

Drivers of Counseling Services Acceptance among Online and Flexible Distance Learning Students

Zahir Osman*

Faculty of Business & Management, Open University Malaysia
Corresponding Author Email: zahir_osman@oum.edu.my

Aliza Ali

Faculty of Education, Open University Malaysia
Email: aliza_ali@oum.edu.my

Raziana Che Aziz

Faculty of Technology and Applied Sciences, Open University Malaysia
Email: raziana@oum.edu.my

Fatimah YusooF

Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Open University Malaysia
Email: fatimah51@oum.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i3/24731> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i3/24731

Published Date: 02 March 2025

Abstract

This study highlights the crucial role of accepting counseling services in online flexible distance learning higher education institutions, particularly as students face unique mental health and academic performance challenges. The primary aim of the research was to explore the relationships among counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and perceived benefits and how these factors influence students' intentions to accept counseling services. A quantitative approach was employed, utilising a structured survey for data collection among 358 participants. The data analysis used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses. The results of the hypotheses testing indicated significant positive relationships, with perceived benefits demonstrating the most decisive influence on counseling acceptance, followed by counselor competency and then counseling accessibility. These findings suggest that enhancing students' perceptions of the benefits of counseling can significantly increase their willingness to seek help. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of counselling services and investigate the influence of demographic factors on student perceptions. Additionally, qualitative inquiries could provide deeper insights into students' barriers to counselling. The

implications of this study are substantial, providing actionable insights for higher education institutions aiming to improve mental health outcomes.

Keywords: Counseling Accessibility, Counselor Competency, Perceived benefits, Counseling Services Acceptance, Online Flexible Distance Learning

Introduction

Counselling services in higher education institutions are becoming increasingly crucial, particularly as online flexible distance learning expands globally. These services have a significant role in supporting students' mental health, academic guidance, and career planning, which are pivotal for success in an open and adaptable learning environment (Liu, 2022)—in this context, counselling hinges on several factors, including providing personalised support, enhancing learning experiences, and improving retention and completion rates by addressing students' diverse needs and challenges (Sari et al., 2023). In online flexible distance learning, counselling services face specific challenges. Current issues include the lack of accessibility and awareness of such services among students who engage in distance education (Chen et al., 2022). Many students may be unaware of the availability or importance of counselling services due to geographical distance, less face-to-face interaction, or inadequate communication channels (Alvarez-Hernandez et al., 2022). Moreover, trends show a growing demand for online counselling services, driven by the increasing awareness of mental health issues and the pivot towards digital solutions expedited by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2023). As more educational institutions offer online programs, integrating effective counselling services into digital platforms has become a trending necessity (Yandri et al., 2023). Despite these advancements, significant research gaps exist in understanding counselling services' optimal implementation and effects in open, online, flexible distance learning (Kebah et al., 2019). For instance, there is a need for more comprehensive research on the effectiveness of virtual counselling methods compared to traditional face-to-face approaches (Cerolini et al., 2023). Additionally, studies exploring how different demographic groups experience and benefit from these services online are limited (El-Hachem et al., 2023). There is also a dearth of research on the long-term impact of counselling on students' academic outcomes and mental well-being within online higher education (Kebah et al., 2019). These gaps highlight the potential areas for future research and development. By addressing these, educational institutions can better tailor their counselling services to meet the unique needs of distance learners. The significance of such studies extends to policymakers, educators, and students alike. For policymakers, comprehensive data can inform policy development to allocate resources effectively, ensuring equitable access to mental health and academic counselling across various demographic groups (Almajali et al., 2023). For institutions offering open online flexible education, filling these research gaps can enhance their support services, attracting and retaining students by fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Ultimately, improved counselling support means better guidance in navigating the challenges of distance learning, leading to better academic and personal outcomes. This study assesses the direct relationship between counseling accessibility, counselor competency and intention to accept counseling services among students in online flexible distance-learning higher education institutions.

Literature Review

Underpinning Theory

The Health Belief Model (HBM) is a psychological framework that helps explain individuals' behaviours concerning health-related services. It posits that health behaviours are influenced by personal beliefs about health conditions and the perceived benefits and barriers to accessing care (Rosenstock, 1974; Maiman & Becker, 1974). This model is particularly relevant in counseling services for students in online flexible distance learning institutions, where understanding the intention to accept these services can be critical for fostering mental well-being. In this study, the variables of counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and intention to accept counseling services can be directly related to the components of the HBM. Perceived susceptibility involves students' recognition of potential mental health issues they may face while studying remotely, such as stress and isolation. Perceived severity reflects their beliefs about the impact of these issues on their academic performance and personal life. Perceived benefits relate to how students view the advantages of utilizing counseling services, including emotional support and improved academic outcomes, which may be heightened by the competency of counselors they encounter. Conversely, perceived barriers encompass obstacles like stigma, lack of awareness of available services, or feelings of inadequacy in accessing online counseling. Finally, cues to action can include promotional efforts by educational institutions to encourage students to seek help and remind them of available resources (Skinner et al., 2015). By utilizing the HBM, researchers can effectively analyze the factors influencing students' intentions to engage with counseling services, leading to improved support frameworks in online learning environments.

