**INTENTION TO USE ONLINE COUNSELING SYSTEM BY MUSLIM UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

***Abstract- This study aims is to determine Muslim university students’ intention to use online counseling system. Four variables that influence attention to use the online counseling system were developed and tested through a survey. There were 120 questionnaires distributed to students from four faculties. From 120 distributed questionnaires, 108 of them were returned and completed. The results of analyses show that interactivity, responsiveness, social stigma avoidance, anonymity, and direct non-mahram avoidability have a positive influence on Muslim intention to use online counseling system.The findings highlight an important issue, which is Islamic universities may be encouraged to develop online counseling systems to reduce barriers regarding Islamic values and norms in counseling service provision.***

***Keywords - online counseling, Muslim students, Islamic universities, counselors***

I. INTRODUCTION

Previous studies highlighted that University and college student populations experience a high prevalence of mental health and academic pressure conditions, particularly depression and anxiety, and experience higher levels of psychological distress [[1-4](#_ENREF_1)]. University students may experience the stress and pressures at the early stage of their studies or during the whole process of the research. Unable to cope with these difficulties may result in study termination, retention, and academic failures. Relationship between students mental health with academic success has been found in previous studies[e.g :[2](#_ENREF_2), [5](#_ENREF_5)].

Research also has pointed that significant numbers of students on college campuses experiencing mental health distress and an ever increasing number of college students who are choosing to make an off-campus educational experience or leave campus for certain period [[6](#_ENREF_6)]. This phenomenon becomes worse when a campus does not have a mental health support center such as a counseling center. Students might keep the stressful situation without a solution which may cause their education failure. In some cases, students mental health support only relies on an academic advisor who takes care for a specified number of students according to a campus regulator appointment.

Student counseling services center is recognized globally for their role in promoting holistic student development, assisting with psychological and personal difficulties as well as facilitating academic retention and throughput in higher education [[7](#_ENREF_7), [8](#_ENREF_8)]. However, most the counseling services are provided through face to face mode which may discourage students attention to use the services due to lack confidentiality [[9](#_ENREF_9)]. This may cause students satisfaction to become lower, and they may not return to the services in the future. Some students from Islamic universities who believe that non-*mahram* men and women should not have direct contact [[10](#_ENREF_10)]. This belief has caused male or female students reluctant to seek mental consultations with opposite sex counselors.

Rosenbaum and Weatherford [[11](#_ENREF_11)] emphasize that counseling centers need to accommodate the particular demands of their stakeholders in campuses. Besides, a university must cope with various mental issues that affect the academic performance of its students [[12](#_ENREF_12)]. However, if the counseling is absence, a campus may do not have data relating to students mental health, which cause poor strategy in assisting students in academic development.

This study, therefore, conducted a survey to understand Islamic university students intention to use an online counseling center provided by an Islamic university. For this study purpose, online counseling is understood as any delivery of mental and behavioral health services, including but notlimited totherapy, consultation and psycho‐education, by a licensed practitioner to a client in a non‐face‐to facesetting through distance communication devices for instance, the telephone, fax, asynchronous e‐mail,synchronous chat, and video conferencing[[13](#_ENREF_13)]. This online counseling provides support for clients through various online facilities such as online chat, telephone, email, and online discussion forum. The facilities enable clients to reach the service in 24 hours and seven days a week without constraining by time and space.

Studies on the online counseling service adoption under Islamic higher education in Indonesia are limited performed. This study is expected to shed light on how Muslim students perceived online counseling and what variables determine their intention to use an online counseling system. Understanding the phenomenon through online counseling not only help the students solve their problem, but also help an Islamic university to improve services.

II. RELATED STUDIES

Previous studies [e.g: [14](#_ENREF_14), [15-17](#_ENREF_15)] have conducted studies on online counseling at various institutions. Herr and Best [[18](#_ENREF_18)] began introducing the concept of communication therapy using computers through an internet connection. At that time the concept of online counseling was still limited through a network of computers connected via an internet network that had not been supported by various online applications. Then a number of studies related to online counseling continue to emerge which include Grohol [[19](#_ENREF_19)], Barnet [[15](#_ENREF_15)], and Mallen, et al [[20](#_ENREF_20)][see also : [21](#_ENREF_21), [22](#_ENREF_22)]. However, most online counseling studies were conducted in non-Muslim education institutions where cultural and religious issues are not the main concern.

Many previous studies show the active use of online counseling services because their identity is more confidential [[23](#_ENREF_23), [24](#_ENREF_24)]. For example, research conducted by Harbertsroh, et al [[25](#_ENREF_25)] on college students in America found that these students were very enthusiastic about using online chat to consult because visually there was no need to meet. Thus the students can consult freely without feeling pressured due to shame or being seen by the counselor. However, online counseling also requires skills to use technology for both parties, both counselors and lecturers.

In another study conducted by Rochen, Kan and Wong [[26](#_ENREF_26)] also found that male students even showed a more active nature in the counseling process when it was done online. In the online counseling process, problems with anonymity, comfort, and time can be more assured because of the nature of online counseling that does not require direct gaze. Richard and Vigano [[27](#_ENREF_27)] state that such positive things are conveyed more by their clients when they conduct research.

