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Interpretative phenomenological analysis of guidance advocates' online counseling experiences

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Introduction: In order to document and understand the lived experiences of guidance advocates navigating transactional distance in education, this phenomenological study examined the experiences of advocates in the Philippines.

Methods: This study examined how clients and guidance advocates interact in online learning environments, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of eight individuals who underwent online counseling (OC). These individuals provided firsthand experiences that elaborated the phenomenon.

Results: The study, which has its roots in Transactional Distance Theory (TDT), finds interesting connections between the variables and the experiences of the individuals. Among these variables are: (i) discourse that mirrors the exchanges between a counselor and a client; (ii) framework, which includes OC dynamics and changing communication requirements; and (iii) learner autonomy, which stands for the involvement of clients in online learning.

Discussion: A community-based framework for developing students is formed by these variables. The data shared by participants reveal complex issues as they struggle with the limitations and realities of applying standards in multimodal counseling sessions. This change emphasizes how important it is for students to have a strong support system. The study, which focused on guidance advocate-client relations, took inspiration from the eight participants' OC experiences. The mechanisms that promote a reciprocal, technology-mediated kind of communication are central to this emerging structure.

KEYWORDS

counseling experiences, counselor-client interaction, counselor perspective, guidance advocates, interpretative phenomenological analysis

1 Introduction

In response to the growing need for accessible counseling services within the diverse landscape of distance learning methods, guidance advocates have embraced online counseling (Asri et al., 2024; Kiuchi et al., 2024; Supriyanto et al., 2024; Moussa et al., 2024) due to its convenience and efficiency (Wells, 2023). It is important to note, nevertheless, that as Wells makes clear, certain counselors—such as Snow and Coker (2020)—continue to view in-person, face-to-face encounters as fundamental and essential techniques in psychotherapy and counseling. The rapid surge of distance education prompted by the pandemic has highlighted the relevance of transactional distance (Moore, 1993, 2013) across educational levels, from basic education (Epperson, 2020; Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2008) to higher learning (Gavrilis et al., 2020; Mbweza, 2014).

Amid the limitations, this innovative counseling approach complements traditional practices (Yanto et al., 2024; Wells, 2023), challenging the exclusivity of face-to-face encounters in the wake of distance learning (Snow and Coker, 2020). The motives for offering educational programs, including counseling, encompass expanding access to underserved populations and

viewing distance education as a means of growth and efficiency (Jones, 2015). The counseling community is urged by Snow and Coker to look at the potential of remote learning as well as the associated methods and resources.

Furthermore, educators, including counselors, have access to virtual training opportunities to enhance their skills, such as behavioral training (Jones, 2015), integrating technology into clinical practice (Barnett, 2018), and web-based training modalities (Chapman et al., 2011). These efforts especially aim to evaluate the effectiveness of technology-based counseling in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions (Wells, 2023; Basilaia and Kvavadze, 2020). While face-to-face interactions have limitations, high-tech counseling (Layne and Hohenshil, 2005) significantly influences the future of technology in the counseling profession (Utami et al., 2024; Anthony, 2003). In counseling and psychotherapy, it is critical to acknowledge the impact that technology plays. Although online counseling has its pros and cons (Speyer and Zach, 2011), an increasing number of clients are seeking cyber counseling (Mallen et al., 2003), with Richards (2009) indicating satisfaction and positive impact within the client community.

This study looked at the fundamentals of transactional distance in relation to the experiences of class advisers who serve as guidance advocates. Guidance services must adapt to such demanding environments as the use of technology in counseling by implementing technology-enhanced counseling approaches that are customized to particular circumstances, especially within the learning communities they are committed to and, most importantly, the students. The training for Philippine guidance advocates is limited which is rooted in practical or peripheral experience, has acknowledged this necessity, and the rapid transition to distance education has compelled counseling programs to be conducted in virtual formats even in the post-pandemic era (Wan-Chen et al., 2023).

