecker & Kottler, 2002; Carson & Becker, 2004; Lawrence et al., 2015; McGhee et al., 2019).

Since the counseling field continually and inevitably evolves, determining counselors' experiences in times of significant changes could contribute to the development of the counseling field. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to examine counselors' experiences regarding using creativity in OC by attempting to answer the following questions: (1) What creative practices are used by the counselors in OC? (2) How have counselors adapted their current practices to the online environment? (3) How do OC's advantages and disadvantages contribute to counselors' creativity in OC?

Method

Design

To investigate creativity, it is essential to have a qualitative understanding of the process, meaning, and experience involved in producing (Glaveanu et al., 2020). For this reason, methods from the context of qualitative research have been incorporated; in particular, phenomenological research design has been implemented in the current study. The research examined the perspectives and experiences of psychological counselors about the utilization of technology, particularly applications, and the inclusion of creative implementations in OC.

Participants

The sample, selected by purposive sampling method, comprised nine counselors (five women, four men), which aligns with the recommended guideline in phenomenological research that suggests a sample size of no more than ten participants (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). The psychological counselors had a mean age of 33 years, with ages ranging from 27 to 51 years. The participants exhibit many different kinds of experiences with both online and face-to-face counseling. Specifically, the counselor with the highest level of experience possessed 16 years of counseling experience, while the counselor with the lowest level of experience had accumulated four years of counseling experience. Furthermore, it is worth noting that each counselor possessed varying levels of experience conducting online sessions, ranging from a minimum of 250 to 1000 sessions. They have employed several treatment approaches, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), the Rogerian Approach, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Art Therapy, and Couple and Family Therapy. Detailed descriptives about participants were given in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participants	Gender	Therapeutic Approach	Number of Online Sessions	Counseling Experience	Education Level	Age
PC1	Male	EMDR	500-600	3.5 years	Bachelor	31
PC2	Female	Couple and Family Counseling	400	4 years	Master	30
PC3	Male	Individual Counseling and Systemic Family Therapy	300-350	4 years	Bachelor	31
PC4	Female	EMDR	1000	7 years	PhD	40
PC5	Male	ACT	150-200	1.5 years	PhD	51
PC6	Female	CBT, EMDR	900-1000	25 years	Bachelor	47
PC7	Female	CBT	200-250	3 years	Bachelor	27
PC8	Male	Rogerian	900-1000	4 years	Master	31
PC9	Female	EMDR, CBT, Art Therapy, ACT	250-300	4 years	Master	30

Data Collection Tools

Before recruiting participants, researchers developed a set of semi-structured interview questions in accordance with the existing literature on OC and the utilization of creative intervention in OC. Following the development of the semi-structured interview form, expert opinions were obtained from two professionals who hold a Ph.D. in the field of counseling and have extensive experience in both face-to-face and OC practices. Both experts stated that the interview questions were aligned with the research questions. One of the experts

suggested minor revisions regarding sentence structure. Based on this feedback, two of the interview questions were revised accordingly. The final interview form consisted of two sections: demographics of the participants and questions related to OC, including its advantages, disadvantages, creativity, and technological integration. The first section of the interview form included five questions, and the second part consisted of eight questions with additional probes.

The first section gathered basic information regarding participants' background, including gender, year of birth, education level, years of professional experience, number of sessions, and duration of practice for both face-to-face and OC. The second section involves experiences with creativity in OC to elicit in-depth narratives about participants' subjective experiences of creativity within the OC process. Topics included the perceived impact of OC on participants' creativity, examples of creative practices that involved the integration of technology in online sessions, reflections on potential applications of technology for enhancing creativity in counseling, experiences with the digital platforms used during online sessions, and their effects on the ability to express creativity.

Participants were also asked about therapeutic approaches, the techniques they utilized, and their views on their compatibility with integrating technology and creativity in online settings. After receiving their views and experiences on this, participants were asked about the adaptation of specific interventions, such as the empty chair technique, relaxation exercises, and family constellations, using digital features like screen sharing, drawing interfaces, or photo/video integration. These structured prompts were given as word pairs (e.g., empty chair-photo, muscle relaxation-video, family constellation- drag and drop interface). While these prompts offered a degree of structure, participants were encouraged to share any additional creative applications that came to mind.

