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Unveiling Counseling Service Acceptance among Students in Online Flexible Distance Learning Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This study investigates the acceptance of counselling services among students in open online flexible distance learning (OOFDL) higher education institutions, emphasizing the critical role these services play in promoting mental well-being and academic success. The primary aim is to explore the relationships between counsellor accessibility, counsellor competency, and perceived benefits and how they influence students' intentions to accept counseling services. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to 420 students enrolled in OOFDL programs, and 311 clean data were used in data analysis. The analysis employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the hypothesized relationships, with results revealing significant findings: counselor competency and perceived benefits were positively associated with accepting counseling services. In contrast, the impact of counselor accessibility was less direct. Specifically, the study confirmed that six out of seven hypotheses were accepted, indicating that while accessibility is important, it does not directly lead to acceptance without enhanced competency and perceived benefit. The study suggests avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies to track changes over time, qualitative interviews to deepen understanding of student experiences, and exploring the effects of technology on counseling engagement. The implications underscore the necessity

for OOFDL institutions to enhance counseling accessibility, invest in counselor training, and implement awareness campaigns to foster an environment conducive to seeking help.
Keywords: Counseling Accessibility, Counselor Competency, Perceived benefits, Acceptance

Introduction

The importance of counseling services in higher education, particularly in online flexible distance learning environments, has gained considerable attention in recent years. As higher education increasingly transitions to online and flexible formats, the demand for accessible mental health and support services for students has become critical. Counseling provides vital support in managing stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges that students face, particularly in open online flexible distance learning settings where traditional in-person support may not be available (Hyseni et al., 2023). Current trends emphasize adopting technology-driven solutions to deliver counseling services virtually (Kebah et al., 2019). Tools such as academic advising chatbots and AI-powered systems are being implemented to offer personalized guidance and support based on individual student profiles and interests (Bilquise et al., 2024; Majjate et al., 2023). These innovations address barriers to help-seeking by providing students with immediate and accessible counsel without the stigma often associated with traditional mental health services (Irawan et al., 2024). However, several research gaps persist in this domain. Many studies have highlighted a lack of comprehensive data on the effectiveness of these services on student well-being and academic success (Howard et al., 2024). Moreover, there is a need for more research into culturally relevant counseling frameworks that accommodate diverse student backgrounds in global online education settings, as found in the insights of Chinese university students on help-seeking behaviors (Ning et al., 2022). Additionally, factors such as school connectedness and emotional intelligence influencing counseling-seeking behavior in diverse cultural contexts require further exploration (IGWEILO et al., 2024). The significance of this study extends to policymakers, education providers, and students. For policymakers, understanding the role and effectiveness of online counseling services can guide the development of supportive educational policies prioritizing mental health in digital learning environments. Educational institutions can leverage these insights to enhance service quality and access, adapting counseling services to meet evolving student needs (Chuang & Liu, 2023). For students, improved access to adequate counseling can foster better mental health outcomes, academic performance, and overall student satisfaction in online learning contexts (Ahmad et al., 2024). In conclusion, while significant strides have been made in integrating counseling services into flexible online learning environments, ongoing research and adaptation are critical to fully meeting the needs of students across diverse educational landscapes. Through collaborative efforts and an emphasis on evidence-based practices, the higher education sector can ensure that counseling services are effective, inclusive, and aligned with the challenges and opportunities of the digital learning era (Cloutier & Low, 2024; Yurayat & Tuklang, 2023). This study assesses the direct and indirect relationship between counseling accessibility, counselor competency and intention to accept counseling services among students in online flexible distance learning higher education institutions with perceived benefit as a mediator.

Literature Review

Underpinning Theory

The Health Belief Model (HBM), introduced by Becker and Rosenstock in the 1970s, provides a valuable framework for understanding health behaviors, specifically regarding mental

health counseling acceptance in educational settings. The HBM posits that individuals' beliefs about health issues influence their willingness to engage in health-promoting behaviors, such as seeking counseling services. In the research model, counselor competency is a pivotal factor influencing perceived benefits and, ultimately, the acceptance of counseling services. When students perceive their counselors as competent, they are more likely to believe that these services can effectively address their mental health needs. This perception of competency enhances students' confidence in the potential benefits of counseling, such as improved emotional well-being and academic performance. Additionally, the HBM highlights the role of perceived barriers in the decision-making process. If students perceive high barriers, such as stigma or a lack of understanding about counseling's benefits, their acceptance of these services may decrease. However, as counselor competency reduces these barriers by fostering trust and providing practical support, students are more likely to consider counseling a valuable resource (Intaratat et al., 2024). Moreover, cues to action, such as positive testimonials about counseling experiences or mental health awareness campaigns, can further reinforce the perceived benefits of seeking help. Integrating the HBM into the research model can effectively explore how these interconnected variables influence students' acceptance of counseling services, emphasizing the importance of addressing beliefs and competencies in mental health education (Becker & Rosenstock, 1974).