However, it is important to consider that online facilities such as websites, e-mails, chats, etc, cannot replace counselors functions in service provision [[28](#_ENREF_28)]. In other words, counselors still have to play a major role in providing counseling services as practiced in face to face mode. Online facilities have advantages in counseling services compared to conventional services because they do not require face-to-face meeting [[29](#_ENREF_29)].

Another study conducted by Tsan and Day [[30](#_ENREF_30)]which involved 176 college students also found that their attitudes and behaviors related to the use of counseling services in campuses were increasingly active when they learned that counseling services could be obtained online. Students actively send e-mails, instant text messages, and chat through online sites that are prepared. The students cannot be ashamed to mention their most personal problems to their online counselors. This never happened when counseling services were given face-to-face. These results prove that online counseling services can provide tangible benefits for solving problems experienced by students. But ethical issues such as not divulging the secret of students still need to be considered even though counseling services are carried out online [[31](#_ENREF_31)].

Success in healing psychiatric therapy was discovered by Dowling and Rickwood [[23](#_ENREF_23)] in their research on social workers. They found that online therapy (through online chat) was very effective in curing the problems of mental stress experienced by these social workers. Social workers often experience high mobility and meet people of different cultural and behavioral differences. This increases the stress of social workers. But with this counseling service, they can contact counselors at any time.

Online self-help may help increase the reach of mental health services for college students, but little research has examined students' actual interest/use of these resources. An online survey of 389 college students examined the intentions and use of online mental health resources as compared with other support options. Findings indicated the highest intentions/use of informal supports (e.g., parents, friends) for mental health problems and lowest intentions/use for online self-help. However, a subset of students showed a preference for online self-help over other forms of support. Participants were also more likely to request online self-help resources (21%) than in-person therapy resources (9%) when offered these options. Reported barriers were also identified for using mobile applications (apps) specifically (e.g., stigma, credibility, privacy). Overall, results suggest mixed findings and relatively low interest for use of online self-help among college students, while highlighting potential barriers that might be addressed to increase engagement[[32](#_ENREF_32)].

III. THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

An interactive website is considered as a website that provides a number of facilities to help users interact with website owners. These interactive facilities include the presence of e-mail and online forums to make it easier for people to contact service providers [[33](#_ENREF_33)]. Meanwhile, Kaaya [[34](#_ENREF_34)]also says that an interactive website has facilities such as there is a column for member suggestions and various means that allow for two-way communication. Furthermore, high interactive level of a website also has facilities to download various forms and also a means of posting various community comments. Users can ask various things through websites that are provided by an institution. Various community questions are also responded by service providers through interactive means on the website [[35](#_ENREF_35)].

A responsive website is understood as a website that provides various facilities to enable users to contact the service providers [[36](#_ENREF_36)] and the willingness to help customers in a short time [[37](#_ENREF_37)]. When the service provided through a website is delivered in the expected time, the customers may perceive it as a responsive website [[38](#_ENREF_38)]. The website operators have good willing to respond to every customer inquiries base on a high service provision principle.

Online counseling service provision may be useful in reducing social stigma associated with receiving mental health therapy [[39](#_ENREF_39)]. For people who are uncomfortable with receiving face to face counseling, online counseling system allows access to such services in private without having to visit the counseling center. People who seek counseling service in a traditional mode often associated with stereotypes and prejudice that result from misconceptions about counseling mental issues [[40](#_ENREF_40)]. The online counseling system has the ability to avoid this social stigma due to anonymity in the service provision process. Users and service providers may interact without require to disclose their identities.

Meanwhile, Muslim has a belief that non*-mahram* men and women are not allowed to have direct contact without accompanied by their close relatives. For example, the Islamic boarding schools have set a rule which is none of the females are allowed to mix with male students during studying. The practice is often implemented in the form of segregated educational setting [[10](#_ENREF_10)]. Avoiding physical contact with men who are not related by a blood or marital bond, acceptance by other Muslims, and how to best raise children to be good Muslims [[41](#_ENREF_41), [42](#_ENREF_42)]. A such in countries with majority Muslim belief that women should always be accompanied by their *mahram* (male guardian). The beliefs and norms may affect their behavior in public services seeking.

Base on the literature review, five theoretical constructs are summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Theoretical constructs

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| No | Constructs | Authors |
| 1 | Interactivity | [[43-45](#_ENREF_43)] |
| 2 | Responsive | [[36-38](#_ENREF_36)] |
| 3 | Social stigma avoidance | [[40](#_ENREF_40), [46](#_ENREF_46), [47](#_ENREF_47)] |
| 4 | Anonymity | [[23](#_ENREF_23), [24](#_ENREF_24), [39](#_ENREF_39), [48](#_ENREF_48)] |
| 5 | Non-*Mahram* contact avoidability | [[10](#_ENREF_10), [41](#_ENREF_41), [42](#_ENREF_42)] |

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study used a survey to find out Muslim students intention to use online counseling, which is provided through a campus online official website. The purpose of the survey was to find out the level of user intention to use online counseling website. Knowing the trend of user intention to use a technology product may help policymakers to improve the quality of the technology so that the technology services can be utilized maximally by users [[49](#_ENREF_49)] (Norfazlina, Akma, Adrina, & Noorizan, 2016). Besides that, the survey can also be a factor in the success of an information system created [[50](#_ENREF_50)].