Procedure

The researchers obtained ethical approval from Middle East Technical University Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 275-ODTÜİAEK-2022; Date: 20.05.2022). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, specifically through the snowball sampling technique. Informed consent was obtained via an online survey platform (Google Forms). Two researchers individually conducted the interviews through Zoom. Audio recordings of the participants were used for verbatim transcription.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through content analysis of the participants' transcripts. The term "content analysis" refers to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making activity that takes a large amount of qualitative material and attempts to uncover fundamental consistencies and meanings. The patterns or themes uncovered through content analysis are occasionally referred to as essential meanings (Patton, 2002). Two researchers were involved in this process. Researchers read the material several times to understand the lived experiences of the particular case, and they analyzed the cases individually by following the coding procedures for the content analysis. Each case is named "PC" with the case number, such as "PC1." Both researchers used MAXQDA22 to analyze the data.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is essential for establishing credibility and validity, and researchers use various strategies to achieve it (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria to strengthen the trustworthiness of qualitative research by addressing concerns around validity and reliability: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. O'Connor & Joffe, (2020) states that intercoder reliability enhances the credibility of qualitative studies by ensuring coding consistency, fostering researcher reflexivity, and demonstrating the trustworthiness of findings consistency. To address this, two researchers conducted initial coding independently and then met to discuss discrepancies. The coding agreement rate was calculated based on the percentage of overlapping or conceptually similar codes. Across both code systems, an intercoder agreement rate of 84.8% was achieved, which is considered acceptable in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding differences were discussed and resolved by mutual agreement. This process helped to increase trustworthiness and the consistency of the framework presented in the findings.

For transferability, defined as demonstrating the applicability of findings in other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the inclusion criteria for participants, participant details, and detailed steps of the study are provided in the relevant sections. Dependability was supported by thoroughly documenting each step of the research process to maintain transparency. Finally, confirmability was enhanced through reflective practices, including notetaking on personal reflections and sharing these insights, as well as using memos in the data analysis software collaboratively between the two researchers during the data analysis process.

Results

This section outlines the findings of the study including six main themes: fostering creativity, barriers to creativity, advantages and disadvantages of OC, recommendations for improving OC, and potential creative interventions with their sub-themes and codes.

Fostering Creativity

This theme illustrates various factors that help counselors engage in creative interventions during OC, including technological integration, individual characteristics, clients' environment and belongings, and challenges (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Themes, sub-themes, and codes regarding fostering creativity

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
1. Fostering Creativity	1.1. Technological integration	1.1.1. Screen sharing
		1.1.2. Digital drawing
		1.1.3. Coworking through the use of technology
		1.1.4. Integration of applications
	1.2. Individual characteristics	1.2.1. Motivation for learning
		1.2.2. Openness to change
	1.3. Clients' environment and belongings	1.3.1. The ability to utilize objects in the client's environment
		1.3.2. Observing the client's living environment
	1.4. Challenges	1.4.1. Difficulty in connecting with children and adolescents
		1.4.2. Resistance

Technological Integration

Counselors frequently reported that some features offered by platforms, such as screen-sharing and digital drawing, give rise to their creativity, enabling them to work with clients simultaneously and enhancing the feelings of togetherness via collaborative work. For instance, one counselor revealed, *"I frequently use the whiteboard in the app. When engaging in any collaborative activity with the client, such as an art therapy exercise, we can make drawings on the whiteboard."* (PC9).

According to counselors' experiences, using videos, images, and music during diaphragmatic breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, or systematic desensitization processes are effective and creative solutions that facilitate the transfer of practices conducted in face-to-face sessions to OC. One counselor mentioned, *"If the client does not understand the diaphragmatic breathing exercise I introduce, I can quickly open an image or video from Google to show the client"* (PC8).

In addition, most counselors viewed integrating other applications into OC as a booster for their creativity. Some examples were Notion, Google Forms, Bilateral Stimulation, Genpro, and Canva.

I use a website called bilateral stimulation. For EMDR practices, a ball and an auditory stimulus are on the screen, moving back and forth (PC1).

We used Canva to initiate collaborative work with my client, engaging in an expressive exercise concurrently fostering cooperative participation (PC4).

Individual Characteristics

Some counselors perceived their characteristics, such as openness to new experiences, flexibility in unusual conditions, and learning motivation, as nurturing factors for engaging in creative interventions in OC. One counselor declared, *"I was not a technology guru, but I learned technological skills on my own. It was super motivating to me… I also used to be pretty strict with traditional rules, yet OC enabled me to be more flexible and increased my creativity"* (PC8). Additionally, one counselor pointed out the activities she engaged in her personal life: *"Since I'm also involved in arts in my personal life, I can transform any material in my personal life into creative endeavors in OC"* (PC4).

