

*Experience of Psychological Help Seeking through Online Psychological Services  
among Adolescents: A Consensual Qualitative Research*

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**Abstract**

This study, aimed to examine experiences of Thai adolescents who have sought online psychological support. Key informants were nine adolescents aged 18-25 who fulfill selection criteria and were willing to be interviewed. A consensual qualitative research method was used for data analysis. Finding revealed six main themes of online help seeking experiences of these adolescents. These were: (1) Awareness of warning signs of daily life interferences and suffering mind, (2) Dealing with the interferences and way to handle them, (3) Seeking "other support or oasis" by considering individual who could support them during the challenging times, (4) The decision to use internet help seeking and facilitating factors, (5) Experience in exchanging with skilled psychological support providers feeling of being understood and obtaining alternative resolutions to their challenges, and (6) Limits of online psychological help-seeking. Finding obtained should help enrich online psychological services in enhancing the service utilization and reaching out to adolescents who would benefit from the services. Additionally, the findings should provide a guideline for the enhancement of online psychological services.

**Keywords:** psychological help-seeking, internet-based services, consensus qualitative research

## Introduction

Seeking professional psychological services is an effective way of coping among persons with life difficulties and psychological concerns. Particularly, adolescents who are experiencing life transition have to learn these help-seeking skills. According to King and colleagues (2006), internet-based psychological help seeking has become more popular among adolescents. The researcher reported issues contributing to psychological help seeking from professionals through the internet on websites "Kids Help Line" (KHL) ([www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)) about receiving benefits from service among adolescents who had used psychological services via the internet that found five domains relevant to adolescents' motives and experiences. The main benefits of online counseling were reported in relation to the privacy and providing an emotionally safe environment to seeking psychological help from professionals through the internet on websites "Kids Help Line" (KHL) ([www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)) about receiving benefits from service among adolescents who had used psychological services via the internet (King, Bambling, Lloyd, Gomurra, Smith, Reid & Wegner, 2006). In addition, Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, and Cantrill (2005) regarded internet as the most accessible and economical media which attracts users' interests. The study has shown the internet service combines positive features of traditional lay and professional, personal and impersonal sources. Although it is unlikely to totally replace the role of trusted peers and adults, the internet has found an important place among adolescents' repertory of health information sources and tend to rely on the internet as the first source of helping.

Likewise, Gross (2004) found a significant increase of internet usage in the group of teenagers who need to find solutions for their problems. Moreover, a factor that prohibit help seeking behavior was relating to having to disclose identity to the help providers. Doing so, made people decided to seek help from helping sources that did not require them to disclose their identities (Wills & DePaulo, 1991). Therefore, internet is a good alternative that provides comfortability for the help seeker who is in need of professional psychological services. Nicholas, Oliver, Lee, and O'Brien (2004) had introduced helping services via the internet called "Reach Out!" ([Au.reachout.com](http://Au.reachout.com)) found that adolescents had access to the service when they had emotional pressures and there were no significant differences between the two genders in terms of service seeking from "Reach Out!". This research shows that almost half the participations has been to the "Reach Out!" website following the presentation, and approximately two-thirds reported that they would use "Reach Out!" to seek help if they were going through a tough time.

Although it has been noted that there is high incidents of internet-based psychological help seeking among adolescents, we found that few efforts to clarify seeking help experiences during a crisis or after experiencing psychological distress among adolescents. Therefore, this paper aimed to present experience of psychological help seeking from psychology professional services via the internet among Thai adolescents.

## Methodology

This study employed a consensual qualitative research (CQR) design as detailed below:

**Key Informants.** Nine Thai adolescents (2 Males, 7 Females) who have experienced psychological help seeking from psychology professional services via the Internet participated in this study. Their mean age was 21.50 (SD = 2.06, R=18 – 25) years old. All volunteer to participate in the study.

**Procedure and Data Analysis.** : After getting an approval by the Committee for Human Research, Chulalongkorn University, the researcher contacted the gatekeepers and utilized social network to recruit the qualified key informants and made appointments with the key informants. The first meetings with the informants were to inform them about the detail of the study and their rights to participate in the study. Those who were willing to participate in the study were asked to sign a consent form. The key informants were invited and interviewed once or twice which took approximately 1-2 hours. A verbatim transcription of the interview audio records were analyzed using a consensual qualitative research method (CQR: Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005). Trustworthiness - validity of the findings, interpretation, and summary from supportive data were achieved through an external audit conducted by 2 experts on qualitative research, as well as member checking.