Relationship between Counseling Accessibility, Perceived Benefits and Intention to Accept

The perceived benefits of these services significantly influence the relationship between counseling accessibility and counseling service acceptance in education. When counseling services are readily accessible, students are more likely to utilize them, as convenience and ease of access are crucial in encouraging student engagement (Srijundaree et al., 2024). Accessibility can refer to various factors, including the physical location of services, availability of online counseling options, flexible hours, and the simplicity of the appointment process. As these barriers to access are reduced, students may be more inclined to consider and ultimately accept counseling as a valuable resource (Ahmad et al., 2024; Bilquise et al., 2024). Perceived benefits serve as a crucial mediator in this relationship (Kebah et al., 2019). When students recognize the potential advantages of counseling services, such as improved mental health, better stress management, and enhanced academic performance, they are more likely to view these services positively and seek them out (Cloutier & Low, 2024). This perception enhances acceptance and motivates students to overcome any remaining barriers to access, including stigma or lack of awareness about available services (Turliuc & Candel, 2022; Won et al., 2024). Moreover, increased awareness and education about the benefits of counseling can further bolster acceptance. When educational institutions actively promote the positive outcomes of counseling, they facilitate a supportive environment that encourages students to engage with these services (Flavián et al., 2022; Wilson & Liss, 2022). Enhancing the accessibility and perceived benefits of counseling services is essential for increasing their acceptance and utilization in educational settings (Osman et al., 2019). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed for this study:

H1: There is a relationship between counseling accessibility and the intention to accept counseling services among students in online flexible distance learning higher education institutions.

H2: There is a relationship between counseling accessibility and perceived benefits towards the intention to accept counseling services among students in an online

flexible distance learning higher education institutions.

H3: There is a mediating effect of perceived benefits on the relationship between counseling accessibility and the intention to accept counseling services among students in online flexible distance learning higher education institutions.

Relationship between Counselor Competency, Perceived Benefits and Intention to Accept

The relationship between counselor competency and counseling service acceptance in education is crucial for ensuring students feel confident utilizing available support services. Counselor competency encompasses various dimensions, including knowledge, skills, empathy, and the ability to build rapport with students. When counselors exhibit high competency levels, they are more likely to address students' needs effectively, fostering trust and encouraging acceptance of counseling services (Cloutier & Low, 2024; Simons et al., 2022). Perceived benefits play a vital mediating role in this dynamic. When students recognize that a competent counselor can provide valuable insights and effective strategies for managing stress, enhancing mental health, and improving academic performance, their willingness to accept and engage with counseling services increases (Li et al., 2023). This perception is reinforced when counselors demonstrate their ability to facilitate positive outcomes, enhancing students' overall experiences (Chen, Du, & Qi, 2022). Additionally, the presence of competent counselors contributes to a supportive counseling environment, increasing students' comfort levels, particularly for those who may experience anxiety or stigma surrounding mental health services (Li et al., 2020). The more students perceive the likelihood of benefiting from counseling, the more inclined they are to seek these services (Rong et al., 2023; Park et al., 2023). Counselor competency significantly influences counseling service acceptance in educational settings, primarily by mediating perceived benefits. Enhancing counselor training and support systems can lead to better student engagement and improved mental health and academic outcomes (Flavián et al., 2022; Turliuc & Candel, 2022). Thus, the following hypotheses were proposed for this study:

H4: There is a relationship between counselor competency and the intention to accept counseling services among students in online flexible distance learning higher education institutions.

H5: There is a relationship between counselor competency and perceived benefits towards the intention to accept counseling services among students in an online flexible distance learning higher education institutions.

H6: There is a relationship between perceived benefits and the intention to accept counseling services among students in online flexible distance learning higher education institutions.

H7: There is a mediating effect of perceived benefits on the relationship between counselor competency and the intention to accept counseling services among students in online flexible distance learning higher education institutions.