Relationship between Counseling Accessibility and Intention to Accept

The relationship between counseling accessibility and the intention to accept counseling services in higher education institutions is a crucial area of focus, especially in online and flexible learning environments. Accessibility refers to how easily students can reach and utilize counseling services, encompassing availability, ease of scheduling, online options, and institutional support (Lu et al., 2023; Park et al., 2024). When counseling services are readily accessible, students are more likely to engage with them due to reduced barriers. These may include logistical challenges, such as distance and time, or psychological barriers, such as perceived stigma and fear of judgment (El-Hachem et al., 2023). By providing clear information about services, ensuring ease of access through user-friendly platforms, and offering flexible appointment options, institutions can enhance students' willingness to seek help (De Veirman et al., 2022). In environments where counseling services are not easily accessible, students may feel discouraged from utilizing available resources, potentially leading to unmet mental health needs (Li et al., 2024). For instance, limitations in remote accessibility can be especially detrimental for students in online learning settings, where physical distance from campus resources is inherent. Thus, improving accessibility is about eliminating obstacles and fostering an inclusive and supportive atmosphere where students feel confident and motivated to seek assistance (Li et al., 2020). By prioritizing accessibility, higher education institutions can significantly boost students' intention and likelihood to engage with counseling services, thereby supporting their overall well-being and academic success (Grimmett et al., 2024). Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed for this study:

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

Relationship between Counselor Competency and Intention to Accept

The relationship between counselor competency and the intention to accept counseling services in higher education institutions is pivotal in encouraging students to seek and benefit from these services. Counselor competency refers to a counselor's ability to effectively understand, empathize, and guide students through their mental health and academic challenges. It encompasses technical skills, knowledge, interpersonal abilities, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability to diverse student needs (Bathje et al., 2022; Haas et al., 2024). When students perceive counselors as competent, they are more likely to trust and engage with the counseling process. This trust is essential for creating a safe environment where students feel comfortable sharing personal concerns. Competent counselors can address various issues, from anxiety and stress to more complex psychological matters, thereby increasing counseling services' perceived value and efficacy (Chen, Du, & Qi, 2022). Furthermore, competency in counselors reassures students that their issues will be handled professionally and confidentially, reducing apprehensions associated with seeking help. The perception of high counselor competency can significantly influence a student's decision to initiate or continue using counseling services, as it increases confidence in receiving meaningful and actionable support (Osman et al., 2018). Conversely, if students perceive counselors as lacking in competency, they may be reluctant to seek assistance, fearing inadequate support. Therefore, enhancing counselor training, ensuring cultural competence, and continuously adapting to emerging student needs are crucial strategies for institutions aiming to boost the acceptance and utilization of counseling services within their student communities (Nardini-Bubols et al., 2024; Caskie et al., 2024). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed for this study:

H2: There is a relationship between counsellor competency and intention to accept counselling services among students in online flexible distance-learning higher education institutions.

Relationship between Perceived Benefits and Intention to Accept

The relationship between perceived benefits and the intention to accept counselling services in higher education institutions plays a significant role in students' decision-making processes regarding mental health support. Perceived benefits encompass the advantages students believe they will gain from counselling services, such as improved emotional well-being, effective coping strategies, enhanced academic performance, and personal growth (Jiang et al., 2022; Sahoo et al., 2023). When students recognise the potential positive outcomes of counselling, they are more likely to be motivated to seek help (Intaratat et al., 2024). The belief that counselling can provide valuable support during challenging times fosters a proactive approach to mental health, encouraging students to overcome barriers like stigma or fear of judgment (Ajlouni et al., 2023). Additionally, understanding the specific benefits of counselling, such as stress reduction or conflict resolution skills, can enhance students' willingness to embrace these services (Guzman et al., 2024). Conversely, if students perceive limited benefits or question the effectiveness of counselling, they may hesitate to initiate contact with these services. Institutions can play a key role in shaping these perceptions by clearly communicating the advantages of counselling through awareness campaigns, testimonials, and educational resources (Yeung et al., 2024). By highlighting the tangible benefits of counselling, higher education institutions can significantly improve students' intentions to engage with mental health services, ultimately promoting a healthier, more supportive academic environment (Liu et al., 2022). Hence, the following hypothesis was proposed for this study:

H3: There is a relationship between perceived benefits and intention to accept counselling services among students in online flexible distance-learning higher education institutions.