1.1 Background and context of the study

While guidance advocates along with licensed guidance counselors encounter stress-related risks due to the nature of their work, Tayoto (2019) suggests that their professional resilience and effective self-care strategies empower them to fulfill their roles. Counseling serves as a vital pillar in students' wellbeing and adolescents (World Health Organization, 2024), addressing a spectrum of concerns and fostering personal growth, environmental awareness, and social interactions (Ignacio and Fabella, 2018). Students have mentioned a variety of concerns, such as difficulties with their mental health, loneliness, high academic expectations, and erratic internet access. In response, guidance counselors provide individual and group counseling, liaise with parents, collaborate closely with educators, strengthen homeroom and guidance sessions, and organize mental health activities (Arrieta et al., 2021). As a source of personal growth and career advocates, teachers can gain great experiences from giving guidance that profoundly affects students' lives by changing their perspective on school, family, and the future. In this sense, teachers who are considered guidance advocates have to consider important aspects in their counseling training to promote such as planning, autonomy, curiosity, trust, and cooperation (Lai-Yeung, 2014).

In the country, amidst the post-pandemic situation, Department of Education (2020) has actively promoted a mental health awareness campaign. The DepEd has trained over 600 participants nationally in mental health and psychosocial help services as well as psychological first aid as part of its efforts to provide help to its clients. Despite DepEd's well-intentioned initiatives, the challenges faced by guidance counselors in the Philippines persist, as observed by Cervantes et al. (2018), especially the guidance advocates (Maidu et al., 2022). These challenges encompass insufficient training, limited technological skills, and counselor shortages (Cervantes et al., 2018) which resulted in teachers being involved in the counseling services provided by schools.

The goal of this research is to assist the holistic development of students by focusing on the experiences of guidance advocates through online counseling. Gallardo and Chavez (2022) emphasize the scarcity of research exploring guidance advocates' experiences and perceptions regarding wellness programs, wellbeing, self-care practices, and retention, highlighting the need for further exploration. Focused on the concept of "transactional distance," the study delves into the psychological gaps between students, instructors (guidance advocates), and course content in the context of distance education (Moreno et al., 2021; Stapleford and Lee, 2020; Nelson, 2019), with guidance counseling playing a pivotal role in client satisfaction and overall outcomes (Murphy et al., 2009).

The study examined the experiences of guidance advocates, documenting their struggles in the context of the new normal in education. This encompasses the evolving guidance activities in career counseling and youth support practice (Ignacio and Fabella, 2018), factors within the work environment, and intrapersonal dynamics (Gallardo and Chavez, 2022). These insights hold significant value in education policy formulation, particularly in ODL-based academic institutions, to establish ethical guidelines for online counseling practices (Geraldo et al., 2024; Wells, 2023), ensuring appropriate interpersonal skills, counseling techniques, and strategies that demonstrate skill development within counseling sessions (Cicco, 2011). With this, the study sought to evaluate the impact, acceptability, and outcomes of support, contributing to the overarching goal of student wellbeing (Bennett-Levy et al., 2012) in the basic education.

1.2 Research focus and aims

This study examined the phenomena of transactional distance in the context of online counseling (OC) as experienced by guidance advocates throughout the implementation of distance education through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative approach which aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experience (Smith, 2008). Moreover, it is helpful because of the painstaking attention the research design gives to enabling the guidance advocates to recount as full an account as possible of their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, the main goal of the study is to provide a thorough explanation of this transactional gap and its consequences. In addition, the study sought to understand the particular requirements, tactics, and methods used by guidance advocates to overcome the difficulties that come with offering counseling remotely, especially in light of the changing demands that the new normal places on students.

This study is guided by two specific questions: (1) What nuanced experiences do guidance advocates encounter when providing out-of-conventional counseling services, particularly in the context of transactional distance? (2) How do guidance advocates at the secondary level make sense of their experiences with transactional distance, and how do these experiences shape their counseling practices within remote learning contexts?