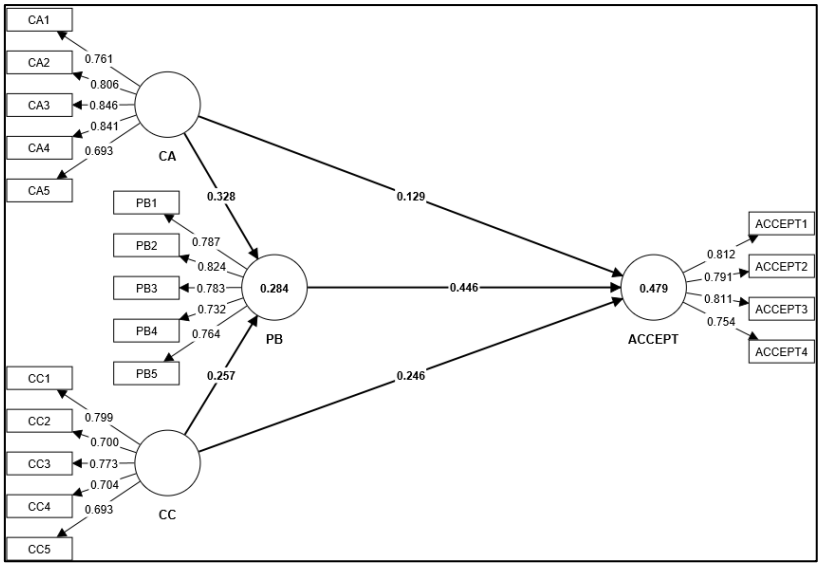

Figure 1: Research Framework

Note: CA=Counseling Accessibility CC=Counselor Competency PB=Perceived Benefit ACCEPT=Acceptance

Methodology

This study explored the intricate relationships among counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and students' intention to accept counseling services among students within online flexible distance learning higher education institutions while also analyzing the mediating effects of perceived benefits. A thorough data collection approach was implemented to ensure reliable and valid measurements. The selection of tools was informed by existing literature. The researchers developed a survey encompassing 19 observed variables: counsellor accessibility (5 items) adapted from American College Counseling Association (2017) and counsellor competency (5 items) adopted from Pedersen et al. (2002), perceived benefits (5 items) sourced from baker & Duncan (2013), and intention to accept (4 items) adopted from Vogel et al. (2006. Participants evaluated each construct utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A purposive sampling strategy was applied due to the absence of a complete population list. Out of 420 distributed surveys, 334 responses were received (79.5% response rate), validating the use of structural equation modelling (SEM) for analysis. After data cleaning, 311 responses were considered appropriate for analysis. The research employed SmartPLS software, acclaimed for its SEM capabilities, to analyze data and test hypotheses due to its robust assessment features and ability to manage multivariate data, following study objectives and recommendations from Ringle et al. (2022). SmartPLS enabled a thorough evaluation of the proposed hypotheses and performed extensive multivariate data analysis, facilitating a comprehensive examination of measurement and structural models.

Data Analysis

Respondents' Profiles

The respondent sample consists of 311 individuals, with a nearly balanced gender distribution: 147 males (47.3%) and 164 females (52.7%). The largest group is between 31-40 years old, comprising 137 respondents (44.1%), followed by those under 30, which account for 122 respondents (39.2%). Older age groups are less represented, with only 41 respondents (13.2%) in the 41-50 age range and 11 respondents (3.5%) in the 51-60 age range. Regarding

academic year, most respondents are in the earlier to mid-stages of their studies, with 74 respondents (23.8%) in Year 3 and 68 respondents (21.9%) in Year 2. Year 1 students make up 20.3% of the sample, while the number of respondents decreases in higher years, with Year 4 at 16.1%, Year 5 at 10.9%, and Year 6 at 7.1%. As for academic programs, most respondents are enrolled in diploma programs, totaling 208 students (66.9%), followed by 76 students (24.5%) pursuing master's degrees. There are fewer students in bachelor's programs (25, or 8.0%) and doctoral programs (2, or 0.6%). When asked about their experience with counseling, a clear majority (89.1%) have never sought counseling services, while only 10.9% have. However, when it comes to recommending counseling services to peers, an overwhelming 99.7% of respondents said they would recommend such services, indicating a strong positive perception of counseling despite limited personal usage.