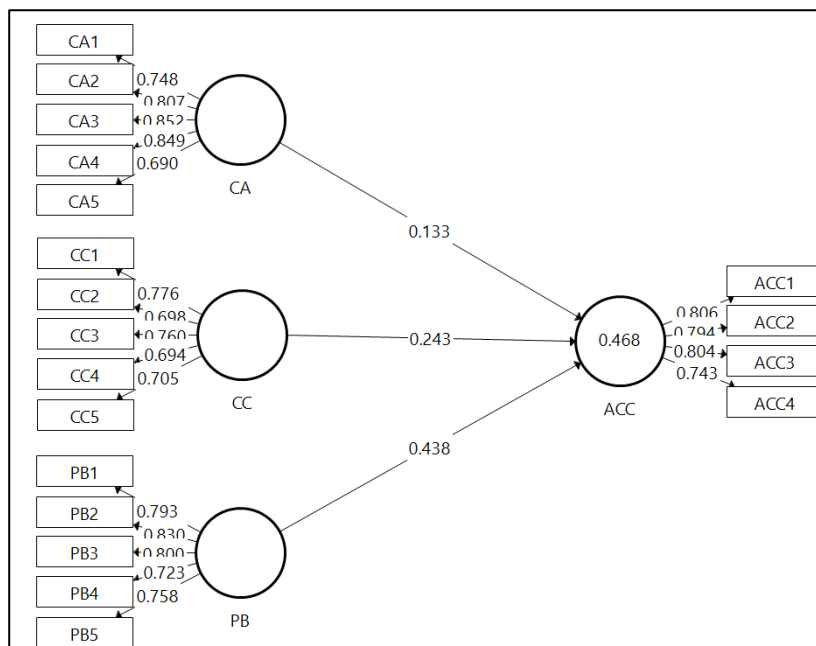


Figure 1: Research Model

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

Methodology

This study meticulously explored the intricate relationships among counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and students' intention to accept counseling services within online flexible distance learning higher education institutions while also examining the mediating effects of perceived benefits. A rigorous data collection approach was implemented to ensure the reliability and validity of the measurements. The selection of measurement tools was guided by existing literature, ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of the constructs. The researchers developed a comprehensive survey encompassing 19 observed variables: counseling accessibility (5 items) adapted from the American College Counseling Association (2017), counseling competency (5 items) sourced from Pedersen et al. (2002), perceived benefits (5 items) derived from Baker & Duncan (2013), and intention to accept counseling services (4 items) adopted from Vogel et al. (2006). Participants evaluated each construct utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A purposive sampling strategy was employed due to the absence of a complete population list. Of the 420 surveys distributed, 365 responses were received, yielding a response rate of 79.5%, which validated the use of structural equation modeling (SEM) for analysis. Following data cleaning, 358 responses were deemed appropriate for analysis. The research utilized SmartPLS software, renowned for its SEM capabilities, to analyze the data and test the hypotheses. It leveraged its robust assessment features and capacity to manage multivariate data per the study objectives and the recommendations from Ringle et al. (2022). SmartPLS facilitated a thorough evaluation of the proposed hypotheses and conducted extensive multivariate data analysis, enabling a comprehensive examination of measurement and structural models.

Data Analysis

Respondents' Profiles

The study comprises 365 individuals, with a gender distribution of 176 males (48.2%) and 189 females (51.8%). Age-wise, the largest group is those aged 21-30 years, constituting 126 respondents (34.5%), followed by those under 20 years old, with 98 respondents (26.8%). The 31-40 age group includes 54 individuals (14.8%), while those aged 41-50 account for 31 respondents (8.5%). The 51-60 age group includes 43 respondents (11.8%), and those over 60 years number 17 (4.7%). Regarding educational background, a majority of respondents, 247 (67.7%), have a postgraduate education. This is followed by 47 (12.9%) with undergraduate degrees and 34 (9.3%) with secondary school education. Those with a primary school education account for 26 respondents (7.1%), and an unspecified group, labeled "Other," includes 11 respondents (3.0%). Regarding income, most earn less than RM4,850, accounting for 108 respondents (29.6%). Those earning between RM4,851 and RM10,970 comprise 156 respondents (42.7%), while 71 respondents (19.5%) earn more than RM10,971. The table also shows that 297 respondents (81.4%) have used counseling services, while 68 (18.6%) have not. The total number of valid respondents is 365 (100.0%).

Common Method Bias

Common method bias using the full collinearity test outlined by Kock & Lynn (2012) and Kock (2015) involves examining Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for each construct in the study. Common method bias is often a concern in research where data is collected from the same source, potentially inflating relationships between variables. In Table 1, the VIF values for the constructs Accessibility (ACC), Counselor Accessibility (CA), Counselor Competency (CC), and Perceived Benefits (PB)—are all below the threshold of 3.3. Specifically, the highest VIF is 1.913 for Counselor Competency, indicating no severe multicollinearity issues. Values below 3.3 suggest that common method bias is unlikely to be a significant problem in this dataset. This outcome signifies that the relationships among the variables are likely not distorted by the methodological approach, lending confidence in the validity of the findings regarding the interconnections between counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and perceived benefits affecting students' intentions to accept counseling services.

Table 1

Full Collinearity Test

	ACC	CA	CC	PB	
ACC			1.518	1.757	1.463
CA	1.781			1.409	1.819
CC	1.787	1.442			1.913
PB	1.208	1.279	1.734		

Measurement Model

Hair et al. (2017) recommended the measurement evaluation approach to conduct both first-order and second-order assessments. Table 2 presents the reliability and validity assessments for the constructs using Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs are above the acceptable threshold of 0.7, indicating good internal consistency, with Accessibility (ACC) at 0.796, Counselor Accessibility (CA) at 0.851, Counselor Competency (CC) at 0.779, and Perceived Benefits (PB) at 0.841. Composite Reliability scores further confirm the reliability, all

exceeding the threshold of 0.7: ACC is 0.867, CA is 0.893, CC is 0.849, and PB is 0.887, indicating consistent measurement reliability. Average Variance Extracted values demonstrate convergent validity, as all constructs have AVE scores above 0.5, suggesting that the constructs explain more variance than error; ACC's AVE is 0.620, CA is 0.627, CC is 0.529, and PB is 0.611. The item loadings for each construct, denoted by the AVE values, show that the items are well representative of their respective constructs. Overall, the constructs exhibit strong reliability and validity, supported by robust CA, CR, and AVE metrics, affirming the soundness of the measurement model employed in the study. These findings are based on a two-tail percentile bootstrap test at a 5% confidence interval with 5,000 subsamples.