## Results

Findings revealed six main themes of experience of psychological help seeking as the following.

1. **Awareness of Warning Signs.** Key informants reported this experience as an alarm which indicates that they were obsessed with the problems. At the same time, they had the "flashing thoughts" about the problems, and cannot stop themselves from thinking repeatedly. The theme also includes "anxiety," "unhappiness," "stress," and eventually "despair."

**1.1 Obsessed with thoughts.** Almost of key informants have the idea that differentiate obsession with thinking to solve problems, how problems happen to them or impact of problems in future.

*It is not clear ...the steam like yes or maybe not when I thought it's yes but I rethink again . I can not find concluded in the middle what really I want (ID3) ."*

**1.2 Anxiety.** Key informants reported anxiety about their problems and cannot handle or do anything to fix the problems or make themselves feel better.

*"It's like I started thinking too much, tied up..... I started jittery feeling and It's like no I can not stand this anymore I needed someone to talk. (ID1) "*

**1.3 Unhappiness, stress and despair.** Most of key informants reported some changes that occurred during that time of service seeking and how this had an impact on their minds in terms of the sense of frustration.

*Yes, It's like I cannot get rid of this feeling from my life and I have to live with this pain forever. No way out from this mess ... I cannot do anything. (ID3) "*

2. **Dealing with the Interferences.** Key informants reported coping with their own emotions that prevented them from getting back to their normal life. This coping did not resolve the issues, but merely reflected the first response that the informants

needed to do in order to alleviate the emotional disturbance which greatly affected their lives.

**2.1 Dealing with problems by themselves.** Most of key informants have mentioned to deal with problems by considered and reviewed cause and try to deal with the emotions that interfere their daily lives so they reclaim normal back to their own lives. They has been decided to not disclosure problems with others.

*"About the problem I will try to find out good ways perhaps I can find one... I read short messages or something like that to me feel strong, cheerful and no pessimistic thinking... yes, I do not give yourself lonely, hang out with my friends, listened to the music. Most of I read a lot of short, simple messages.(laughs ) (ID2) "*

**2.2 Maintaining a balance of mind .** Key informants discussed how to deal with their emotions about problems to better emotion or back to normal felling by decided to tell their problems to other for release tight feeling inside but not reached to deal direct with problems.

*"It's had to be love story ( laughs) ...Yes ( name of interviewer ), I thought alone it would be much more reality. I like to drain my felling to other but not person that I fought with it will making more trouble. I need to share what I thought with my friends "what he/she thing about this" something like that. (ID1) "*

**3. Seeking Other Support or "Oasis".** Key informants decide the individual to who would be comes their supporter and to reveal the problems to from their characteristics or attributes of each person. The Informants need support from that individual or some other sources to help them from the emotions that caused them frustration and influenced their behavior.

**3.1 Seeking help from a Close persons.** Key informants reported deciding to disclose their problems to people that are closeest to them such as friends, roommates , romantic partners and family members. 8 in 9 of key informants mentioned to talking with "friend" were first person who decide to talk with. A person who closest are person who key informants spent times together, do the same activities together, know each other very well, feeling comfortable to talk with about their narrative feeling and trust each other

*"Sometime I shouldn't say anything but some deep issues I can trust her .It isn't mean she can help me but he understand my feeling and keep it as a secret.(ID1) "*

**3.2 Perceiving that she/he might be helpful.** Key informants decided to disclose their desire for help seeking to other person who not close to them. Key informants considered by kind of their problems that are facing and appropriate with issues. Person who chosen by key informants was expected to give some answers that can help them.

*"I'm not specific or any criteria who that I talking I just feel like I can get a good advices or suggestions from her/him. (ID6) "*

**4. Seeking Help via Internet.** This theme includes key informants' decision making and facilitating factors for their internet use preference. Key informants not only needed to deal seriously with their emotions, but also needed to have a better understanding of the problems and of themselves. This eventually led to their online help-seeking behavior.

**4.1 Feeling deadlock when dealing with problems.** Key informants has committed to deal with problems by rethinking about their situation and trying to balance their mind. Still, they perceive that they are not effective in their problems

solving even when they seek help from closest persons, such as telling friends or family members, taking advices. However, this does not help them out of the problems.

