

**A STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES AND EXPERIENCES FACED BY  
MENTAL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS DUE TO INCREASED  
ONLINE CONSULTATIONS PRECIPITATED BY THE COVID-19  
PANDEMIC**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The COVID-19* pandemic has heavily burdened and, in many cases, overstretched the healthcare systems. Online consultation is part of Internet medical care, which circumvents the disadvantages of traditional ways of seeking medical care and provides patients with a convenient and affordable service. It also reduces the chances of spreading infectious diseases by reducing the number of patients visiting hospitals. The sudden spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fast growth of online medical care have led to a sharp rise in the number of online patient consultations during this time.

This research study aims to understand the experiences mental health care professionals have during online consultations and the various challenges they face during online consultations.

In the present research, the researcher used a descriptive survey method, which includes presentations of facts and class of events, and involves the procedure and enumeration of measurements, to analyze the viewpoints and challenges mental health care professionals face during an online consultation. The researcher used convenience sampling design to collect the information from 35 respondents.

**Keywords:** Online Consultations, Mental health care professionals, Health care system, COVID-19

## **INTRODUCTION**

The healthcare system was under a lot of strain during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was challenging to control the disease and the stress and anxiety the situation brought. In that situation, it was challenging to receive consultation or advice from doctors/psychologists in physical form. During this period, the rapid development of online medical care and the sudden pandemic of COVID-19 has led to a sharp increase in online patient consultations. Online consulting has many benefits, such as saving time and money and reducing rental costs for doctors, psychologists, and mental health care professionals. The advantages of e-mental health and blended approaches combining e-mental health and face-to-face interventions include easy access to mental healthcare, cost-effectiveness, flexibility, lower stigma, and services offered in the natural context of the individual (Ebert et al., 2018; Musiat et al., 2014).

However, there are many challenges and difficulties associated with online consulting, and as a result, some patients have less confidence in the online services provided by psychologists. Mental health professionals generally have a positive attitude toward e-mental health, but some barriers to implementing this technology have also been reported. Lack of knowledge about e-mental health, concerns about relational aspects, concerns about technology (e.g., data security), and ethical, practical, and contextual factors have been referenced as impediments to implementation.

The present research study aims to identify the experiences and challenges faced by mental health care professionals during online consultations.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The role of online consultancy for mental health care professionals has emerged in today's scenario, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak. It leads to various benefits for the clients and patients, like time-saving, cost-effectiveness, etc., but at the same time, it will lead to various challenges also.

The present study will emphasise both perspectives regarding the viewpoints of mental health care professionals during online consultation and their varied experiences.

Therefore, the research study is entitled "A STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES AND EXPERIENCES FACED BY MENTAL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS DUE TO INCREASED ONLINE CONSULTATIONS PRECIPITATED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC" to assess the viewpoints and challenges faced by mental health care professionals during online consultations.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Suler (2004)** in the study emphasized the importance of *online disinhibition* about the hierarchical relationship and several concepts related to judgment.

**Brivio et al. (2010)** emphasized the role of *disinhibition effect* on the social space and the role of the situation, which allow different levels of interaction.

**Pietrabissa et al. (2015)** identified the benefits related to telepsychology in their research. They have considered several advantages related to it like time-saving, money-saving reducing the rental cost for the doctors and psychologists. Further in the study, the authors also highlighted the difficulties and found that people showed less confidence in the online services provided by psychologists.

**According to Wells et al. (2015)** there are various benefits related to online psychological services. They highlighted that the sessions provided through chats/ videos are helpful for the patients. This is also useful for comparing how well each session works and the whole process works.

**Algeri et al. (2019)** in their research, emphasized that online psychological support plays a vital role in the development of the relationships between the psychologist and the patients.

**Békés and Aafjes-van Doorn (2020)** in their study, highlighted the advantages of online psychological services in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, people experienced different kinds of stress and anxiety, which online mental health services helped to ease.