Table 2

Construct Reliability and Validity & Items Loading

	CA	CR	AVE
ACC	0.796(0.759, 0.828)	0.867(0.846, 0.886)	0.620(0.581, 0.660)
CA	0.851(0.822, 0.875)	0.893(0.874, 0.910)	0.627(0.584, 0.669)
CC	0.779(0.726, 0.816)	0.849(0.817, 0.872)	0.529(0.473, 0.578)
PB	0.841(0.811, 0.872)	0.887(0.869, 0.907)	0.611(0.570, 0.662)

*Note: CA=Cronbach Alpha CR=Composite Reliability AVE=Average Variance Extracted
A two-tail percentile bootstrap test at 5% confidence interval (2.5%, 97.5%) with 5,000 subsamples were performed*

Discriminants Validity

The examination of cross-loadings confirmed discriminant validity and ensured accurate measurement and representation of constructs (Table 3). Additionally, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, as recommended by Henseler et al. (2015), was utilized to evaluate discriminant validity within the framework of Variance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (VB-SEM). The HTMT ratios for the constructs and the original sample are presented in Table 4, with all values falling below the 0.85 threshold, further supporting the validity of the constructs.

Table 3

Cross Loadings

	ACC	CA	CC	PB
ACC1	0.806	0.474	0.494	0.548
ACC2	0.794	0.412	0.394	0.439
ACC3	0.804	0.416	0.426	0.476
ACC4	0.743	0.267	0.362	0.473
CA1	0.280	0.748	0.439	0.295
CA2	0.387	0.807	0.528	0.359
CA3	0.514	0.852	0.590	0.510
CA4	0.425	0.849	0.558	0.402
CA5	0.331	0.690	0.433	0.303
CC1	0.335	0.508	0.776	0.312
CC2	0.373	0.425	0.698	0.325
CC3	0.349	0.436	0.760	0.314
CC4	0.476	0.498	0.694	0.418
CC5	0.380	0.489	0.705	0.322
PB1	0.551	0.430	0.427	0.793
PB2	0.506	0.424	0.416	0.830
PB3	0.442	0.304	0.313	0.800
PB4	0.449	0.355	0.305	0.723
PB5	0.451	0.375	0.375	0.758

Table 4

Hetrotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratios

	ACC	CA	CC
CA	0.586(0.459, 0.677)		
CC	0.660(0.562, 0.743)	0.7830.689, 0.857)	
PB	0.746(0.661, 0.823)	0.554(0.437, 0.657)	0.569(0.464, 0.664)

Note: A two-tail percentile bootstrap test at 5% confidence interval (2.5%, 97.5%) with 5,000 sub-samples were performed

Structural Model

In this study, the structural model evaluation meticulously followed the rigorous methodology outlined by Hair et al. (2017), which involves a detailed analysis of pathway coefficients (β) and coefficients of determination (R^2) using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) technique. This evaluation utilized 5,000 sub-samples to assess the path coefficients' significance rigorously. The results from the hypothesis testing, including confidence intervals for path coefficients (beta), t-statistics, and p-values, are thoroughly documented in Table 5. Such an approach delivers crucial insights into the strength and significance of the relationships among variables within the structural model. Table 5 provides an exhaustive overview of each hypothesis, detailing beta coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, and the level of support for each hypothesis. This level of detail enhances the clarity of the direct relationships among the variables, thereby increasing the robustness of the study's conclusions. The comprehensive assessment of these statistical parameters highlights the interactions being examined, deepening the understanding of the structural model's dynamics and reinforcing the validity of the findings.

This thorough examination of the pathway coefficients and related statistical measures ensures a more reliable framework for interpreting the relationships explored in the study.

The hypotheses testing results presented in Table 5 provide a detailed analysis of the influences on counseling services acceptance in online flexible distance learning environments, focusing on counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and perceived benefits. For Hypothesis 1 (*H1*), which posits that counseling accessibility positively influences the acceptance of counseling services, the beta value is 0.133, indicating a modest positive relationship. The t-statistic of 2.054 exceeds the critical value required for significance, and with a p-value of 0.040, this result is significant at the 5% significance level. The confidence interval from 0.012 to 0.256 does not encompass zero, reinforcing the conclusion. Consequently, *H1* is supported, illustrating that greater accessibility modestly boosts the likelihood of students accepting counseling services. Moving to Hypothesis 2 (*H2*), which suggests that counselor competency positively impacts counseling services acceptance, the analysis reveals a stronger positive relationship, with a beta value of 0.243. The t-statistic of 4.263 and a p-value of 0.000 highlight strong significance, well below the typical alpha level of 0.05. This result is supported further by a confidence interval from 0.130 to 0.336. Thus, *H2* is supported, indicating that higher perceived counselor competency significantly enhances acceptance. Finally, Hypothesis 3 (*H3*) investigates the perceived benefits' effect on the acceptance of counselling services. This hypothesis showcases the most substantial positive relationship, with a beta value 0.438. The t-statistic is notably high at 8.858, coupled with a highly significant p-value of 0.000. The confidence interval, ranging from 0.342 to 0.532, underscores the robustness of this finding. Therefore, *H3* is supported, affirming that perceived benefits substantially influence students' decisions to engage with counseling services. Overall, each hypothesis is supported, highlighting different facets contributing to the acceptance of counselling services, with perceived benefits showing the most substantial effect, followed by counsellor competency and accessibility.