Clients' Environment and Belongings

Several counselors indicated that the increased comfort and availability of resources and belongings in clients' surroundings and the opportunity to observe clients' environments contribute to their creativity. As an illustration of creative intervention in couples therapy fostered by the chance to observe clients' environment, the following was expressed:

I noticed something in the couple's background and asked them to share its story. It was a handmade gift they had created for each other. Asking for its story was a truly effective intervention (PC3).

Challenges

Few counselors pointed out the challenges they have experienced in OC, such as difficulties connecting with children, adolescents, or resistant clients. These issues prompted them to seek alternative and innovative ways. One counselor illustrated, *"When clients resist, I usually guide them towards artistic activities by saying let's draw what you think and explain it to me. This approach tends to encourage them"* (PC4).

Barriers to Creativity

According to counselors, some factors inherent in OC are perceived as barriers to them engaging in creative interventions. Three sub-themes emerged under the theme of barriers to creativity: time, shortcomings in material usage, and nonverbals as illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Themes, sub-themes, and codes regarding barriers to creativity

Themes		Sub-themes		Codes	
2.	Barriers to Creativity	2.1.	Time	2.1.1.	Time-consuming interventions
				2.1.2.	Time constraints in platforms
		2.2.	Shortcomings in Material Usages	2.2.1.	Art materials
				2.2.2.	Lack of instruments
		2.3.	Nonverbals	2.3.1.	Difficulty in observing nonverbals
				2.3.2.	Lack of face-to-face contact

Time

Several counselors complained about the time-consuming nature of conducting interventions in OC. According to their views, time constraints in platforms and the time wasted transitioning between various applications hindered their motivation to be creative. Sample statements are as follows:

We waste time discussing what we will do and displaying it on the screen. (PC2).

When we do a creative activity with the materials in the client's environment, some clients need to go to other rooms to find them, so about three to five minutes are spent during this process (PC9).

Shortcomings in Material Usages

As another barrier that inhibits their creativity, counselors declared the lack of available physical materials, especially for expressive art activities. One counselor stated this issue:

In face-to-face sessions, accessing materials is easy; I keep small jars and papers around my office. The online format, however, limits my creativity. I ask clients whether they have materials, but they might say there is nothing (PC4).

While one counselor mentioned the possibility of using technological materials instead of physical ones, he also emphasized the potential limitation of such usage as follows: *"Expecting the client to express themselves using a computer mouse instead of playdough or drawing, I think sometimes putting quite a bit of pressure on them since this is up to clients' ability"* (PC1).

Nonverbals

Few counselors viewed difficulties observing clients' nonverbal behaviors in OC as a limiting factor for their creativity. A counselor who works with couples stated the following regarding this:

Observing clients' sitting positions and distance is crucial while working with couples. Due to the small screen in online sessions, I cannot observe the physical proximity between couples. So, I cannot make a hypothesis about their relationship. As a result, I find OC challenging to generate creative interventions (PC2).

On the other hand, another counselor expressed that he perceives this challenge as a contributing factor to being creative: *"[…]it's difficult to perceive bodily changes, facial expressions, and posture. Consequently, I had to brainstorm creative techniques that would make the clients physically active"* (PC3).

Advantages of OC

This theme illustrates factors motivating counselors to provide OC. It involves six sub-themes: flexibility in scheduling, accessibility, continuity, comfort, client follow-up, and cost-effectiveness (see Table 4 below).

Table 4. Themes, sub-themes, and codes regarding advantages of OC

Themes	Sub-themes		Codes	
3. Advantages of OC	3.1.	Flexibility in Scheduling	3.1.1.	Time flexibility
			3.1.2.	Scheduling flexibility
	3.2.	Accessibility	3.2.1.	Easy participation
			3.2.2.	Transportation
	3.3.	Continuity	3.3.1.	Session consistency
	3.4.	Comfort	3.4.1.	Home environment
			3.4.2.	Less performance anxiety
			3.5.1.	Working on homework
	3.5.	Client Follow-Up	3.5.2.	Out-of-session contact
	3.6.	Cost-Effectiveness	3.6.1.	Reduction in expenses
			3.6.2.	Eliminating office rent burden

Flexibility in Scheduling

Some counselors declared that arranging session appointments is more comfortable in OC than face-to-face counseling. One of the counselors declared that flexible scheduling increases the chances of meeting with clients. Along these lines, the counselor stated, *"I can have a session at 10 PM. In face-to-face sessions, arranging evening appointments is not feasible, yet OC provides this unifying aspect"* (PC7).