**Nele A.J. De Witte (2021)** in their research study, highlighted the importance as well as difficulties faced by mental health professionals in providing online services to patients during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research also focused on the role of the government, educational institutions, and infrastructure in making online consultations a viable and stable option in mental health care.

**In the research, Jennifer Dykxhoorn (2022)** highlighted the conceptual framework of public mental health. The study was based on academic research, practitioner expertise and public perspectives to create a public mental health conceptual framework.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse the experiences of mental health care professionals during online consultations.

2. To assess the challenges faced by mental health care professionals during online consultations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

In the present research, the researcher used the descriptive survey method, which includes presentations of facts, a class of events, and involved procedure and enumeration of measurement, to analyse the experiences and challenges mental health care professionals face during an online consultation.

### **Sample Design**

In the present study, the researcher used convenience sampling to collect information from different respondents. The Sample used in the study:

**Total number of Respondents – 35 mental health care professionals**

### **Research Area**

The researcher has selected the Delhi & NCR areas in the present research.

### **Collection of Data**

**Primary** Data has been gathered from 35 mental health care professionals in the Delhi and NCR areas.

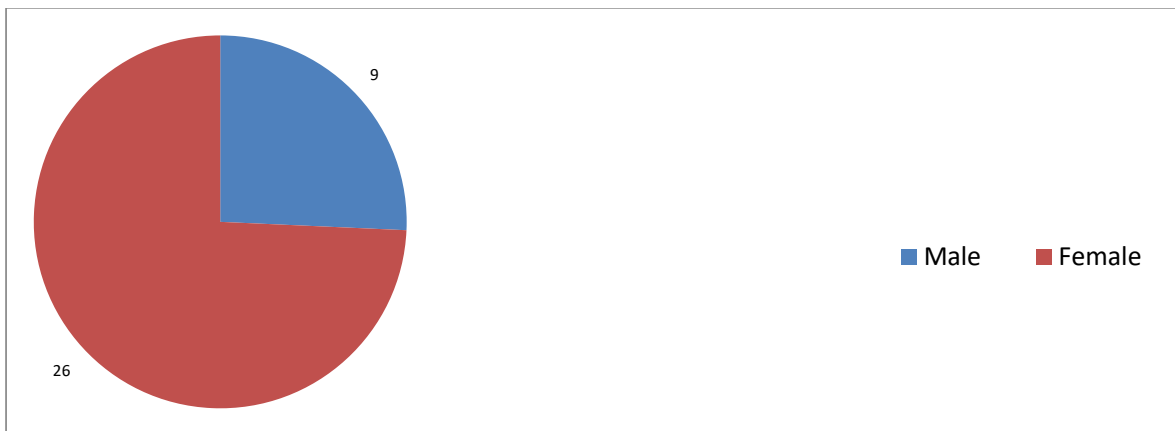
**Secondary data:** Secondary data has been collected through research papers, journals, reviews of articles etc.

### **Analysis of Data**

**Table 1 No. of Respondents based on Gender**

<b>S. No.</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
1	Male	9

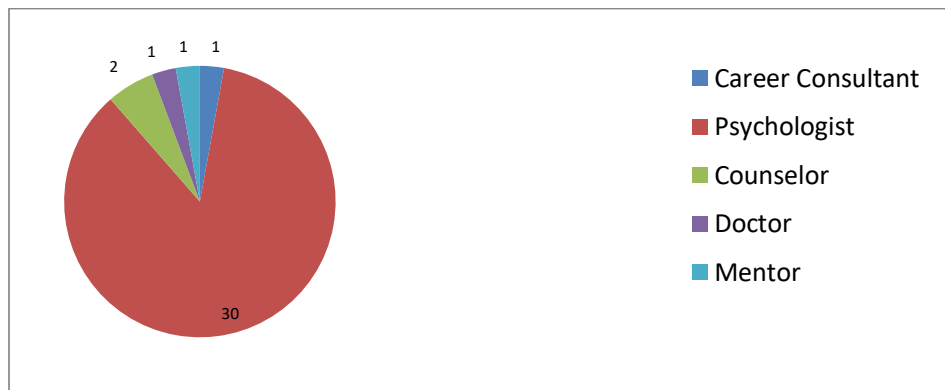
2	Female	26
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 1** No. of Respondents based on Gender