Table 5

Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Beta	T Statistics	P Values	2.50%	97.50%	Decision
<i>H1</i> : CA -> ACC	0.133	2.054	0.040	0.012	0.256	<i>Supported</i>
<i>H2</i> : CC -> ACC	0.243	4.263	0.000	0.130	0.336	<i>Supported</i>
<i>H3</i> : PB -> ACC	0.438	8.858	0.000	0.342	0.532	<i>Supported</i>

Note: Significant at $p < 0.05$. A two-tail percentile bootstrap test at 5% confidence interval (2.5%, 97.5%) with 5,000 sub-samples were performed

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

Table 6 offers a detailed analysis of effect sizes (f^2) using the benchmarks set by Cohen (1992), which categorize them as minor (0.020 to 0.150), medium (0.150 to 0.350), and significant (0.350 and above). In this study, effect sizes vary from small (0.018) to substantial (0.260), showcasing the varied influence levels the studied variables exert on each other. Additionally, the analysis considers the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, all of which remain comfortably below the more permissive threshold of 5, with the highest value being 1.876. This suggests minimal collinearity among variables, an essential factor for enhancing the reliability of effect size comparisons and interpreting coefficients within the structural model.

The low collinearity supports the validity of the findings, thereby strengthening the overall integrity of the model's assessments. The model also demonstrates a significant degree of explained variance for the endogenous constructs, reflected in an R^2 value of 0.468 (Figure 1), indicating that the predictors can account for nearly half of the variability in the dependent variables. This considerable explained variance underscores the model's effectiveness in capturing the complexities of the relationships among the studied variables, contributing to a robust understanding of the dynamics at play.

Table 6

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

	f^2	VIF
CA	0.018	1.876
CC	0.060	1.846
PB	0.260	1.389

PLSpredicts & Cross-Validated Predictive Ability Test (CVPAT)

The inference and managerial implications were rigorously evaluated through out-of-sample predictive analysis using the PLSpredict method, as recommended by Shmueli et al. (2016, 2019). As shown in Table 6, the PLS-SEM approach yielded significantly improved Q^2 predictions (>0) when compared to naive mean predictions, consistently demonstrating lower Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) values than those derived from linear model (LM) benchmarks. This finding highlights the robust predictive capabilities of the model. Specifically, in four comparative scenarios, all four RMSE values from PLS-SEM predictions surpassed those of the LM prediction benchmarks, underscoring the predictive strength of the proposed model, as detailed in Table 7. The integration of the Cross-Validated Predictive Ability Test (CVPAT) outlined by Hair et al. (2022), along with the PLSpredict analysis explored by Liengaard et al. (2021), represents a significant advancement in predictive modeling. Moreover, Table 7 further substantiates the superior predictive capacity of PLS-SEM, with lower average loss values than 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, emphasising 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 7

PLSpredicts

	PLS-RMSE	LM-RMSE	PLS-LM	Q^2_{predict}
ACC1	0.579	0.592	-0.013	0.367
ACC2	0.600	0.612	-0.012	0.237
ACC3	0.655	0.664	-0.009	0.276
ACC4	0.690	0.699	-0.009	0.223

Table 8

Cross Validated Predictive Ability Test

	Average loss difference	t-value	p-value
ACCEPT	-0.137	5.721	0.000
Overall	-0.126	6.324	0.000

Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA)

Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) provides valuable insights into the relationship between constructs' importance and performance levels, guiding managerial decisions (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016; Hair et al., 2018). In this analysis, perceived benefits emerged as the most important construct (0.438) but exhibited the lowest performance (59.922), highlighting a critical area of focus for enhancing counseling services acceptance. To address this gap, strategies should be implemented to improve perceived benefits, such as increasing awareness of the positive outcomes associated with counseling, providing clear communication on the services offered, and highlighting success stories from past clients. Additionally, enhancing the visibility of counseling services and integrating feedback mechanisms could help assess and improve the perceived effectiveness of these services. By targeting perceived benefits, institutions can foster a more compelling narrative around counseling, thereby increasing both its acceptance and utilization among students.