Accessibility

Most of the counselors highlighted that the accessibility of OC is a positive aspect that increases the chances of conducting sessions without being influenced by challenging transportation factors. Several counselors declared they have many clients from different cities thanks to OC. One counselor stated, *"Sometimes transportation becomes challenging for clients. The accessibility of OC allows clients with low motivation to participate"* (PC3).

Continuity

Several counselors indicated that clients exhibit higher motivation and participate more regularly in OC than in face-to-face sessions. Regarding clients' motivation, one counselor stated, *"I haven't needed to call my*

clients in OC asking where they are due to delays; instead, they often call me 5 minutes earlier before the session, wondering where I am" (PC6).

Counselors predominantly perceived the accessibility of OC as the primary factor contributing to their and clients' consistent continuity. Accordingly, the following was expressed: *"If I am going on holiday, I can conduct my sessions online […] I also have clients who need to travel for work or attend school. OC offers us an opportunity to continue sessions"* (PC8).

Comfort

Several counselors declared they feel more comfortable and less anxious during OC sessions since they connect to sessions from their environments. One counselor stated, *"I feel more at ease during OC due to connecting from my place. During face-to-face sessions, it becomes more difficult to manage my anxiety"* (PC3). Another counselor highlighted the convenience of OC due to the absence of physical materials that require oversight, stating:

There are many things to control in face-to-face sessions, such as whether there are tissues, water, or if the office has been properly ventilated. OC frees you from these worries (PC8).

Client Follow-up

Few counselors indicated that OC facilitates monitoring in-session assignments and communicating with clients between sessions. One counselor told how the transition from face-to-face counseling to OC affected their formats of assignments as follows:

There used to be a substantial amount of paperwork during face-to-face sessions; however, after shifting to OC, all documents became digital, allowing us to review assignments collaboratively with the clients (PC8).

Another counselor highlighted the ease of communication with the client between sessions: *"You can maintain constant communication with the client, and they can contact you anytime"* (PC6).

Cost-Effectiveness

Several counselors stated that OC is more economical than face-to-face counseling and leads to a reduction in expenses. One counselor specifically highlighted how high office rents have placed an economic strain on him, highlighting that OC helps to overcome this limitation as follows:

Office rents are excessively high. When 40% of my office income is required, I am left with only a minimal profit, which does not balance with the effort I put in. As a result, I feel my work is not sufficiently compensated, and OC provides an advantage in this regard (PC7).

Disadvantages of OC

This theme highlights factors perceived as challenges by counselors while providing OC. It involves five sub-themes as problems related to therapeutic relationship, difficulty in observing nonverbals, difficulty to intervene, environmental problems, and technical issues as represented in table 5 below.

Table 5. Themes, sub-themes, and codes regarding disadvantages of OC

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
4. Disadvantages of OC	4.1. Problems Related to Therapeutic Relationship	4.1.1. Differences in communication
		4.1.2. Boundary problems
		4.1.3. Role conflict
	4.2. Difficulty in Observing Nonverbals	4.2.1. Observing issues
		4.2.2. Applying somatic practices
	4.3. Difficulty to Intervene	4.3.1. Working with emotions
		4.3.2. Working with trauma
	4.4. Environmental Problems	4.4.1. Disruptions by others
		4.4.2. Privacy issues
	4.5. Technical Issues	4.5.1. Internet connection
		4.5.2. Disruption issues

Problems Related to Therapeutic Relationship

Nearly all counselors declared that establishing a therapeutic relationship is more difficult in OC than face-to-face counseling. Counselors highlighted the virtual atmosphere and lack of physical existence perceived by clients as a factor that decreases the feelings of togetherness and emotional connection. One counselor stated, *"We are only visible through a screen; the client doesn't see me in person"* (PC1). Similarly, another declared, *"The client may feel artificial can feel artificial to the client[...] If there's going to be an emotional moment, as a counselor, you can't convey the sense of "I'm here, I'm by your side."* (PC4).