Common Method bias

The full collinearity test is a critical diagnostic tool for assessing common method bias by examining the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each construct in a model. As recommended by Kock (2015) and Kock & Lynn (2012), a VIF value greater than 3.3 may indicate the presence of common method bias, as it suggests excessive multicollinearity between the constructs due to shared measurement methods. In this study, the VIF values for all constructs are well below the 3.3 threshold, ranging from 1.366 to 1,913 (Table 1). These results suggest minimal multicollinearity, reinforcing that common method bias is unlikely to influence the findings significantly. Therefore, the relationships between the constructs appear robust, with negligible impact from common method variance. This reinforces the validity of the conclusions drawn from the analysis, ensuring that measurement-related biases do not confound the observed effects.

Table 1
Full Collinearity Test

	ACCEPT	CA	CC	PB
ACCEPT		1.844	1.757	1.463
CA	1.854		1.409	1.816
CC	1.810	1.443		1.913
PB	1.366	1.686	1.734	

Measurement Model

The study employed the measurement evaluation approach Hair et al. (2017) recommended to perform first- and second-order assessments, particularly targeting items with loadings under 0.7. An analysis of construct reliability and validity indicated that all constructs had Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above 0.5, ranging from 0.541 to 0.628 (Table 2), thereby establishing convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, composite reliability values for all constructs exceeded 0.7, between 0.789 and 0.874, while Cronbach's alpha values were also above 0.7, ranging from 0.787 to 0.851 (Table 2). Initial examination of cross-loadings confirmed discriminant validity and ensured accurate measurement and representation of constructs (Table 2). Further, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, as suggested by Henseler et al. (2015), was employed to evaluate discriminant validity in Variance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (VB-SEM). The HTMT ratios for the constructs and the original sample are provided in Table 3, all below the 0.85 threshold.

Table 2
Constructs Reliability and Validity & Items' Loadings

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Acceptance	ACCEPT1	0.812	0.803	0.810	0.628
	ACCEPT2	0.791			
	ACCEPT3	0.811			
	ACCEPT4	0.754			
Counseling	CA1	0.761	0.851	0.874	0.627
Accessibility	CA2	0.806			
	CA3	0.846			
	CA4	0.841			
	CA5	0.693			
Counsellor	CC1	0.799	0.787	0.789	0.541
Competency	CC2	0.700			
	CC3	0.773			
	CC4	0.704			
	CC5	0.693			
Perceived	PB1	0.787	0.838	0.842	0.607
Benefits	PB2	0.824			
	PB3	0.783			
	PB4	0.732			
	PB5	0.764			

Notes: CA=Cronbach Alpha CR=Composite Reliability AVE=Average

Variance Extracted

Table 3
Hetrotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratios

	ACCEPT	CA	CC
CA	0.596		
CC	0.664	0.786	
PB	0.753	0.569	0.567

Structural Model

In this study, the structural model evaluation adhered to the rigorous methodology outlined by Hair et al. (2017), which encompasses a comprehensive analysis of pathway coefficients (β) and coefficients of determination (R^2) utilizing the Partial Least Squares (PLS) technique, the evaluation employed 5,000 sub-samples to assess the significance of the path coefficients. The results of hypothesis testing, alongside the confidence intervals for the path coefficients (beta), t-statistics, and p-values, are meticulously presented in Table 4. This diligent approach yields essential insights into the strength and significance of the relationships among the variables within the structural model. Table 4 provides an in-depth review of each hypothesis, detailing beta coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, and the corresponding support for the hypotheses. By offering this level of detail, the analysis clarifies the direct relationships among the variables and enhances the robustness of the study's conclusions. The comprehensive assessment of these statistical parameters ultimately underscores the interactions examined, enriching the understanding of the structural model's dynamics and reinforcing the validity of

the findings. Such thorough scrutiny of the pathway coefficients and associated statistical measures ensures a more reliable framework for interpreting the relationships within the study.