Table 9

Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA)

	Importance	Performance
CA	0.133	65.829
CC	0.243	65.552
PB	0.438	59.922

Discussion & Conclusion*Discussion*

To enhance counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and the perceived benefits of acceptance of counselling services in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions, targeted strategies must be implemented in line with the statistical analysis findings. The results indicate that counseling accessibility ($\beta = 0.133$), counselor competency ($\beta = 0.243$), and perceived benefits ($\beta = 0.438$) are all positively associated with accepting counseling services. To improve counseling accessibility, institutions should implement user-friendly platforms that facilitate seamless access to counseling services, including chat functionalities, mobile-friendly applications, and flexible scheduling options that accommodate students' schedules (Liu, 2022). Additionally, promoting awareness about these services through various communication channels, including social media and institutional websites, will help reach a broader student audience. Enhancing counselor competency is crucial; institutions can invest in ongoing training programs to equip counselors with the latest skills and best practices for virtual counseling. Workshops focusing on cultural sensitivity, mental health issues prevalent among students, and innovative counseling techniques will further enhance counselors' capabilities. Regular feedback from students can also be instrumental in evaluating counselor performance and identifying areas for improvement (Sari et al., 2023). Higher education institutions must actively communicate the positive outcomes of utilising these services to elevate the perceived benefits of

counseling services ($\beta = 0.438$). Sharing testimonials from former clients, disseminating data on success rates, and incorporating mental health education into the curriculum can significantly enhance students' perceptions of the value of counseling. Moreover, engaging students in promotional activities and awareness campaigns can foster a supportive community that encourages seeking help (Almajali et al., 2023). These strategies address the constructs identified in the statistical results, ultimately supporting better mental health outcomes and academic performance for students in online learning environments while reinforcing the importance of sustained efforts to improve counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and the perceived benefits of counseling services.

Theoretical Implication

The theoretical implications of this study, grounded in the Health Belief Model (HBM) (Rosenstock, 1974; Maiman & Becker, 1974), offer valuable insights into the variables influencing counseling services acceptance in online flexible distance learning environments. The HBM posits that individuals' health-related behaviors are significantly influenced by their perceptions of susceptibility, severity, benefits, barriers, and cues to action. In the context of this research, counseling accessibility relates to the perceived barrier; when students view counseling services as easily accessible, their likelihood of seeking help increases, thereby enhancing acceptance. Counselor competency aligns with the perceived benefits component, as students are more likely to embrace counseling services when they believe qualified counselors will effectively address their needs. Perceived benefits, as indicated by a strong positive relationship with counseling services acceptance, directly reflect students' beliefs in the value and effectiveness of these services, reinforcing the HBM's premise that perceived benefits significantly impact health-seeking behaviors. Moreover, the findings suggest that emphasizing the benefits of counseling through effective communication and outreach initiatives can serve as a significant cue to action, motivating students to engage with mental health support. The proposed research model effectively integrates these dimensions, illustrating how counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and perceived benefits collectively influence students' intentions to accept counseling services. By aligning the study's variables with the HBM framework, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the determinants of help-seeking behavior. It provides a comprehensive perspective for enhancing counseling service uptake among students in distance learning settings.

Managerial Implication

The managerial implications of this study are critical for higher education institutions seeking to enhance acceptance of counseling services among students in online flexible distance learning environments. First, institutions should improve counseling accessibility by implementing user-friendly platforms and promoting awareness of available services through targeted outreach strategies, including social media and informational campaigns. Enhancing counselor competency through ongoing professional development and training programs will ensure that counselors are well-equipped to address students' needs effectively, thereby increasing trust and utilization of services. Additionally, fostering a positive perception of counseling services as beneficial can significantly impact students' willingness to seek help. Institutions should actively communicate the value of counseling by sharing success stories and incorporating mental health education into their curricula. By addressing these managerial strategies, institutions can create a supportive environment that encourages

students to engage with counseling services, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes and student success.

Suggestions for Future Study

Future studies should explore the longitudinal impacts of enhanced counseling services on student mental health and academic performance in online flexible distance learning environments. Additionally, the research could investigate the specific factors influencing perceived benefits, including the role of cultural differences and demographic variables in shaping students' attitudes towards counselling. It would also be beneficial to conduct comparative studies across various institutions to identify best practices and effective strategies for increasing counseling accessibility and counselor competency. Furthermore, qualitative research exploring students' experiences and barriers to seeking counseling would provide deeper insights into their perceptions and behaviors. Finally, incorporating advanced methodologies, such as mixed-methods approaches, could enrich findings by blending quantitative data with qualitative narratives, offering a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact. Such studies could contribute valuable knowledge to the existing literature, guiding institutions in developing more effective mental health support systems tailored to diverse student populations.

Conclusion

this study highlights the critical relationships among counseling accessibility, counselor competency, and perceived benefits in influencing students' acceptance of counseling services in online flexible distance learning environments. The findings indicate that enhancing these key elements can significantly improve students' willingness to engage with mental health support. The application of the Health Belief Model provided a valuable theoretical framework to understand how perceptions of barriers, benefits, and trust in counselors shape help-seeking behavior. The statistical results affirm that perceived benefits offer the strongest influence on counseling acceptance, emphasizing the importance of effective communication regarding the value of these services. By adopting strategic interventions to improve accessibility, enhance counselor competency, and promote perceived benefits, institutions can foster a supportive environment that encourages student engagement with counseling services. Ultimately, these efforts are essential for improving mental health outcomes and academic success among students in online learning settings.