2 Materials and methods

The study's foundation was the principles of IPA, a qualitative research methodology that prioritizes the exploration of subjective meaning and personal experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This approach allowed the study to achieve its goals on exploring the lived experience of guidance advocates involves in online counseling (Alase, 2017). By using the methods in IPA, the study sought to go beyond the surface-level descriptions of guidance advocates and explore the deeper ideas, feelings, and perspectives that influence their understanding of and interaction with transactional distance in the context of online counseling. The postmodernist theoretical framework (Crotty, 2003; Lyotard, 1993) has been utilized as a lens to capture the existence of counseling services and the interactions of guidance advocates within the framework of the new normal, in light of the significant changes in the educational landscape brought about by the pandemic.

The study of lived experience via a discovery-oriented lens is known as phenomenology (Deal and Grassley, 2012). In this qualitative research approach, the Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) (Moore, 1993, 2013, 2018) can serve as a helpful framework for the new standard of counseling practice, elucidating how guidance advocates navigated their crucial role as service providers and supports to students despite numerous obstacles in remote learning. Using the ideas of the theory, the TDT proposes that we will probably achieve better results and higher levels of client satisfaction if we lessen the psychological distance between clients and guidance advocates by using counseling techniques suitable for limited or virtual face-to-face interaction. Combining the IPA and the TDT can build the significant lens of unearthing the lived of experience of online counseling among guidance advocates. Results of the study can explain a concrete evidence of transactional distance contextualized in online counseling, as experienced by the guidance advocates and their clients in schools (Awang, 2007).

2.1 Participants

In their 2009 work, Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin highlight that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis prioritizes depth and detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences. A sample of eight participants is appropriate for IPA as it allows researchers to conduct in-depth analyses of individual experiences while identifying shared themes among a relatively homogeneous group. In this study, the participants—guidance advocates addressing transactional distance within learning continuity plans—were purposefully selected to ensure their relevance and contribution to understanding the phenomenon. This purposive sampling aligns with IPA's focus on selecting individuals with meaningful and specific experiences related to the research question

(Smith et al., 2009), particularly the lived experience on online counseling and how the participants navigate online platform amidst the constraints in conducting such. Purposive sampling directed the participant recruiting process, following Patton (1990) advice. With the use of this technique, a targeted and relevant participant pool was ensured by carefully choosing eight guidance advocates who had a significant amount of experience (Moustakas, 1994) with transactional distance.

Additionally, data saturation in IPA does not rely on a large sample but rather on achieving thematic richness and depth. With eight participants, the researchers can uncover the nuanced ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences without sacrificing the detailed interpretation that is central to IPA. The homogeneity of the sample and the focus on a specific shared experience, such as transactional distance, ensures that the data is both rich and cohesive, fulfilling IPA's goal of understanding complex human phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). The demographic profile shows the participants' characteristics or profile as guidance advocate in selected Philippine high schools.

Demographic profile of the guidance advocates	
Guidance advocates	Brief description/Background as guidance advocate
Rosa	32 years old; 5 years as a guidance advocate
Jose	30 years old; 3 years as a guidance advocate
Bernard	31 years old; 2 years as a guidance advocate
Daisy	35 years old; 6 years as a guidance advocate
Delbert	37 years old; 5 years as a guidance advocate
Lester	33 years old; 3 years as a guidance advocate
Janine	30 years old; 4 years as a guidance advocate
Arnold	30 years old; 3 years as a guidance advocate

The demographic profile indicates that all these class advisers voluntarily accepted to participate in the study. All of them has at least one (1) year of experience as guidance advocates in DepEd. These inclusion criteria ensure that a rich and thick data on online counseling can be deduced from the lived experiences of the guidance advocates.

