

*Mental Health Consultation Through Telemedicine, Does it Work?
A Case Study of Psychologists and Patients in Online Consultation*

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Abstract

The advancement of technology has brought a significant impact to our lives, including in the health sector. The presence of telemedicine allows us to access health information and health services very easily. It enables users to communicate with doctors virtually via chat consultations and video calls. Halodoc, a telemedicine platform from Indonesia has been providing health services, including psychologist consultation to cover mental health issue in Indonesia. Data stated that a month after Covid-19 break, mental health consultation in Halodoc was rose by 80% than before. Most of the users stated that they satisfied with the consultation sessions. However, quite few number of users also stated that they face several challenges in terms of communication between doctor and patient in online consultation. Therefore, this study aims to discover the interpersonal communication challenges in health communication practice between psychologist and patient in online consultation and how to cope with it. The Interpersonal Communication, Health Communication, and Computer Mediated Communication are used to analyse the case. This study was conducted using qualitative research with case study method. The research technique used was structured interviews with psychologists at Halodoc who actively consulted about mental health at Halodoc. This research found that the challenges in mental health online consultations are patient openness, language barrier, limited non-verbal expression, and patient trust to the psychologist. To address this challenge, the psychologist applied interpersonal communication strategies, such as develop empathy and using alternative tools to develop patient's openness and trust.

Keywords: Mental Health, Online Consultation, Health Communication

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Introduction

The advancement of technology brought a significant impact on almost every aspect of human life, including the health sector. In the health sector, technology has been utilized to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and quality in the delivery of health services (Setyowati, 2022). According to the World Health Organization, Electronic Health or e-health refers to the use of information and communication technology safely and efficiently with the aim to facilitate comfortable access to health services, improve the quality of those services, and at the same time, it is also able to reduce the cost associated with the provision of health services (Fara, 2021). E-health is usually accessed through a health application. Tempo.co (2020) recorded that 57% of the Indonesian population has downloaded a health application on their smartphone. It showed that Indonesian people are aware of their health condition (Christy, 2020).

Aside from the health application, telemedicine application also has been playing an important part in the Indonesian people's health condition, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Telemedicine is a health technology that allows health services to be provided remotely or from a different location. Telemedicine is used by patients to consult with doctors through an online platform, get a diagnosis, as well as performing remote treatment without requiring the patient and doctor to come to a health centre. In Indonesia, one of the most chosen telemedicine services is Halodoc (79%) and its most favourite service is Mental Health Consultation (Databoks, 2023). The survey also indicates that respondents use telemedicine for mental health consultation because it is easy (87%), time flexible (76%), affordable (63%), privacy protected (61%), able to give the best solution (40%), and following the trend (15%) (Annur, 2023).

In Halodoc itself, the number of mental health patients significantly increased by 80% during the Covid-19 Pandemic, and the majority of those who access mental health consultation services are millennials aged 20 to 30 years old (Annur, 2020). According to a survey conducted by Indonesia-National Adolescent Mental Health (2022), there were about 15.5 million Indonesian teenagers who suffered a mental health issue in the last 12 months. Nevertheless, only 2.6% of teenagers who really have accessed psychological services with a psychologist (Nababan, 2023). There are many reasons why a person with a mental health issue is not willing to seek any professional help; some of these include social stigma toward mental health issues, lack of understanding toward mental health issues, limited access to psychological services, and high consultation fees (Pranita, 2021).

With the presence of online consultation for mental health, it is hoped that it can have a significant impact. As online consultation with a psychologist is more affordable and the patient can consult more comfortably, without thinking about the prejudice of society. Online mental health consultation is also proven to bring a good impact to the patient, similar to face-to-face consultation (Arjadi et al., 2023). It is also quite effective and efficient in dealing with mental health disorders, although the preference for those experiencing acute mental health disorders is to continue to have face-to-face consultation. Greenwood et al. (2022) also stated that the effectiveness of mental health therapy using telemedicine for mild and moderate health disorders has the same effective result as face-to-face therapy.

However, there is still a challenge in doing an online consultation for mental health. As mental health consultation relies on the communication of the patient and psychologist, it

requires a clear and effective communication. While in online consultation through Halodoc, one important communication aspect that could be not accommodated is non-verbal communication. This is because the patient can choose the mode of consultation freely by them self. It could be text based consultation or voice based consultation.