*"like... make me rethink at the same point ... that's point my friend talk about and what actually it should be for me. (ID3) "*

**4.2 Perceiving that the issues are hard to tell other.** Key informants reported their feeling discomfort and embarrass about issues. Issues that difficult disclosure and concerned about their image so these things make them decided not to seek help.

*"Some problems ummm ... I can't let's my family know that what I think about one of our family even how bad she is because it's a inside problems... should not tell anyone and maybe it's just only my thinking. By the way Maybe it's better not to tell anyone.(ID4) "*

**4.3 Feeling comfortable to seeking help.** Key informants reported about chatting with professional psychological services via Internet found that make them feel comfortable to disclosure their own personal issues without concerned about their image. These make them feel brave and free to share personal issues more than usually.

*"What I was thinking is that should I talk to someone or I should not tell anyone ...this was very hard for me. Then I think if I did not tell anything to anyone it would be worse more and still headache like this.*

**4.4 Getting rid of trouble.** Key informants knew how severe problems that threaten them or recognized that they have bothered them so long. So they needed to deal with their problems seriously to relieve their emotions and thought by seeking help from professionals psychological services.

*"Because I have many thing to do such study and if I can't manage myself about my issues that make me hard to study. Moreover if I still thinking too much I can't concentrate to read books, don't want to meet other and mental health even worse so I need to chat with professional via the internet. (ID8) "*

**4.5 Effective solution.** Key informants reported expectations of their minds when decided to seek help from professional psychological services via the internet as a alternative channel to access the service. They reported about hope psychologists can help them with a view of professional to find out efficiently answers to solve their problems.

*"Would does he/she (psychologists) doing ... well, I keep it for long time...what should I do? Perhaps to satisfy myself, talk with my friends, spend time with myself and him (boyfriend) to thinking about our situation and I can do decision but sometime I want to ask a question in my minds to psychologist if they were me what would they do? They have learned about this thing I want to use their experience of psychologists judged if he/she were me what will they do, what will they say It seems to be right ...Yes, well they must also guide as good so I'm really trust them.(ID2)"*

**4.6 Trusting in the professional.** Trust and confidence of professional psychological services through online services were reported by key informants. There are led to decision to disclose problems to seriously deal with their issues. They assure psychological services can help them to efficiently solve their problems. Image of website and name of the institutions that make some of key informants credibility and confidence in professional psychological services.

*"With name of the institution which service is ( Name of institution*

*... serving profession psychological via the Internet ), it's make me confident with their services and before I used service I knew their security system so I trusted them before I access this services ... yes I trusted them. (ID1) "*

**4.7 Ensure about confidentiality.** Key informants were convinced that psychologists to follow ethical of confidentiality and privacy when they used this services.

*They tell me that I can tell them, I thought it looked good and private because my issue was a little weird, different from other. I think if they can offer privacy it would be ok (ID5) ."*

**5. Experience of Psychological Support via Online Services.** Key informants reported feeling relieved and delighted while chatting with professional psychological service providers. They understood themselves better and obtained the solution for their issues.

**5.1 Recognition of supporting mind.** Perception of key informants given the feeling that occurs when chat with profession that makes comfortable, supported, safe and no anxiety when decided to talking about their issues. During the discussion, several key informants indicated their felt support from professional that not their expect before. This perception has been linked to feeling safe when they decided to disclose personal issues.

*"Safety is the safe feeling I felled, warming. I had drained my feeling inside. I feel free to tell her and don't worry about what I just said. It's difference when I talked to my friend I always worry after that what does my friend thought about me ...maybe I was fool in her thought or bad person. (ID2) "*

**5.2 Recognition of the problems resolved.** Perceptions related to the problems solving that key informants discussed about abnormal feeling and thought return to normal, reduced despondent and improved mood. This understanding could be view as being indicative to the self-understanding and understanding their issues while chatting with professionals. In addition, they reported as recognition of grievances to relieve suffering some key informants mentioned to useful guiding and information to help them from professional services.

*I could not find this solution I found the way for 4 years ago but never find it. They willing to tell this to me "It is worth it for me like gold" for me.(ID8) "*

**6. Limitations of the service,** Some of the factors that affect communication between informants and psychologists during the sessions have been identified as the limitation of online psychological services that use only texts and cause misunderstanding, especially when the psychologists tried to use psychological techniques.