The hypotheses testing results present a comprehensive analysis of the relationships among the variables in the study, focusing on the beta coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, and subsequent decisions to accept or reject each hypothesis. Starting with *Hypothesis 1 (H1)*, which asserts that counselor accessibility influences the intention to accept counseling, the beta coefficient is 0.129, with a t-statistic of 1.830 and a p-value of 0.067. Since the p-value exceeds the significant threshold of 0.05, H1 is rejected, suggesting that counselor accessibility does not significantly affect the intention to accept services. In contrast, *Hypothesis 2 (H2)* posits that counselor accessibility impacts perceived benefits, yielding a beta of 0.328, a t-statistic of 5.022, and a highly significant p-value of 0.000. Consequently, H2 is accepted, indicating a strong and positive relationship between counselor accessibility and perceived benefits. Continuing to *Hypothesis 3 (H3)*, which examines the mediation effect of perceived benefits on the relationship between counselor accessibility and intention to accept, results show a beta of 0.146, a t-statistic of 3.955, and a p-value of 0.000. These figures lead to the acceptance of H3, confirming that perceived benefits significantly mediate the relationship between counselor accessibility and intention to accept.

Hypothesis 4 (H4) reveals a beta of 0.246, a t-statistic of 3.948, and a p-value of 0.000, leading to its acceptance. This suggests that counselor competency significantly predicts intention to accept counseling services. Similarly, *Hypothesis 5 (H5)* demonstrates a beta of 0.257, a t-statistic of 4.034, and a p-value of 0.000, affirming that counselor competency also positively influences perceived benefits. Thus, it is accepted. *Hypothesis 6 (H6)* proposes that perceived benefits directly affect the intention to accept, showing a robust beta of 0.446, an impressive t-statistic of 8.472, and a p-value of 0.000, leading to its acceptance. Finally, *Hypothesis 7 (H7)* examines the mediation effect of perceived benefits between counselor competency and intention to accept, reporting a beta of 0.114, a t-statistic of 3.843, and a p-value of 0.000. Thus, H7 is accepted. In summary, the analysis reveals that while counselor accessibility alone does not significantly influence intention to accept counseling, counselor competency and perceived benefits play critical roles in shaping students' acceptance of counseling services, highlighting the importance of these factors in promoting effective counseling engagement.

Table 4
Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Beta	T-statistics	P-values	2.50%	97.50%	Decision
H1: CA -> ACCEPT	0.129	1.830	0.067	-0.007	0.266	*Rejected*
H2: CA -> PB	0.328	5.022	0.000	0.198	0.454	*Accepted*
H3: CA -> PB -> ACCEPT	0.146	3.955	0.000	0.081	0.229	*Accepted*
H4: CC -> ACCEPT	0.246	3.948	0.000	0.121	0.362	*Accepted*
H5: CC -> PB	0.257	4.034	0.000	0.123	0.375	*Accepted*
H6: PB -> ACCEPT	0.446	8.472	0.000	0.341	0.549	*Accepted*
H7: CC -> PB -> ACCEPT	0.114	3.843	0.000	0.058	0.174	*Accepted*

Note: Significant p<0.05

Effect Sizes (f^2) & Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

Table 5 presents a comprehensive overview of effect sizes (f^2), categorized according to the benchmarks established by Cohen (1992), which classify effect sizes as small (0.020 to 0.150), medium (0.150 to 0.350), or large (0.350 and above). In this research, the effect sizes range significantly from small (0.017) to large (0.273), illustrating the diverse levels of influence the studied variables exert on one another. Furthermore, the analysis includes the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, which remain comfortably below the more lenient threshold of 5, with the highest recorded value being 1.904. This indicates minimal collinearity among variables, which is crucial for enhancing the reliability of effect size comparisons and the interpretation of coefficients within the structural model. The low level of collinearity supports the validity of the findings and strengthens the overall integrity of the model's assessments. Notably, the model reveals a significant degree of explained variance for the endogenous constructs, with an R^2 value of 0.479 (Figure 1), indicating that the predictors in the model can account for nearly half of the variability in the dependent variables. Additionally, regarding the mediating factor, the model explains approximately 28.4% of the variance, as indicated by an R^2 value of 0.284. This substantial explained variance reinforces the model's effectiveness in capturing the complexities of the relationships among the variables studied, contributing to a robust understanding of the dynamics at play.