References

- Ajlouni, A., Almahaireh, A., & Whaba, F. (2023). Students' perception of using ChatGPT in counseling and mental health education: the benefits and challenges. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (IJET)*, 18(20), 199-218.
- Almajali, A. A. B., Al-Bourini, E. S., Almajali, H. K., & Awamleh, W. J. (2023). The Extent Of The Importance Of Family Counseling In Supporting Parents' Acceptance Of Their Disabled Children From Their Point Of View In Jordan. *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture*, 33, 6157-6176.
- Alvarez-Hernandez, L. R., Childs, E. M., Fatehi, M., & Yeo, H. (2022). How perception relates to student utilization of college campus counseling services. *Journal of American College Health*, 1-9.
- American College Counseling Association. (ACCA). (2017). Best practices for college counseling centers: A guide for leadership and practice. American College Counseling Association.
- Baker, A. J., & Duncan, B. L. (2013). The benefits of college counseling centers: A meta-analysis. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(2), 187-202.
- Bathje, G. J., Pillersdorf, D., & Eddir, H. (2022). Multicultural competence as a common factor in the process and outcome of counseling. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 00221678221099679.
- Caskie, G. I., Sutton, M. C., & Voelkner, A. R. (2024). Clinical and counseling psychology doctoral trainees' attitudes toward and interest in working with older adult clients. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 45(2), 141-155.
- Cerolini, S., Zagaria, A., Franchini, C., Maniaci, V. G., Fortunato, A., Petrocchi, C., ... & Lombardo, C. (2023). Psychological Counseling among University Students Worldwide: A Systematic Review. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 13(9), 1831-1849.
- Chen, W. C., Chan, H. Y., Sung, Y. H., Chen, P. L., Hung, Y. F., Huang, K. C., & Hsu, S. S. (2023). Therapists' practical implementation and preparation of online counseling in the post-pandemic era. *Current Psychology*, 42(34), 30548-30560.
- Chen, X., Du, A., & Qi, R. (2022). Factors affecting willingness to receive online counseling: the mediating role of ethical concerns. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(24), 16462.
- Chen, X., Du, A., & Qi, R. (2022). Factors affecting willingness to receive online counseling: the mediating role of ethical concerns. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(24), 16462.
- Cohen, J. (1992). A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112, 155-159. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.112.1.155
- De Veirman, A. E., Thewissen, V., Spruijt, M. G., & Bolman, C. A. (2022). Factors Associated With Intention and Use of e-Mental Health by Mental Health Counselors in General Practices: Web-Based Survey. *JMIR Formative Research*, 6(12), e34754.
- El-Hachem, S. S., Lakkis, N. A., Osman, M. H., Issa, H. G., & Beshara, R. Y. (2023). University students' intentions to seek psychological counseling, attitudes toward seeking psychological help, and stigma. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 58(11), 1661-1674.
- El-Hachem, S. S., Lakkis, N. A., Osman, M. H., Issa, H. G., & Beshara, R. Y. (2023). University students' intentions to seek psychological counseling, attitudes toward seeking

- psychological help, and stigma. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 58(11), 1661-1674.
- Grimmett, M. A., Lupton-Smith, H., Beckwith, A., Messinger, E., Edwards, M., Moody, B., ... & Bates, D. (2024). Intent and impact: Connecting multicultural and social justice counselor training to community client experiences. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 52(2), 107-121.
- Guzman, L. E., Bridges, A. J., Díaz Benitez, D. E., & Hovey, J. D. (2024). Acculturation and Depression Help-Seeking Intentions in a Majority Mexican American College Student Sample. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 1-10.
- Haas, J., Walsh, D. D., & Marroquin, M. (2024). Enhancing Cultural Competence in Counselor Education through Sociolinguistic Awareness. *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*, 6(3), 4.
- Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2017). *A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2022). *A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)* (3 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hair, J.F., M. Sarstedt, C.M. Ringle, and S.P. Gudergan. (2018). *Advanced issues in partial least squares structural equation modeling*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications
- Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., and Sarstedt, M. (2015). **A new criterion for assessing discriminant validity in variance-based structural equation modeling**, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 43(1): 115-135
- Intararat, K., Osman, Z., Nguyen, H. A. T., Suhandoko, A. D. J., & Sultana, N. (2024). Peer and tutor interaction effects on collaborative learning: The role of learning self-efficacy. *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology*, 8(4), 2108-2121.
- Jiang, G., Yang, W., & Zhang, N. (2022). Effect of perceived risks, perceived benefits and regulatory events on users' supervision intention towards e-hailing platforms: A mixed method. *Journal of Information Science*, 01655515221128422.
- Kebah, M., Raju, V., & Osman, Z. (2019). Growth of online purchase in Saudi Arabia retail industry. *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering*, 8(3), 869-872.. ISSN: 2277-3878
- Kebah, M., Raju, V., & Osman, Z. (2019). Online purchasing trend in the retail industry in Saudi. *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering (IJRTE)*, 8(3), 865-868. ISSN: 2277-3878
- Kock, N. (2015). Common method bias in PLS-SEM: A full collinearity assessment approach. *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, 11(4), 1-10.
- Kock, N., & Lynn, G.S. (2012). Lateral collinearity and misleading results in variance-based SEM: An illustration and recommendations. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 13(7), 546-580.
- Li, X. T., Rahman, A., Connie, G., & Osman, Z. (2020). Examining customers' perception of electronic shopping mall's e-service quality. *International Journal of Services, Economics and Management*, 11(4), 329-346.
- Li, L., Peng, W., & Rheu, M. M. (2024). Factors predicting intentions of adoption and continued use of Artificial Intelligence chatbots for mental health: examining the role of Utaut model, stigma, privacy concerns, and artificial intelligence hesitancy. *Telemedicine and e-Health*, 30(3), 722-730.
- Liengaard, B. D., Sharma, P. N., Hult, G. T. M., Jensen, M. B., Sarstedt, M., Hair, J. F., & Ringle, C. M. (2021). Prediction: Coveted, Yet Forsaken? Introducing a Cross-validated