The survey sheets were distributed to 120 students randomly selected from four faculties at State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) Palu. The survey used a five Likert scale ranging from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Each variable consisted of 5 questions which total question to be responded were 25 questions. Out of 120 distributed surveys, seven of them were not returned and five were discarded due to incorrectly filled out of the survey sheets. Total of 108 completed survey sheets was collected to be calculated and analyzed. Simple statistical analysis was used to analyze the data collected from 108 users of online counseling systems. The result of the analyses was used to determine the percentage of students' intention to online counseling systems according to each variable developed in the theoretical construct section.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the survey show that the five variable to determined the trend of Muslim students intention to use online counseling systems are in a positive trend. The five variables are considered to be very influential on the intention to use the online counseling systems. The survey results gathered from 108questionnaires completed by students who have used the online counseling systems is depicted in figure 1:

The data from the above figure shows that most Muslim students that the online counseling website is very interactivebecause the online counseling website has a number of facilities that support interactivity. Students can chat online with one of the counselors through the WhatsApp facility available on the PBK website. If students are reluctant to chat online, students can ask the counselor to call them through the available telephone number.

Even though the level of responsiveness of the online counseling system is still positive, which is 65% of the students agree that the system is responsive, the percentage is the lowest one. We suspect the primary cause of the lack of responsiveness of the systems might be due to the double tasks of the counselors. The counselors who provide service through online systems are also lectures whose main job is teaching.Besides, the counselors’ ability to handle counselee questions through the system is low due to technological skill issues. Previous research has suggested that the slow problem of response to online counseling is more often caused by problems of professionalism associated with combining counseling skills with the skills to master technology at once [[51](#_ENREF_51)]. This could happen to the team of IAIN Palu counselors who had never provided online counseling service before.

The issue of confidentiality in online counseling is also very important to maintain as revealed by Mallen et al. [[52](#_ENREF_52)] so that the psychological pressure of the counselor gets heavier. Besides that, maintaining confidentiality is also a code of ethics in the counseling profession that must be maintained by counselors [[31](#_ENREF_31)] both in the form of offline and online counseling.

Most students (67%) also agree that their intention to use online counseling is influenced by the ability to avoid social stigma which is people who seek counseling are considered to have mental illness issue [[40](#_ENREF_40), [46](#_ENREF_46)]. Through the online counseling systems, the students are able to hide their physical identity from their colleagues and counselors which, than, increase their intention to use the system. The ability to hide identity is also associated with anonymity which was found that 94 percent of the students agree that the online counseling system is able to protect their identity from public attention. In this study, anonymity in online counseling is also understood as strong confidentiality in particular when the online counseling service is provided through an online application such as WhatApps. Previous studies [e.g: [27](#_ENREF_27), [53](#_ENREF_53)] found that anonymity in online counseling service increase likelihood to the service by users because of the level of convenience perception.

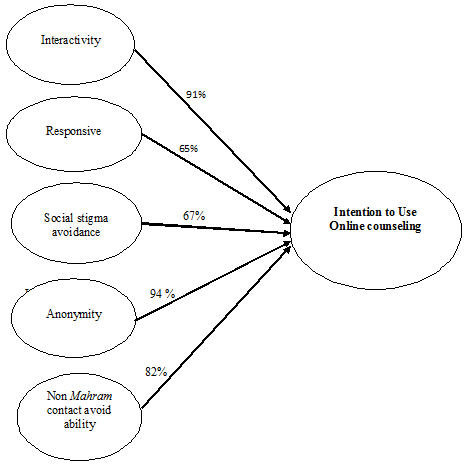


Figure 1. Result of analysis

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The most important variable that determines Muslim students intention to use the online counseling system is the ability of the system to reduce physical contact between female or male students with their different-sex counselor. Most of the Muslim students, in particular, who graduated from Islamic boarding schools, a strong belief that direct contact with non-*mahram* is a sin [[10](#_ENREF_10)]. The faith influences eighty percent of the students to use the online counseling systems. The finding highlights the essential ability of online counseling system in reducing barriers relating Islamic values and norms in men and women relationship in campus services provision.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study found that five variables have positively influenced Muslim students’ intention to use online counseling system. Most students agree that interactivity, responsiveness, social stigma avoidance, anonymity, and direct non-*mahram* contact avoidability have become factors that determine their intention to use the system. The findings highlight that Islamic higher education institution may need to provide online counseling system to reduce barriers related to cultural and religious issues. The online counseling system may help Islamic universities to cope with low usage of current face to face counseling services.

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