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Client Confidentiality Issues in Online Counselling: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Client confidentiality can be expressed as an important ethical principle that counsellors must adhere in order to protect clients' information, such as sensitive demographic and personal data. However, the borderless nature of online counselling has raised new unique challenges regarding client confidentiality. Consequently, this study was conducted to examine the specific issues concerning client confidentiality in online counselling. Based on previous studies, one of the biggest factors that contributes to client confidentiality issues is the counsellors' ability to manage and secure digital data. To fill this research gap, this review highlights the key challenges in client confidentiality to raise awareness, thereby drawing significant attention to measures that can resolve these emerging issues.

Keywords: Client Confidentiality, Online Counselling, Counsellor Challenges, Data Privacy

Introduction

Client confidentiality is an ethical principle requiring mental health professionals to protect clients' personal information, and private communications from unauthorized disclosure (Kafka et al., 2024; American Psychological Association, 2023). Confidentiality is a fundamental aspect of counselling practice because it supports clients' privacy and contributes to the development of trust within the therapeutic relationship (John et al., 2026; Luepker, 2022). However, counselling services delivered through digital technologies can make it more difficult to maintain confidentiality (Anindya, 2024; Salles, 2023). While traditional counselling is usually conducted through direct face-to-face interaction between the counsellor, and client within a designated, and relatively controlled physical setting (Drake, 2026), online counselling, also known as e-counselling, involves the delivery of counselling services through digital, and telecommunication technologies, including videoconferencing, telephone or mobile devices,as well as e-mail, online chat, and text messaging (John et al., 2026; Anindya, 2024; Syamila, 2022). According to the American Psychological Association (2024), telepsychology involves providing psychological services

through telecommunication technologies. Through these technologies, services that are traditionally provided face-to-face to be delivered digitally or alongside in-person services (John et al., 2026).

Traditional counselling and online counselling have the same goal, which is to provide professional psychological support, but there are significant differences in how the services are delivered. In traditional counselling, greater control over the physical environment and the handling of client information is held by the counsellor, while online counselling involves additional digital environments where client information may be transmitted, stored, and processed through devices, communication networks, software, and third-party platforms. These differences create additional considerations for maintaining client confidentiality and protecting sensitive information in online counselling. In addition, Friehs (2023) emphasized that the duty of confidentiality remains fundamental in psychotherapy while presenting additional considerations in virtual settings. Anindya et al. (2024) also identified confidentiality, and client data security as key ethical concerns in online counselling, highlighting the importance of secure technologies, and protected communication. However, examples of confidentiality-related issues in online or technology-mediated counselling, and mental health services, as illustrated by the trend in previous studies, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Selected Studies Illustrating Client Confidentiality Issues in Online Counselling, and Digital Mental Health Services

Study	Context/Focus	Confidentiality-Related Issue
Du Preez et al. (2024)	Video-based therapy	Privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and technological risks
Alhammad et al. (2024)	mHealth application	Concern regarding Data privacy, confidentiality, and security
Moudatsou et al. (2024)	Online counselling during Covid-19 pandemic	Privacy, and confidentiality challenges in remote practice
Rahsepar Meadi et al. (2025)	Conversational AI in mental health care	Privacy, confidentiality, data use, and patient perspective
Pillay (2025)	AI in mental health practice	Confidentiality, data protection, accountability, and ethical decision-making

The rapid development of digital counselling technologies means that counsellors need to understand not only the benefits of providing services online, but also their ethical responsibilities when handling client information (Wendy et al., 2024; Stoll et al., 2020). The American Psychological Association's (2024) Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology highlight several important areas of telepsychology practice, including informed consent, professional competence, data security, electronic communication, documentation, and the proper disposal of client information. This shows that maintaining confidentiality in online counselling involves more than simply following ethical principles; counsellors also need the necessary technological knowledge to protect client information (Manalili, 2024; Stoll et al., 2020). In practice, this includes making appropriate decisions about digital platforms,

obtaining informed consent, considering clients' privacy in their own environments, and managing data securely (Anindya et al., 2024; Shchedrinskaya & Bebchuk, 2020).

Although online counselling has been broadly discussed, previous studies examine that client confidentiality as one issue among broader concerns such as, informed consent, competency, and regulation, rather than synthesising the ability of the counsellors to protect client information (Shchedrinskaya & Bebchuk, 2020). Current guidance is also uneven because it has often developed reactively, is largely aspirational, or remains tied to specific national or professional contexts, leaving the counsellors who lack practical experiences on managing the videoconferencing, messaging, cloud-like electronic communication, and cross-border practice (Sablone, 2024; Friehs, 2023). Therefore, this narrative review highlights a more specific gap by synthesising the unresolved challenges, safeguards, and risks of client confidentiality in online counselling, especially focusing to differences across modalities, client circumstances, and legal contexts.