Besides, the interpersonal communication model (between patient and psychologist) in health practice includes several elements as key communication to ensure that patients feel heard and valued, such as openness, empathy, support, positive feeling, and equality (DeVito, 2016). Tarifu et al. (2023) also stated that effective communication in health practice is not only about exchanging medical information, but also building trust and comfort so that the patients feel heard and understood.

Therefore, in telemedicine practice especially in mental health consultation, interpersonal communication between patient and psychologist becomes more prominent because it occurs through electronic media such as text messages, voice calls, video calls, or other special platform. Although there is no direct physical contact, the psychologist's ability to build a strong bond with the patient, understand their concern, and explain medical information clearly remains very important. Accordingly, this research aims to analyse the challenges of the psychologist to deliver a psychological services through Halodoc and how to cope with those challenges.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research approach with case study. Qualitative is an approach in exploring to understand a meaning that will be considered to come from a context of social or humanitarian problems by one or more people (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While a case study method according to Yin (2018) took an appropriate approach that is more suitable for use in research that focuses on "how" and "why".

The participants of this research are psychologist who actively doing an online mental health consultation at Halodoc. We coded them as P1, P2, and P3. P1 and P3 have joined Halodoc since 2019, while P2 have joined since 2021. An in-depth interview with P1, P2, and P3 was done separately. The interview later was analysed using axial coding to create categorization according the research questions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the interview, this research found there are several challenges in online mental health consultation, namely technical challenges, verbal and non-verbal challenges, and the openness & trust of the patient toward psychologist.

Technical Challenges

The participants all agreed that time limitation is one of the biggest technical challenges. Halodoc limits the consultation time to be 30 minutes in every consultation session. It is considered too short for those who have to explore the patient's condition based only on text messages.

“Because 30 minutes is really a lack of time for counseling, when I was at study the minimum counseling was 60 to 90 minutes.” (P1, interview, 2024)

“It’s more about time. It is less. Because in my opinion, 30 minutes doesn’t seem like enough time to dig into the patient’s problems.” (P3, interview, 2024)

Therefore if the patients experience a lack of time during the consultation, they must go through the process from the beginning.

Verbal and Non-verbal Communication Challenges

Mental health consultation at Halodoc could be done in several options, namely text/chat consultation, audio consultation, and video consultation. Verbal communication can only applied in video consultation and not all of the patients choose the video consultation mode at Halodoc. Most of them select chat consultation as this mode is the most affordable option compared to other modes. The absence of verbal communication in chat mode makes patients difficult to describe their feelings to the psychologist. Besides, intercultural challenges between patient and psychologist also appear when the patient uses local language or dialect.

Chat consultation also lacks of non-verbal expression or messages, especially facial expression, body language, tone of voice, and so on. It caused the psychologist more difficult to provide accurate assessment of a patient’s emotions or condition.

Openness and Trust in the Psychologist

Psychologists have obstacles to ensure that patients can be open and provide accurate information about their condition. Based on the interview results, there are patients who can be open from the beginning of the consultation session and there are those who need to be helped to be open and comfortable talking about their condition.

“Some of them are open and some of them want to be open but are confused about where to start.” (P1, interview, 2024)

“There are some patients who asked me to ask questions for them, so they can tell me more about their feelings.” (P2, interview, 2024)

P1 and P2 also shared their experiences of having patients who doubted their competence as psychologists. This became an obstacle for them to continue building trust between patients and psychologists.

“Oh, there have also been those who, for example, were in the middle of a session and suddenly doubted the psychologist's competence.” (P2, interview, 2024)

“So, the patient is having a consultation not because I trust the psychologists. But they were already searching on Google about their symptom, and more to like me add some information to their assumption.” (P1, interview, 2024)

Strategy to Cope With Those Challenges

The psychologist uses a guide interview clip piece to guide the patient in telling their stories about what they feel when the patients are not really able to describe their feelings or condition. The psychologist also asks the patient to send them a picture to know more about their story. Moreover, in the chat consultation, the psychologist also uses emoticons to build

an atmosphere and depict the friendly side of the psychologist so that the communication could be more comfortable and warm.

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