2.2 Procedures of the study

In order to present the guidance advocates' experiences with counseling in distant education, the researchers had to get their permission as they were purposely recruited based on the objectives of this study. An advocates should have at least one (1) year of counseling experience implemented online in a DepEd school in the Philippines. Through online counseling and other virtual modalities, this cohort of guidance advocates has shared their experiences (Smith et al., 2009) with the programs and services. This indicated that, ever since the epidemic began in the Philippines, transactional distance has impacted the counseling methods they provide to their clients. All instruments used to gather data underwent expert question validation. The cohort of validators includes a licensed guidance counselor, a college faculty of psychology and guidance, and a high school teacher

who acts as guidance advocate during and after the pandemic. After the organization of themes and subthemes, they were peer-reviewed by the participants to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data generated from the lived experience on online counseling (Birt et al., 2016) of guidance advocates.

Observing ethical principles and protocols, an open-ended interview guide was employed in the study to ensure that the participants' narrative moments were efficiently and effectively gathered (Bal and Van Boheemen, 2009). In order to present the guidance advocates' experiences with counseling in distance education, the researchers had to get their permission through a written consent form. This was also coupled with an approval letter in high schools wherein the participants are affiliated with. The consent form elaborates the manner of data collection. Then, then next phase involved focus group discussions (FGDs) to clarify data on online counseling experienced by the guidance advocates (Lodge, 1990). Moreover, they were given opportunities to record their reflections on a diary to comprehensively discuss their insights on online counseling (Benson, 2005). Furthermore, employing pseudonyms and maintaining confidentiality enabled participants to openly share their experiences, enhancing the richness and reliability of the collected data.

Through online counseling and other virtual modalities, this cohort of guidance advocates has shared their experiences with the programs and services through an FGD. This indicated that, ever since the epidemic began in the Philippines, transactional distance has impacted the counseling methods they provide to their clients. Because this study is conducted in an IPA, the researchers devised a number of techniques to examine the essence of guidance advocates' experiences (Smith and Fieldsend, 2021; Pentland, 1999), which were obtained through the counselors' reflection diaries and in-depth interviews for each case. Questions were validated by three experts in the field of guidance counseling, education, and a practitioner guidance advocate. To tame the biases in the results of the study, the researchers ensured to present thick and rich data using the statements from the participants of the study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Kaufmann, 2007).

In qualitative research, data saturation is achieved when no new themes, patterns, or insights emerge from the analysis of additional data, signifying that the collected information sufficiently captures the depth and scope of the phenomenon under study (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Guided by the research methodology described, data saturation was achieved through rigorous processes such as verbatim

transcription of interview recordings, ensuring every nuance of the participants' experiences was documented accurately (Deal and Grassley, 2012). Employing Colaizzi's phenomenological approach (Edward and Welch, 2011), the researchers meticulously examined the data, identifying key statements and uncovering underlying meanings until repetitive insights validated the comprehensiveness of the dataset. To specify the analytic procedures involved in this study, the researchers ensured that the themes appeared through their essence as IPA is always about subjective lived experience. Moreover, IPA has a commitment to ideography, which means in practical terms that an understanding of each case comes before the cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998). This has allowed opportunities for sub-themes to surface. All the 8 cases representing the participants undergone such process of individual case to a cross-case analytic procedures (Cervantes et al., 2018).

By grouping these meanings into three distinct themes and subthemes, the analysis revealed a saturation point where additional data ceased to provide new perspectives on transactional distance. The reflective and iterative nature of IPA, supported by frameworks like Colaizzi's and works by Yüksel and Yildirim (2015) and Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004), ensured that the themes thoroughly represented the phenomena of online counseling before and after the pandemic. This comprehensive and systematic approach confirmed data saturation, allowing for a robust and meaningful exploration of the guidance advocates' experiences (Flores and Rodrigo, 2012).

3 Results and discussion

3.1 The client and the guidance advocate engage in interactive and sustained technology-mediated communication

As seen in Table 1, the narratives of the advocacy groups providing assistance were clear about how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) becomes essential in distance education. Thus, ICT has a great deal of potential for use in counseling (Oraegbunam, 2009; Burbules, 1993).