Literature Review

Regarding significant improvements in access to mental health care following the migration of psychological services to digital platforms, this shift brings complex ethical challenges in terms of protecting client confidentiality, which is the primary legal, ethical, and professional responsibility to protect clinical disclosures, diagnostic records, and personal narratives from unauthorised exposure (Işcan & Çöme, 2026; Manalili, 2024; Geraldo et al., 2024). In virtual settings, the enforcement of confidentiality is multi-layered in nature as sensitive clinical data is distributed across digital devices, telecommunication networks, software environments and human operational behaviours (Tazi et al., 2024; Andreadis et al., 2024). Therefore, the safeguarding of client confidentiality depends on the backend technology infrastructure, as well as the counsellor's technical literacy, legal understanding and practical digital competences (Chang et al., 2026; Pedersen et al., 2022; Tazi et al., 2024). Based on empirical research and case studies from Malaysian and international jurisdictions between 2022 and 2026, the following is an integrated thematic synthesis of the intersection between environmental vulnerabilities, technological risks, practitioner skills and AI-assisted adoption gaps in relation to client confidentiality.

Environmental Privacy and Spatial Vulnerabilities

One of the challenges in telemental health is the lack of control over the physical environment of the therapy and the need for counsellors to actively participate in virtual spatial evaluation skills (Petro & Gonzales, 2023; Anil et al., 2023; Schlief et al., 2022). The counsellor can unilaterally control noise isolation and environmental privacy in the office setting. By contrast, online counselling takes the therapeutic space into the client's immediate environment, which is often a home, a workplace, or a personal vehicle, and therefore vulnerable to domestic interruptions and lean physical partitions (Fel'man et al., 2026; Petro & Gonzales, 2023; Al-Mahrouqi et al., 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that, in the absence of private rooms dedicated to clients, there is a recurring risk of unintended eavesdropping by family members or others, particularly in crowded or shared houses (Chang et al., 2026; Schlief et al., 2022). Moreover, qualitative and review evidence after the pandemic suggests that privacy in the home environment is a significant ethical issue in telemental health and that clients may be reluctant to discuss sensitive topics openly due to concerns about being

overheard (Buğa et al., 2026; Schlief et al., 2022). Case-based and competency-focused issues in the literature also suggest that the lack of formal training for counsellors in working with the remote environment, including specific privacy guidelines such as headphones or room verification (Petro & Gonzales, 2023; Pedersen et al., 2022; Farrer et al., 2022), increases confidentiality risks, which may have implications for privacy and therapeutic efficacy of the session.

Client-Side Device and Stored Data Risks

Hence, confidentiality is not only about live video contacts but also about stored digital artefacts and the broader digital care environment, including platforms, records, and virtual consultation systems (Işcan & Çöme, 2026; Chang et al., 2026). Since telehealth privacy also depends on end-user decisions and the security of the remote environment, critical vulnerabilities often arise on the client side when counselling is accessed via unsecured or poorly managed equipment and connections (Tazi et al., 2024; Andreadis et al., 2024). International research on telemedicine and telemental health (Andreadis et al., 2024; Al-Mahrouqi et al., 2022) shows that clients and providers share similar concerns about software and hardware security, platform hacking, and identity verification issues in remote interactions. To address these client-side and platform-side risks, cybersecurity literacy needs to be improved at the point of informed consent and in routine care, yet many professionals report only having basic compliance training rather than a more operational security education (Chang et al., 2026; Tazi et al., 2024; Pedersen et al., 2022). Therefore, practitioners without technical expertise may not be able to adequately explain the risks to digital privacy, including how platforms, data storage, and interruptions outside the therapist's direct control may affect confidentiality (Chang et al., 2026; Geraldo et al., 2024; Al-Mahrouqi et al., 2022).

Platform Security and Practitioner Technology Choice

A further skill-related factor that affects confidentiality is the practitioner's technical competence in evaluating and selecting secure digital communication channels, particularly given the potential risks posed by commercial platforms and off-the-shelf software (Chang et al., 2026; Yu & Bekerian, 2023). These are common in telemental health, but the level of encryption and privacy protection offered by third-party commercial platforms like Zoom, FaceTime, and Skype for healthcare use is questionable (Andreadis et al., 2024; Yu & Bekerian, 2023). Independent practices often face practical barriers and have limited resources to implement secure systems. The ability of cybersecurity to perform these procedures is limited by time, staff expertise, funding, and access to specialised infrastructure (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2022; Tazi et al., 2024). Other research on professionals' practice environments suggests that psychologists often either use general business software or do their own thing, both of which are more prone to information leakage and offer less robust retention safeguards. Psychiatrists, in contrast, tend to prefer institutional or specialised platforms with more robust encryption, identification and record-keeping features (Chang et al., 2026). Therefore, the use of unmanaged consumer technology can increase practitioners' burden in maintaining confidentiality and the risk of privacy breaches in the event of poor governance, access control, and data management (Işcan & Çöme, 2026; Chang et al., 2026).