Several psychological counselors mentioned experiencing boundary issues with certain clients during OC sessions, attributing these challenges to the counselor's direct involvement in all stages of the process. One counselor stated, *"In face-to-face settings, there's usually a secretary in office who takes care of everything, or if you're working in someone else's office, you can benefit from those services. So, everything from managing payments to scheduling sessions is handled by someone else. However, in OC, if you're not affiliated with an institution, you become responsible for everything. These are things that, if not managed carefully, could potentially harm the therapeutic relationship."* (PC2).

In addition, some counselors declared that online platforms, often used for purposes like education, could lead to role confusion for clients during OC sessions. Accordingly, the following was stated:

With clients I see both face-to-face and online, I've particularly noticed that some individuals adopt a quieter, more passive role in online sessions. Perhaps it's due to their habits—working remotely, attending online classes—they might perceive that role as appropriate in the online setting. (PC8).

Difficulty in Observing Nonverbals

Some counselors declared that challenges in observing clients' nonverbal behaviors due to the limited view of the client in the camera or poor quality of technical equipment lead to incorrect assessments of clients' emotions or the inability to perform some interventions:

The client's eyes might be welled up with tears, indicating they might be crying, but if the video quality is poor due to the internet, it can cause me to miss these cues (PC5).

I cannot engage in somatic experiences with the client in OC because I cannot observe their body. (PC9).

Difficulty to Intervene

Counselors declared that OC limits their potential for effectively dealing with severe issues due to the lack of physical presence. Several counselors explained their challenging experiences while working with trauma in OC:

In trauma work, I can't even hand a tissue to the client[...] I can only provide support through words (PC9).

In cases of prolonged exposure to trauma, clients' being away from me makes me anxious. If we recall a memory, it might trigger an attack... I prefer not to do this exercise in online sessions (PC8).

Few counselors also mentioned that while working with trauma, they feel a lack of control during critical situations, such as clients leaving the screen or experiencing dissociation. One counselor provided her way of dealing with potential dissociation experiences: "*If the client is at a high risk of severe dissociation, I usually prefer to have the contact information of another person present in the room during that time"* (PC4).

Environmental Problems

According to some counselors, clients connecting to sessions from their own environment leads to potential interruptions from others at home or hinders clients from disclosing themselves comfortably: *"Clients sometimes seek times when their parents are not at home. They cannot talk about their issues with their family around since issues are related to them"* (PC9).

On the other hand, one counselor stated that clients connecting from their home environments provide the counselor with more information, thus enabling more effective interventions. Regarding the involvement of third parties in session, one counselor stated, *"For instance, during a session with a client who has boundary issues with their mother, the mother opens the door. Witnessing that moment and observing the emotions make managing the situation easier for me"* (PC3).

Technical Issues

Some counselors pointed out that Internet connection problems, such as disconnections or slow connection speeds, are considered disadvantages of OC. One counselor stated that connection problems result in decreased concentration: *"For instance, there can be sudden internet interruptions or freezing, and at that moment, my focus gets disrupted. I forget where I last left off and how to continue"* (PC7). In addition to internet problems, a few counselors also mentioned that they experience difficulties related to the quality of technological devices: *"Unfortunately, I cannot understand the changes in the client's tone of voice due to audio problems"* (PC5).

Recommendations for Improving OC

This theme highlights counselors' recommendations for improving OC practices based on their experience and needs. The theme contains three sub-themes: improving platforms and technical issues, creative suggestions, and developing counseling platforms (see Table 6 below).

Table 6. Themes and sub-themes regarding recommendations for improving OC

Themes		Sub-themes		Codes	
5.	Recommendations for Improving OC	5.1.	Improving Platforms and Technical Issues	5.1.1.	Platform stability
				5.1.2.	Functional session tools
		5.2.	Creative Suggestions	5.2.1.	Virtual Reality tools
				5.2.2.	Game-based interventions
		5.3.	Developing Counseling Platforms	5.3.1.	Therapeutic use
				5.3.2.	Specific platform

Improving Platforms and Technical Issues

Nearly all the counselors declared they experienced difficulties during OC due to technical issues. Therefore, when they were asked to provide suggestions for improving the practice of OC, they mostly offered suggestions for enhancing Internet connection, audio, and visual quality. For instance, one counselor provided a suggestion regarding internet connection:

Platforms could warn about potential inadequate Internet connection before the session rather than during the session. Thus, I could adjust my actions accordingly (PC2).