When it comes to explaining the vital role that information and communication technology (ICT) plays in the context of distant education, the narratives offered by the advocacy groups for guidance leave no room for hesitation. These testimonies eloquently highlight the indisputable role that ICT has played in reshaping the distant learning

TABLE 1 Technology-mediated communication of the guidance advocates and learners.

Significant statements	Formulated meaning
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> The utilization of information and communication technology (ICT) has seamlessly woven itself into the fabric of counseling services, resulting in a transformative shift in my approach and methods. Distant counseling and additional services catering to learners' academic and personal requirements are delivered through technology-enabled channels that facilitate interactive communication. Effective technology-mediated communication functions optimally when resources are accessible, individuals are adequately trained, guidelines are readily available, and, importantly, counselors exhibit a willingness to embrace adaptation. 	<p>Communication between the guidance advocates and their clients can be enhanced through technological advancement or communication channels.</p>

environment. The carefully considered, well-illustrated narratives provide an engaging picture of how ICT plays a key role in facilitating an education that goes beyond geographical borders. As Rosa said,

“To gather data from students, online surveys and virtual interviews were harnessed as tools. Furthermore, students were tasked with articulating their life narratives through digital platforms. Subsequently, students embarked on a succession of technology-mediated sessions to further their journey.”

Online survey has also been identified to be used by counselors (Abdillah et al., 2020). The guidance advocates clearly articulated the various ways in which ICT serves as a lifeline to enable interactive interaction within these lived experiences (Hall, 2004; Harun, 2000). ICT acts as the skeleton upon which remote learning is built and transactional distance is reduced. The subtleties shown in these narratives explore how ICT effectively closes the knowledge gap between students and instructors, who are regarded as champions for advice, converting online environments into lively hubs for communication and cooperation (Mejah et al., 2019). Rosa further explained that:

“This two-way interaction plays a pivotal role in reducing transactional distance. Engaging in online platforms introduces a unique array of ethical complexities. In every scenario, established values, principles, and individual moral attributes offer valuable guidance for navigating the realm of remote or online counseling.”

Using the advocacy groups' personal experiences as a basis, they conducted online counseling in accordance with the DepEd's suggested principles and guidelines, which support mental health awareness campaigns. According to Katz and Offir (1995), the utilization of IT for teaching and learning, computers can be effectively used for educational counseling. Counselors' ability to store and retrieve current data about students in need of counseling can significantly improve the effectiveness of the counseling process. This led Jose to stress the ethical obligations of online counseling in his tales, which he elaborated: *“The PGCA has provided us with training in online counseling, while the DepEd has outlined guidelines that emphasize the use of diverse mediums to achieve goals and serve the client's best interests.”*

With this remarkable promise of OC, Froehlich et al. (2023) recommended that among others advocates should be given the opportunity through seminars and workshops to improve upon the use of ICT in their counseling activities. Guidance and counseling

services must be delivered with complete integration of ICT (Sussman, 2004).

3.2 Guidance advocates provide collaborative and holistic counseling to clients

The guiding advocates articulated a comprehensive strategy that can create a supportive community for students, even though the lived experiences can be examined on a case-by-case basis. According to Sew Kim et al. (2013), school-aged children are still under the care of their family, mostly their parents, and many authors suggested that the school counseling services for these children are inseparable from their family and community. Beyond just building rapport between the counselor and the client, the collaborative approach to counseling also places a strong emphasis on fostering social connections among other guidance advocates, such as other subject teachers who can lessen the difficulties brought about by the transactional distance (Table 2).

Effective counseling requires that parents and students have a thorough understanding of the difficulties that students confront and their educational needs (World Health Organization, 2004). This common knowledge is the basis for thoughtful discussion and well-informed choices. Furthermore, it is crucial that parents and students respond to any necessary interventions or measures. Their eagerness to engage in constructive participation and proactive involvement are key factors in the counseling process' overall success. One guidance advocate named Bernard mentioned,

“It evolves into a comprehensive and interconnected network where insights, concerns, and proactive measures are shared, ensuring that the support system operates seamlessly and effectively. Ultimately, this collaborative approach enhances the quality of counseling outcomes and fortifies the overall educational journey of the students.”