Table 5
Effect Sizes (f^2) & Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

	f2		VIF	
	ACCEPT	PB	ACCEPT	PB
CA	0.017	0.086	1.904	1.754
CC	0.063	0.052	1.846	1.751
PB	0.273		1.397	

PLSpredicts & Cross-Validated Predictive Ability Test (CVPAT)

The inference and managerial implications were rigorously assessed through out-of-sample predictive analysis utilizing the PLSpredict method, as recommended by Shmueli et al. (2016, 2019). As illustrated in Table 6, the PLS-SEM approach yielded significantly improved Q^2 predictions (>0) when benchmarked against naive mean predictions, consistently demonstrating lower Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) values compared to those derived from linear model (LM) benchmarks. This finding underscores the robust predictive capabilities of the model. Specifically, in nine comparative scenarios, eight RMSE values resulting from PLS-SEM predictions exceeded those of the LM prediction benchmarks, thus highlighting the predictive strength of the proposed model, as detailed in Table 7. The implementation of the Cross-Validated Predictive Ability Test (CVPAT) outlined by Hair et al. (2022), combined with the PLSpredict analysis as explored by Liengaard et al. (2021), marks a significant advancement in the domain of predictive modeling. Furthermore, Table 7 corroborates the superior predictive capacity of PLS-SEM, as evident from the lower average loss values compared to both indicator averages and LM benchmarks. This compelling evidence affirms the enhanced predictive performance of the PLS-SEM approach. It reinforces its practical applicability in real-world scenarios, emphasizing its value for managerial decision-making in complex environments. Overall, these results advocate for the continued adoption of PLS-SEM as a methodological standard for predictive analysis in research and practice.

Table 6
PLSpredicts

	Q^2predict	PLS-RMSE	LM-MSE	PLS-LM
ACCEPT1	0.275	0.623	0.632	-0.009
ACCEPT2	0.186	0.630	0.644	-0.014
ACCEPT3	0.215	0.683	0.690	-0.007
ACCEPT4	0.114	0.740	0.742	-0.002
PB1	0.209	0.639	0.637	0.002
PB2	0.183	0.631	0.641	-0.010
PB3	0.104	0.690	0.693	-0.003
PB4	0.132	0.700	0.718	-0.018
PB5	0.176	0.625	0.637	-0.012

Table 7
Cross Validated Predictive Ability Test (CVPAT)

	Average loss difference	t-value	p-value
ACCEPT	-0.109	5.186	0.000
PB	-0.082	4.125	0.000
Overall	-0.094	5.266	0.000

Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA)

Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) is a valuable tool for understanding the relationship between the importance and performance of various constructs, as highlighted by Ringle and Sarstedt (2016) and Hair et al. (2018). In Table 8, the analysis reveals that among the constructs, Perceived Benefits (PB) holds the highest importance score at 0.446 but has the lowest performance rating at 60.821. This indicates a significant gap between what students value in terms of perceived benefits and their actual experiences, emphasizing the need for targeted improvements in this area. To enhance PB and positively impact collaborative learning, institutions could implement strategies such as increasing awareness of the available counseling services and communicating the potential benefits of these services. Developing workshops or information sessions to highlight success stories and effective outcomes could help students appreciate the advantages of counseling resources. Furthermore, continuously integrating feedback mechanisms to gather student input could foster a more responsive and supportive environment.

Table 8
Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA)

	Importance	Performance
CA	0.276	66.472
CC	0.361	65.942
PB	0.446	60.821

Discussion & Conclusion

Discussion

To enhance counseling accessibility and counselor competency in open online flexible distance learning (OOFDL) higher education institutions, several practical strategies should be adopted. First, institutions can improve counseling accessibility by implementing 24/7 online

counseling services and creating user-friendly platforms that facilitate easy access to mental health resources. The results, particularly Hypothesis 2 (H2), which showed a beta of 0.328 and was accepted, highlight the significant impact that counselor accessibility has on perceived benefits, reinforcing the need for institutions to focus on increasing awareness and utilization of these services (Ahmad et al., 2024). Additionally, to bolster counselor competency, institutions should invest in ongoing training and professional development programs designed to improve counselors' skills, particularly in online environments where building rapport can be challenging. This focus aligns with the acceptance of Hypothesis 4 (H4), which has a beta of 0.246, indicating that counselor competency directly influences students' intention to accept counseling services (Cloutier & Low, 2024). Moreover, mentorship programs can be established wherein experienced counselors guide novice counselors, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and shared knowledge. To address the gaps indicated by the results, institutions should also consider developing targeted marketing campaigns that effectively communicate the potential benefits of counseling services, thereby reinforcing Hypothesis 6 (H6), which demonstrates a strong beta of 0.446, highlighting the importance of perceived benefits in driving students' acceptance of these services (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2023). Conversely, it is critical to acknowledge Hypothesis 1 (H1), which was rejected with a beta of 0.129, suggesting that merely increasing accessibility may not directly translate into an intention to accept counseling services. This could be due to lingering stigma surrounding mental health support or insufficient awareness among students about the types of counseling available. Therefore, integrating these strategies will not only enhance the accessibility and competency of counseling services but also foster an environment where students feel empowered and encouraged to seek the support they need, ultimately bridging the gap between accessibility and actual utilization.