*"three psychologists I used to chat with It is unpredictable if I walk in this service actually I want to talk only one psychologists .... but the situation is not so favorable. (ID5) "*

## **Discussion**

The results demonstrate positive experience of online help seeking among Thai adolescents. In this section, psychological help seeking process and the adolescent experience are highlighted. According to psychological help seeking process, the participants recognize the problems and the necessity for help seeking especially from experts or helping sources they can access. Factors relevant to the

decision regarding the sources of service sought include the reliability, and the level of confidence of these individuals (Nicholas et al., 2004).

Although the adolescents in the current study have used professional services through the internet, the majority of these informants did not recall considering professional psychological services as the first helping source. Instead, they had attempted seeking help from other sources before. However, the process of seeking help found not different from the third step of the process to seeking help that Gross and McMullen (1983, as cited in Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio, and Piliavin 1995). Outlined as will be discussed below.

*First step: Perception of problems*

This study found person can become aware in suffering and emotional that make them feel uncomfortable that reflect self-awareness of the realization about problems. The feeling that affect to their behavioral and physical changes such as cannot stop thinking about the problems, encountering, repeatedly ideas, feeling of isolation, as well as experiencing decreased appetite, troubled sleeping or even physical illness. Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, and Ciarrochi (2005) discussed help-seeking behavior was conceptualized as a process whereby the personal becomes increasingly interpersonal.

*Second step: Decision to deal with problems.*

Informants reported not only deciding how to deal with the problems but also considering the helping sources that can provide benefits to them. Accordingly, key informants made decision to seek help. Due to their concerns that the help seeking would compromise their confidentiality, many sought help from sources they know. Eight in nine key informants decided to disclose the problem to helping sources that they know or have used before with regard to many factors that would be beneficial to themselves or not. Psychological help-seeking behavior has determined that such action will bring pleasure to their mind or how to deal with the problems. These informants would have tried to handle the problem on their own before disclosing the problem to helping sources. During the process they try to review themselves and their problems, ignoring or normalizing by thinking that problems can happen to others too. Ignoring or trying not to think about problems are in the form of a coping type non-productive coping and avoidance (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). To face with problems like this seems to be concerned with handling emotional that may affected the person to feel like they did not fully deal with the problems. Non-productive coping and avoidance coping occurred with the most key informants, although they recognized the need for help seeking. This study found that non-productive coping and avoidance can be problematic and do not depends on the person's perception of discomfort about the problem. Somehow, this feeling pushes the informants to seek help when perceiving that they can-not handle the problem alone.

*Third step: Strategies and Tactics*

This step in psychological help-seeking process help determine whether the person is successful in seeking help or not. Various factors come to play. These are, for instance, how knowledgeable the persons are about help seeking. If person does not engage in appropriate help seeking, they would not benefit from the help. This also has an effect on their perception of the existence of the problems. Experiences in dealing with the problems in past will come to play a role when person began to review or seek psychological help (Wills & DePaulo, 1991).

This study demonstrates the limitations or barriers that found after key

informants trying to deal with their issues by themselves and seek help from others. Also they might not tell anyone. Hence, help seeking is deterred by their concerns for concern lack of confidentiality. Professional psychological services through the internet is a way to makes people feel more comfortable seeking help from sources they are not familiar. This helping source has the potential to make help-seeker feels comfortable expressing themselves. To encourage them to do so, sources of help must be available and accessible. Finally, the help-seeker must be willing and able to disclose their inner state to that source (Rickwood et al., 2005).

## **Conclusion**

The result showed that online psychological services are appropriate and effective for the help-seekers who were not ready to meet face-to-face with the psychologists. However, there are some disadvantages. There are; namely, difficulties in verifying clients' identity, lack of behavioral and non-verbal cues, limit to client who lack of skills to use the technology. This finding also supports by the study of Vongtangswad (2010) that during the online session, using only text could cause misunderstanding which might fail to respond to clients' needs. In sum, help seeking behaviors via online services among Thai adolescents is a new form of service in Thailand- still with some advantages and disadvantage issues- that needs further study and development for greater effectiveness. However, further investigation of the experience on psychological help seeking from professional psychological services via the internet should be carried with a cohort study in the future.

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