Importantly, it is that parents and students respond to any necessary interventions or resources. Their proactive participation and openness to constructive criticism are important factors in the counseling process' overall success. Based on the study of Hrovat et al. (2013), within clinical mental health and healthcare settings, collaboration among professional counselors, guidance advocates, and helping professionals from other disciplines is often necessary. The entire effectiveness of the counseling process has been improved by

TABLE 2 Collaboration contributes to a whole-school approach to learner support.

Significant statements	Formulated meaning
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. By acknowledging the significance of collaboration among learners, parents, and institutions, the counseling process transcends the boundaries of a counselor-client interaction. 2. One noteworthy aspect of success has been the remarkable collaboration and assistance provided by class advisers assigned to each section. 3. The involvement and guidance of parents play a crucial role in the success of online support. Parents are key collaborators in ensuring that students make the most of online resources and counseling services. 	<p>Collaboration means the strong connection of school counseling services through the guidance advocates and the home-based follow-up from the parents of learners.</p>

TABLE 3 Online counseling as described by the guidance advocates.

Significant statements	Formulated meaning
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. By upholding these core steps and principles, guidance advocates can establish a strong rapport, engage in meaningful dialogue, and guide clients toward positive outcomes, regardless of the mode of delivery. 2. Navigating these practical challenges requires a delicate balance, ensuring that counseling remains accessible and effective while also considering the realities of both clients' and advocates' situations. 3. The process entails not only dedicating substantial time to the counseling interaction itself but also navigating the delicate balance between professional commitments and personal responsibilities, particularly when working from home. 	Transformation in the modality of counseling from face-to-face to virtual platforms has involved guidance advocates in the new normal and plays a vital role in addressing limitations on online counseling.

this synergy, which has made it possible for those in need of guidance to get a smooth continuum of care and assistance. *Daisy* therefore clarified and confirmed this kind of stakeholder participation as follows:

"In essence, my adjustment to the online counseling milieu encompasses multiple dimensions. It encompasses adapting my expectations, refining session methodologies, collaborating with class advisers, and actively disseminating information. Collectively, these efforts contribute to the holistic enhancement of the online counseling experience, aligning it more effectively with the evolving needs and demands of those seeking guidance and support."

The highlighted construct of [Strong et al. \(2008\)](#) which puts at the center the collaborative counseling on the innovations as dialogic, suggested that a guidance counselor or an advocate has his interactions with clients as co-creating accomplishments in the back and forth of therapeutic interaction. *Delbert* is a guidance advocate in an educational setting where online counseling is implemented on a school-wide basis. He has assumed the role of empowering other members of the learning community so that they may create a strong support system for the students. He said,

"I engaged in conversations with my fellow advisers and subject teacher, equipping them with the necessary skills to effectively manage students facing minor issues. By doing so, I aimed to optimize my time and resources, ensuring that I could allocate more attention to those students who require more comprehensive assistance. This strategic approach allowed me to prioritize my efforts where they are most needed, fostering a more efficient and targeted support system."

According to [Hrovat et al.](#)'s conclusion, mental health counselors are working in interdisciplinary work contexts more frequently, and there is a considerable overlap in the tasks and responsibilities of mental health professionals with different educational backgrounds.

3.3 Online guidance gives birth to a development in the new normal counseling

The majority of the participants also referred to this as online counseling ([Wan-Chen et al., 2023](#); [Arrieta et al., 2021](#); [Situmorang, 2020](#)). The counseling services were generally carried out by the

Guidance and Counseling teachers by making a media that an operator can control, visiting students' homes, and giving classical and individual guidance and counseling online and offline ([Saman et al., 2022](#)). The important remarks made by the advocates for the advice are shown in [Table 3](#).