Theoretical Implication

The theoretical implications of this study are significant, particularly regarding the Health Belief Model (HBM), which serves as the underpinning theory for understanding the relationships among the variables within the proposed research model. The HBM posits that individuals' health-related behaviors are influenced by their perceptions of susceptibility, severity, benefits, and barriers (Becker & Rosenstock, 1974). In this context, counselor accessibility and competency are critical factors that impact students' perceived benefits of counseling services, ultimately influencing their intention to accept such services. For instance, the positive relationship between counselor competency and students' intention to accept counseling (H4) aligns with the HBM's emphasis on perceived benefits as a mediator (Cloutier & Low, 2024; Hyseni Duraku et al., 2023). The study demonstrates that enhanced counselor competency increases perceived benefits, boosting the likelihood of service acceptance (González et al., 2023). Furthermore, rejecting H1 suggests that increasing accessibility alone may not suffice in changing behaviors, indicating that perceived barriers still exist (Irawan et al., 2024). This underscores the necessity of addressing both individual beliefs about the benefits of counseling and structural barriers to accessing these services. Thus, the findings encourage further exploration of how the HBM can inform interventions tailored to enhance students' engagement with counseling services by bridging the gap between perceived accessibility, benefits, and acceptance (Ahmad et al., 2024; Simons et al., 2022). The theoretical framework strengthens the understanding of the dynamics at play and provides a foundation for future research in counseling within OOFDL higher education settings.

Managerial Implication

This study is crucial for online flexible distance learning (OOFDL) higher education institutions aiming to enhance student intention to accept counseling services. As institutions increasingly rely on digital platforms, it is essential to prioritize the accessibility and competency of counseling resources. The findings indicate that improving counselor competency significantly affects students' intention to accept counseling (H4), highlighting the necessity for ongoing professional development and training for counselors to address the unique challenges faced in an online environment effectively (Cloutier & Low, 2024; Hyseni Duraku et al., 2023). Furthermore, since students may harbor misconceptions about counseling accessibility (as suggested by the rejection of H1), institutions must implement targeted awareness campaigns to educate students on the available resources and their benefits, bridging the perceived gaps (Ahmad et al., 2024). This aligns with Hypothesis 6, which posits that enhancing perceived benefits will increase acceptance (Chen, Du, & Qi, 2022). By establishing user-friendly online counseling platforms that integrate seamless access and communication, OOFDL institutions can foster a supportive environment, encouraging students to seek help (Irawan et al., 2024). Ultimately, these strategies will bolster student well-being and academic success in higher education settings (Simons et al., 2022).

Suggestions for Future Study

Future studies should explore several avenues to build on the findings of this study. First, longitudinal studies could be conducted to assess how changes in counseling accessibility and counselor competency over time influence students' intention to accept counseling services, providing insight into the effectiveness of interventions. Additionally, qualitative research could enhance understanding of student's perceptions and experiences with counseling online, identifying specific barriers and facilitators that quantitative data may not fully capture. Exploring cultural differences in attitudes toward counseling among diverse student populations could also provide valuable insights, helping institutions tailor their services to meet all students' unique needs better. Moreover, investigating the role of technology in facilitating counseling services, such as using AI-driven tools or apps, could yield innovative strategies for increasing engagement. Finally, studies could evaluate the impact of integrating peer support systems and mentorship programs alongside traditional counseling services, assessing their influence on perceived benefits and overall mental health outcomes for students in open online flexible distance learning environments.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the critical factors influencing the acceptance of counseling services among students in open online flexible distance learning (OOFDL) environments. By examining the roles of counselor accessibility, counselor competency, and perceived benefits, the research provides valuable insights into how these elements interact to shape students' intentions to seek counseling support. The findings emphasize that while accessibility is important, the competency of counselors and the perceived benefits of counseling significantly drive students' acceptance of these services. This underscores OOFDL institutions' need to focus on enhancing accessibility and counselor skills through targeted training and awareness campaigns. Institutions can promote mental well-being and improve academic outcomes by fostering an environment where students feel informed and supported. Ultimately, this study serves as a foundation for future research to further

enhance counseling services in higher education, ensuring that they effectively meet the needs of all students.

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