Infrastructure-Level Breaches and Operational Cybersecurity

Given that electronic healthcare records are under severe threat at the infrastructure level from data breaches and cyberattacks, practitioners and system administrators must maintain

strong operational digital hygiene (Işcan & Çöme, 2026; Tazi et al., 2024). The telehealth literature has recognised the following vulnerabilities: security issues with online consultations, lack of encryption, data breaches, interoperability challenges, and consent challenges (Işcan & Çöme, 2026; Yu & Bekerian, 2023; Schlief et al., 2022). Research findings show that confidentiality breaches in remote care environments are important due to backend technical defects and operational competency shortcomings in the management of files, encryption, and access control (Işcan & Çöme, 2026; Chang et al., 2026; Tazi et al., 2024). Thus, security assessments of telehealth focus on ensuring secure infrastructure, privacy-by-design, provider training, and more robust governance mechanisms to protect backend data and workflows (Işcan & Çöme, 2026; Geraldo et al., 2024; Farrer et al., 2022).

Legal, Ethical, and Cross-Jurisdictional Compliance

Nevertheless, another core competency domain essential for protecting client confidentiality amid administrative jurisdictional issues is legal and regulatory literacy, especially as telemental health continues to expand across international borders (Chang et al., 2026; Anil et al., 2023; Pedersen et al., 2022). Cross-jurisdictional and international literature suggests that the regulatory environment for telehealth remains patchy and that providers are often left to interpret privacy and security obligations as platform use accelerates faster than clear institutional guidance can be provided (Chang et al., 2026; Tazi et al., 2024; Farrer et al., 2022). A similar need for more specific tele-mental health guidelines, stricter organisational rules, and clear local protocols to reduce legal and ethical ambiguity in practice has been reported in studies from Oman and other settings (Al-Mahrouqi et al., 2022; Schlief et al., 2022). Hence, practitioners who are unaware of their legal obligations might find it difficult to apply the general principles of confidentiality in a remote setting without contravening laws (Chang et al., 2026; Manalili, 2024; Geraldo et al., 2024).

AI-Assisted Practice and Vendor Data Governance

According to Işcan and Çöme (2026) and Chang et al. (2026), the quick adoption of artificial intelligence and more sophisticated digital health resources for consultation support, decision support, and digital service delivery further raises confidentiality problems. This calls for stricter vendor oversight and increased technology literacy. AI-based systems appear to be in the same risk category as teleconsultations, patient portals, and digital support tools, judging by reviews of digital healthcare privacy and security. They require more than just technical add-ons; they require privacy-by-design, secure infrastructure, and more transparent regulations (Işcan & Çöme, 2026; Chang et al., 2026). In order to understand how client data is saved, handled, and safeguarded across third-party systems, counsellors who utilise automated tools in practice must possess technical and governance skills (Geraldo et al., 2024; Anil et al., 2023; Pedersen et al., 2022). Işcan & Çöme (2026), Farrer et al. (2022), and Fel'man et al. (2026) state that to protect client confidentiality in digital counselling, practitioner skill, client privacy capacity, and context-sensitive ethical protocols that can adapt professional standards to virtual care are just as important as clear regulations and secure technologies.

Conclusion

In justification, this study found out that the nature of digital communication has significantly influenced online counselling services, chiefly client confidentiality. Given the increased risks

associated with online security, data protection, and third-party data transmission in a virtual environment, implementing up-to-date online counselling procedures is needed so that the therapeutic process and client confidentiality are safely protected (Nurul Naimah et al., 2023). Furthermore, these modifying procedures would ensure that online counselling remains relevant and well-utilized within the community. Despite the contemporary challenges, counsellors must maintain confidentiality because it is essential for establishing trust and fostering an effective therapeutic relationship. Therefore, continuous adherence to ethical guidelines is also essential to ensure that counsellors can provide the best counselling services for their clients.

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Project conceptualisation and analysis, Nor Aini Akma; further analysis and interpretation of findings, Nur Afiqah Musfirah; project administration, editing and manuscript draft preparation, Huong, G. X. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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