Some counselors also declared that integrating several features into online platforms, such as a section for counselors to take notes or quick-drag-and-drop keywords, would also facilitate their practice while taking

notes in OC. Furthermore, integrating other applications into online platforms instead of directing clients to other applications through links was another suggestion: *"Integrating multimedia programs into OC platforms could be beneficial for quickly creating a space for clients with colors and visuals, especially during expressive art activities"* (PC4).

Creative Suggestions

According to counselors, there were sometimes difficulties in applying therapeutic interventions in a virtual setting. Therefore, several counselors provided creative suggestions to improve the effectiveness of techniques commonly used in face-to-face sessions in OC. For instance, a counselor provided a suggestion as follows:

While using techniques like sand trays, numerous physical objects are usually involved in face-to-face sessions. In OC, it would be beneficial if there were applications where the materials used could be selected and dragged onto the virtual space upon clicking (PC9).

Another counselor suggested using video games in career counseling: *"A client interested in becoming a teacher could engage in gameplay with various tasks and experience the environment. This way, they would gain experience by encountering challenges firsthand"* (PC8).

Few counselors suggested integrating virtual reality into OC, especially when conducting meditation practices or desensitization procedures while working with phobias. Furthermore, arranging counseling rooms via virtual reality and incorporating several materials that can be utilized during sessions will also be suggested. Accordingly, the following was expressed:

We can arrange the session room and add materials used during the session. Virtual reality could eliminate the need for everything required for face-to-face sessions (PC5).

Developing Counseling Platforms

Few counselors declared that an online platform designed specifically for OC would be helpful for their practice. The main reasons behind the counselors' suggestion for a specialized OC platform were the existing programs' time constraints and lack of integration with other potentially practical applications that could benefit OC. PC8 illustrated the necessity of OC platforms and an example of an application that could be integrated into these platforms by the following statement:

These platforms are not inherently designed for counseling. They are designed for meetings or classes […] Specific counseling platforms can be designed; for instance, a mediation application can be included in the platform (PC8).

Potential Creative Interventions

This theme illustrates examples of how certain commonly used techniques in face-to-face counseling can be creatively integrated into OC. Counselors were given seven pairs of matched words and were asked to explain the first application that came to their minds. There are seven sub-themes under this main theme.

Empty Chair - Picture

Nearly all counselors declared they could integrate screen-sharing to display one or two chairs onto the screen when applying the empty chair technique. One counselor illustrated: *"I would ask for a photo from the client's childhood and integrate it into the image of empty chair on the screen"* (PC8). Another counselor preferred using a physical chair in the client's space with the following words: *"I would not put a photo of an empty chair. I would want them to touch the chair, be more active, and change places between chairs in their own environment"* (PC6).

Muscle Relaxation Exercise - Video

Most counselors mentioned that they could explain a muscle relaxation exercise by displaying an informative video on the screen: *"I would directly open the video and let them watch. They would see it first and then do it themselves"* (P9). Additionally, one of the counselors mentioned that instead of a video explaining the muscle relaxation exercise, she could play relaxing videos during the session to support the client's relaxation: *"I have some short nature videos that we can watch together during the muscle relaxation"* (P4).

Case Analysis - Screen Sharing

Most counselors, especially those who use the CBT approach, mentioned that they frequently use screen sharing to fill out forms with their clients collaboratively. One counselor suggested that visuals could be used instead of writing as a different approach: *"I think the text might strain clients' eyes. By creating something with visuals such as comics, alternative attitudes and behaviors for the client can be discussed, whether they would or wouldn't apply them in their own life"* (PC2).

Family Constellation - Drawing and Drag-and-Drop

Counselors emphasized the importance of collaborative work while using the family constellation technique. They mentioned combining visual elements with interactive applications to support the client's engagement while applying the family constellation technique. For example, one counselor said, *"I could set up a screen with an application like Paint where the client can draw family members and place them"* (PC1).

Understanding Emotions - Drawing and Playdough

Most counselors noted that utilizing materials, such as paper, pencil, and playdough, that clients already have in their environments would be more effective for understanding clients' emotions than integrating this practice with technology. One counselor stated: *"After the client makes their drawing to express his emotions with their paper and pencil, they can send me a photo of it, and we can discuss it together"* (PC7).

Body Responses - Asking Open-Ended Questions

While counselors acknowledged that OC has limitations in capturing clients' full body movements, they mentioned compensating for this by frequently asking open-ended questions. Regarding a creative intervention in OC related to this matching, one counselor said, *"We could give voice to organs. I could ask the client what their body or specifically stomach would say right now if they had a language"* (PC1).