While there are observed challenges in counseling in the new normal setup such as inadequate support and restrictions in delivering guidance and counseling services, their initiatives included using technology-aided services, conducting online activities, and strengthening of school and community partnerships ([Pedroso et al., 2022](#)). The core ideas and methods of counseling are those that are able to adapt to virtual spaces and cross physical borders. *Lester* claims that he stated that:

"By upholding these core steps and principles, counselors can establish a strong rapport, engage in meaningful dialogue, and guide clients towards positive outcomes, regardless of the mode of delivery. The key lies in the skillful application of proven counseling strategies to address the unique challenges and opportunities that online counseling presents."

In the study of [Wan-Chen et al. \(2023\)](#), they referred to this as Online Counseling or OC. There are three components to this: a defined procedure, infrastructure, and practice similarity, which includes two components: the intention to perform open communication and the perceived advantages for the clients. *Janine* confirmed this, describing OC as a type of internet messaging or chat. Now that sessions can be conducted in this way, it's becoming the new normal, as explained below.

"Given the prevalent challenges of inconsistent internet connectivity faced by many clients, we have opted for chat messaging as a communication medium. This approach is more accommodating to their circumstances, allowing for asynchronous interactions that can be managed at their convenience."

Online or cyber counseling has been characterized as the conveyance of counseling services via the Internet, where the pastoral/spiritual counselor or psychologist and counselee/client are not within the same physical area and they communicate utilizing computer-mediated communication innovations ([Situmorang, 2020](#)). *Arnold* concluded by outlining the difficulties associated with online counseling in the context of advocates for help seeking to reduce transactional distance. He clarified,

“Engaging in online counseling sessions, whether through methods like phone calls and text messaging or video conferencing and chat, often surpasses the typical hour-long duration. This extended timeframe can lead to a heightened sense of fatigue and, at times, a feeling of burden. The process entails not only dedicating substantial time to the counseling interaction itself but also navigating the delicate balance between professional commitments and personal responsibilities, particularly when working from home.”

As recommended by Situmorang (2020), everyone who works in the mental health field can provide free online/cyber counseling services by advertising it as a form of humanity toward others. Furthermore, the challenges and prospects associated with online/cyber therapy services might also be addressed. This will improve knowledge about contemporary therapies and provide the background information on the growing trend of online and cybercounseling (Zainudin and Harun, 2006). It is critical to take into account the comprehensive effects of longer sessions on counselors and clients as distant counseling techniques develop. Maintaining the standard of counseling services while protecting the important facets of life outside of work requires finding a balance between personal and professional commitment.

4 Conclusion

The findings from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of Guidance Advocates’ Online Counseling Experiences in the Philippines have important implications for Transactional Distance Theory (TDT), particularly in the context of basic education. The transition to online counseling within the basic education system has underscored an increase in transactional distance—the psychological and communicative space between counselor and student. This is especially significant in the Philippine context, where the shift to online platforms has presented challenges in maintaining the close, supportive relationships that are essential for effective counseling in schools.

The findings of this study hold particular significance in the context of guidance advocates and the transactional distance experienced in Philippine high schools. With the shift to online and blended learning brought about by the pandemic, students have faced increased feelings of isolation, reduced interpersonal interactions, and challenges in accessing support services. Guidance advocates, by engaging in sustained and interactive technology-mediated communication, play a critical role in bridging this transactional distance. Their holistic and collaborative approach addresses not just academic concerns but also the emotional and social wellbeing of students, which is vital in mitigating the effects of the fragmented educational environment. Furthermore, the emergence of online guidance as a key component of the new normal highlights the adaptability of Philippine high school counselors to the unique challenges of their context, such as limited technological infrastructure and varying levels of digital literacy. By leveraging available tools and strategies, guidance advocates ensure that support systems remain accessible and relevant to students, fostering resilience and a sense of connection despite the barriers posed by distance education. These efforts emphasize the importance of equipping guidance counselors

with the skills and resources necessary to navigate the complexities of online counseling effectively in the Philippine educational landscape.