- Predictive Ability Test in Partial Least Squares Path Modeling. *Decision Sciences*, 52(2), 362-392.
- Liu, H. H. (2022). A Study of Factors Affecting Acceptance of Counseling Service System Service Users' Perspective. *Journal of Robotics, Networking and Artificial Life*, 9(1), 54-58.
- Liu, Y. L., Yan, W., Hu, B., Li, Z., & Lai, Y. L. (2022). Effects of personalization and source expertise on users' health beliefs and usage intention toward health chatbots: Evidence from an online experiment. *Digital Health*, 8, 20552076221129718.
- Lu, F., Wang, X., & Huang, X. (2023). Counseling for Health: How Psychological Distance Influences Continuance Intention towards Mobile Medical Consultation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(3), 1718.
- Maiman, L. A., & Becker, M. H. (1974). The health belief model: Origins and correlates in psychological theory. *Health education monographs*, 2(4), 336-353.
- Nardini-Bubols, M., Costa, D. B., Moret-Tatay, C., & Irigaray, T. Q. (2024). Effects of the Religious and Spiritual Competencies Training in Brazilian Psychologists: A Pilot Study. *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, 1-16.
- Osman, Z., Mohamad, W., Mohamad, R. K., Mohamad, L., & Sulaiman, T. F. T. (2018). Enhancing students' academic performance in Malaysian online distance learning institutions. *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education*, 33, 19-28.
- Park, G., Chung, J., & Lee, S. (2024). Human vs. machine-like representation in chatbot mental health counseling: the serial mediation of psychological distance and trust on compliance intention. *Current Psychology*, 43(5), 4352-4363.
- Pedersen, P. B., Draguns, J. G., Lonner, W. J., & Trimble, J. E. (2002). *Counseling across cultures* (5th ed.). Routledge.
- Ringle, C.M., and M. Sarstedt. (2016). Gain more insight from your PLS-SEM results: The importance-performance map analysis. *Industrial Management & Data Systems*. 116: 1865–1886.
- Ringle, Christian M., Wende, Sven, & Becker, Jan-Michael. (2022). SmartPLS 4. *Oststeinbek: SmartPLS*. Retrieved from <https://www.smartpls.com>
- Rosenstock, I. M. (1974). The Health Belief Model and Personal Health Behavior. *Health Education Monographs*, 2(4), 354-386.
- Sahoo, A. K., Dash, A., & Nayak, P. (2023). Perceived risk and benefits of e-health consultation and their influence on user's intention to use. *Journal of Science and Technology Policy Management*.
- Sari, R. K., Kurdi, M. S., Kurdi, M. S., Lukiani, E. R. M., & Cakranegara, P. A. (2023). Self-Acceptance for Students Through Reality Counseling Containing Local Wisdom. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 15(4), 6055-6062.
- Shmueli, G., M. Sarstedt, J.F. Hair, J.-H. Cheah, H. Ting, S. Vaithilingam, and C.M. Ringle. (2019). Predictive model assessment in PLS-SEM: Guidelines for using PLSpredict. *European Journal of Marketing*. 53: 2322–2347.
- Shmueli, G., S. Ray, J.M. Velasquez Estrada, and S.B. Chatla. (2016). The elephant in the room: predictive performance of PLS models. *Journal of Business Research*, 69: 4552–4564.
- Skinner, C. S., Tiro, J., & Champion, V. L. (2015). Background on the health belief model. *Health behavior: Theory, research, and practice*, 75, 1-34.
- Vogel, D. L., Wade, N. G., & Haake, E. M. (2006). Measuring the self-stigma associated with seeking psychological help. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(3), 325-337.

- Yandri, H., Mudjiran, M., Karneli, Y., & Netrawati, N. (2023). Mindfulness in Counseling: Implementation of Counseling in the Society 5.0. *Indonesian Journal of Counseling and Development*, 5(1), 24-31.
- Yeung, N. C., Lau, S. T., Mak, W. W., Cheng, C., Chan, E. Y., Siu, J. Y., & Cheung, P. S. (2024). Applying the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology to Identify Factors Associated With Intention to Use Teledelivered Supportive Care Among Recently Diagnosed Breast Cancer Survivors During COVID-19 in Hong Kong: Cross-Sectional Survey. *JMIR cancer*, 10(1), e51072.