Inner Talks - Clients' Environment

For this matching, counselors conveyed that they can use items in the clients' environments to initiate conversations and learn about their thoughts. For instance, one counselor stated: *"I can use this intervention, especially with adolescents since they sometimes find it challenging to open up their thoughts. For instance, I can ask them with which object in their room they associate or resemble their thoughts and feelings"* (PC4).

Discussion

Fostering Creativity

The present study showed that one of the integral parts of creative interventions in OC is technological integration. Even though entering a virtual setting builds physical distance between client and counselor, it also provides them a space to work collaboratively through technological tools (Koltz & Tarabochia, 2014; Bolton et al., 2021). In line with that, the present study revealed that counselors perceived technology as a valuable motivator when developing creative interventions in OC. In addition, our study findings show that increased virtual reality could be a common tool for the OC process along with the digital games created for deciding different aspects of the people in their lives, especially for the student's career choices. Combining different technological tools could improve the effectiveness of the OC sessions (Ong et al., 2022) as it would eliminate possible obstacles to applying creative interventions. Moreover, this variety of technology usage in OC may contribute to the creativity of the counselors.

Counselors stated that transitioning from face-to-face counseling to OC in their practice required them to learn new things and adapt to the process. Some of their personality traits (i.e., being flexible, open to new experiences, and having a strong motivation to learn) contributed to improving their creativity in OC. The present findings were consistent with studies indicating that creative people have some common characteristics (Carson et al., 2003; McGhee et al., 2019; Gutterman & Aafjes-Van-Doorn, 2022). Besides, counselors pointed out that their leisure activities facilitate OC's creativity. This finding aligns with another study that shows the association between leisure time activities and creativity in psychological counseling practices (Özcan & Ümmet, 2023). Thus, the present study reveals this link applies to online psychological counseling sessions.

The current study also revealed how clients' physical surroundings and personal belongings can play an essential role in fostering the creativity of counselors in OC. Even though the virtual atmosphere of OC decreases the chances of sincere human interaction and feelings of togetherness, it also provides an opportunity for entering into clients' living environments (Vermeire & Van den Berge, 2021). Counselors conveyed that the chance to observe clients' environments and possessions helps them to develop original ideas. These findings were consistent with a qualitative study indicating that OC makes the client's environment visible, providing counselors with a different type of observation and an additional resource for therapeutic interventions (Heiden-Rootes et al., 2021; Smith & Gillon, 2021).

Another noteworthy finding of this study was that counselors used some of the challenges they faced creatively. The present findings support the existing definition of creativity, which is "a process typically born from frustration or need for a solution" (Hecker & Kottler, 2002). As OC has more potential to rely solely on words because of the lack of physical appearance, materials, and bodily movement, establishing a connection with children and adolescents, whose verbal skills are less developed than adults, might be more challenging. Therefore, it may require more playful and dynamic interventions (Burhoyne & Cohn, 2020; Vermeire & Van den Berge, 2021). In line with this, counselors declared that when experiencing communication difficulties with children, adolescents, and resistant clients, creative interventions with visual materials, drawings, and music increased the effectiveness of their practice in OC, allowing clients to engage more fully in the therapeutic process.

Barriers to Creativity

Under the second theme of the present study, which is thematized as barriers to creativity, counselors declared that their motivation to engage in creative interventions in OC was hindered due to limited time, material shortages, and difficulties in observing nonverbals. In a qualitative study by Carson et al. (2003), counselors most commonly mentioned not having the time to learn creative practices and apply them in face-to-face sessions. Similarly, but in a different format, time constraints were also revealed in the present study as a barrier. Counselors declared that the time constraints of platforms and a loss of time due to transitioning between applications hindered their creativity in OC. The lack of available resources, like time, can also restrict creativity (Davis, 1999). In line with that, counselors mentioned that being unable to access shared physical materials with the client is a limiting factor for their creativity in OC. Furthermore, counselors frequently reported that OC inhibits their ability to observe clients' nonverbal behaviors, emotional expressions, and body movements due to physical gaps and technical issues. These findings were aligned with a qualitative study indicating that technology acts as a mediator between the client and the counselor in OC (Heiden-Rootes et al., 2021). One of the disadvantages of OC also emerged as a barrier to counselors' creativity. According to counselors, failure to properly assess clients' non-verbal cues prevents them from identifying and implementing creative interventions that address client needs.