The lack of physical presence in online interactions complicates the interpretation of non-verbal cues, which are vital for understanding students’ emotional and psychological states. This can lead to a greater sense of separation between counselor and student, making it more difficult to establish trust and rapport, key elements in the guidance process. To address this, enhancing the quality and frequency of dialogue is crucial. Filipino school counselors including the advocates must develop strategies to ensure continuous and effective communication, such as regular check-ins with students, the use of visual aids or digital tools, and the adaptation of traditional counseling methods to fit the online environment. These efforts are essential to mitigating the effects of increased transactional distance and ensuring that students feel supported and understood.

TDT also emphasizes the importance of balancing structure with flexibility in the counseling experience. In the basic education context, a highly structured approach to online counseling might increase transactional distance by limiting the ability to respond to students’ immediate and individual needs. Conversely, a more flexible approach that allows for adjustments based on the specific circumstances of each student can decrease this distance, creating a more personalized and responsive counseling experience. School guidance advocates in the Philippines must carefully navigate this balance to manage transactional distance effectively, ensuring that their approach is both structured enough to provide consistency and flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of students.

Another critical aspect highlighted by TDT is the role of learner (or student) autonomy. In the context of basic education, students’ ability to engage actively in their counseling process can influence the level of transactional distance. This is particularly challenging in the Philippines, where students may have varying levels of familiarity with online platforms and differing degrees of confidence in navigating the digital space. Guidance advocates may need to focus on empowering students, encouraging them to take an active role in their counseling process, and providing them with the necessary tools and support to do so. By fostering student autonomy, counselors can help reduce transactional distance and make the counseling process more effective.

Cultural sensitivity is also crucial in managing transactional distance in the basic education setting. The degree of distance can be influenced by how well the online counseling environment reflects the cultural norms and expectations of Filipino students. School guidance advocates must ensure that their online counseling practices are culturally appropriate and sensitive to the unique needs of Filipino students, which may include using culturally resonant language, acknowledging students’ cultural values and beliefs, and being mindful of the socio-economic and geographical realities that may affect students’ ability to engage fully in online counseling.

The accessibility and reliability of technology in the Philippine basic education system are significant factors affecting transactional distance. Inconsistent internet connectivity and limited access to digital devices can exacerbate the sense of separation between counselor and student, making it difficult to maintain continuous and effective communication. Ensuring that both counselors and students have access to reliable digital tools and are technologically competent is essential for reducing transactional distance and ensuring the effectiveness of online counseling.

While there is a set of promising constructs on TDT and online counseling in this study, the researcher's claims are limited to the use of IPA with only eight participants. The sampling also restricts the generalizability of the findings, as the experiences of these participants may not fully capture the diversity of guidance advocates' perspectives across different schools and regions in the Philippines. The in-depth exploration of individual experiences, are context-specific to the participants. As an archipelagic country, the cultural and systemic nuances of the Philippine education system may require a larger and more varied sample to draw more comprehensive insights into the broader implications of transactional distance in online counseling.

Meanwhile, the implications for TDT in the context of basic education in the Philippines highlight the need for strategies that reduce psychological and communicative distance in the scenario of online counseling. By enhancing dialogue, balancing structure with flexibility, fostering student autonomy, and addressing technological and cultural challenges, school guidance advocates can more effectively manage transactional distance and improve the quality of online counseling services in the basic education system. To strengthen the role of guidance advocates and address transactional distance in Philippine high schools, schools should enhance digital infrastructure, provide professional development for counselors, and implement student-centered online guidance approaches. Promoting mental health awareness, fostering parental and community involvement, and addressing technological and socio-economic barriers are also critical. Policies ensuring ethical online counseling and alternative low-tech solutions can ensure inclusivity. Additionally, introducing peer support systems and resilience programs can help students navigate challenges, fostering stronger connections and emotional wellbeing in the new normal education landscape.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and

institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AT-S: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RP: Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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