Advantages & Disadvantages of OC

Overall, the study's findings were consistent with Amabile's (2011) componential theory of creativity, highlighting the influence of both internal and external factors on individuals' creativity in their counseling practice. The transition from traditional face-to-face OC significantly altered the work environment for counselors and their interactions with clients. While some counselors found the virtual setting, technological resources, and clients' surroundings conducive to creative approaches, others encountered challenges such as time management and difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues, which hindered their creativity. Consistent with the theory, the study underscored the importance of counselors' characteristics and their perception of session challenges in fostering creativity (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012). Despite the perceived drawbacks of OC, such as technical issues, some counselors viewed these obstacles as opportunities to tap into their intrinsic motivation and innovate. For instance, what was initially considered a disadvantage of OC—environmental constraints—was reinterpreted by some counselors as a catalyst for creativity. However, technical glitches remained a significant impediment to implementing creative interventions.

Recommendations for Improving OC

Counselors recommended enhancing their skills in OC to address these technical challenges effectively. While useful for conferences, existing digital platforms like Zoom may not fully meet the needs of therapeutic

settings. Thus, the study suggests the development of an online therapy platform tailored specifically for counselors and equipped with therapeutic tools to facilitate creative implementation in OC and increase the sessions' effectiveness. In addition to improving basic technical features, counselors pointed out the need for built-in multimedia tools so they would not have to use separate apps. They suggested features like digital drawing spaces, note-taking areas, and tools that allow dragging and placing items, similar to what they use in face-to-face sessions. Some also recommend tools that simulate real-life materials, such as virtual sand trays or art tools, and mentioned using video games or virtual reality to support activities like career counseling or relaxation. These ideas show that counselors want online platforms to better support the creative and integrative parts of counseling process.

Potential Creative Interventions

The findings also highlighted specific examples of how face-to-face counseling techniques can be adapted to online sessions. Counselors shared ideas such as using screen-sharing for empty chair technique, displaying videos for relaxation exercises and using collaborative drawing tools for family constellation. Other suggestions included interpreting clients' emotional states via playdough or drawings, using open-ended questions for exploring bodily-sensations, and engaging clients through objects in their home environment. Counseling techniques can be successfully adapted to technology as creative, play-based methods can work well using digital tools (Bolton et. al., 2021; Vermeire & Van Berge, 2021). Similarly, empty chair techniques or bodily exercises helped counselors keep sessions effective and encouraged them to be more creative by using technology to adjust traditional techniques of counseling (Smith & Gillon, 2021).

Creativity may help to improve therapeutic interventions and practice demonstrate how combining traditional interventions with screen-sharing, video integration and household materials supported a more dynamic, emotionally rich, and interactive process. These adaptations also support Amabile's (2011) componential theory that mentions both personal competence and contextual resources interaction to foster creative outcomes in professional settings. Thus, these examples highlight creativity both serves to address limits of OC and adapt previous techniques in new ways for improving client engagement.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The current study has limitations. Although some studies investigate the use of both face-to-face and OC simultaneously, research combining OC and technological tools such as VR is limited. Further research may focus on this issue in greater depth, investigating how adapting technological devices into OC affects its effectiveness. The study participants were counselors with varying therapeutic approaches, such as ACT, CBT, EMDR, and Couples and Family therapy. According to previous research, OC has unique advantages, drawbacks, and facilitators or barriers to creativity for different therapeutic approaches. Therefore, conducting future qualitative studies with a homogenous group of counselors who adopt the same therapeutic approach is essential to gaining enriched information on creativity and overcoming the existing limitations of this research. Furthermore, this study aimed to investigate counselors' experiences regarding using creativity in their OC practice. However, being creative in counseling is collaborative work involving clients. Therefore, future investigations of creativity incorporating clients' perspectives and experiences may enrich the understanding of creativity in OC.

Conclusion

The present study showed that applying creative practices in online sessions depends on both internal issues, such as personal characteristics, and external issues, such as clients' environment and opportunities for technology. As counselors' space and control are limited in OC, they have tried different techniques and skills to compensate for the drawbacks. Interestingly, these drawbacks sometimes helped them figure out new applications they had not tried before. Such challenges improved their creativity level, and they have developed many ideas. Some ideas they have could be applicable with the current technology; however, some may need to develop multidisciplinary works to reach the intervention they want to apply in their dreams. The collaboration of counselors and technology developers can solve these issues.

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