**Table 2** No. of Respondents based on Profession

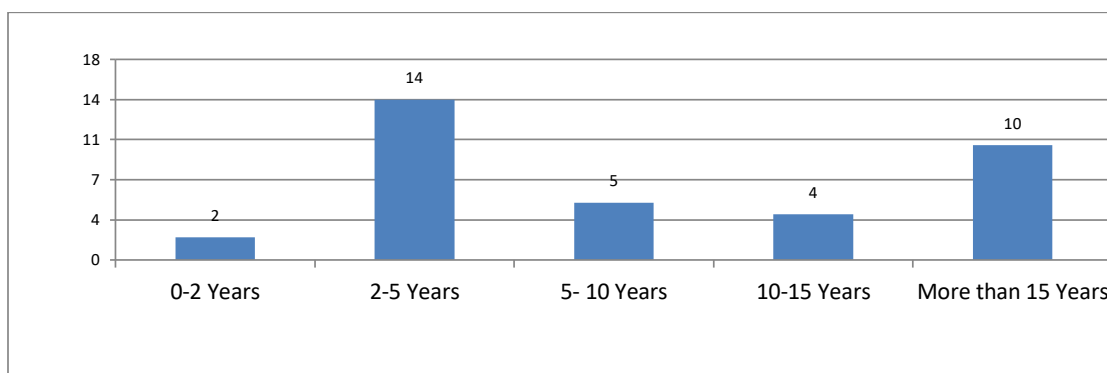
S. No.	Profession	Numbers
1	Career Consultant	1
2	Psychologist	30
3	Counselor	2
4	Doctor	1
5	Mentor	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 2** No. of Respondents based on Profession

**Table 3** No. of Respondents based on Experience (In Years)

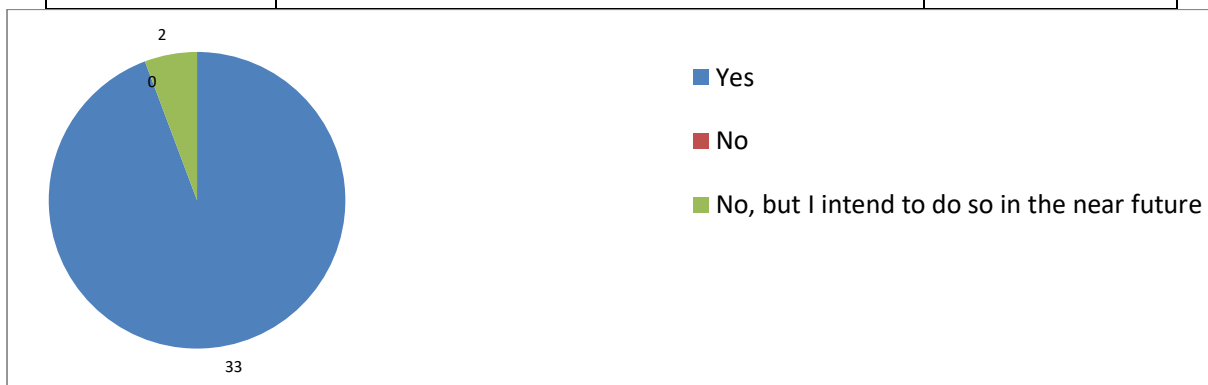
S. No.	Experience (In Years)	Numbers
1	0-2 Years	2
2	2-5 Years	14
3	5- 10 Years	5
4	10-15 Years	4
5	More than 15 Years	10
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 3** No. of Respondents based on Experience (in years)

**Table 4 Do you provide online consultations to your clients?**

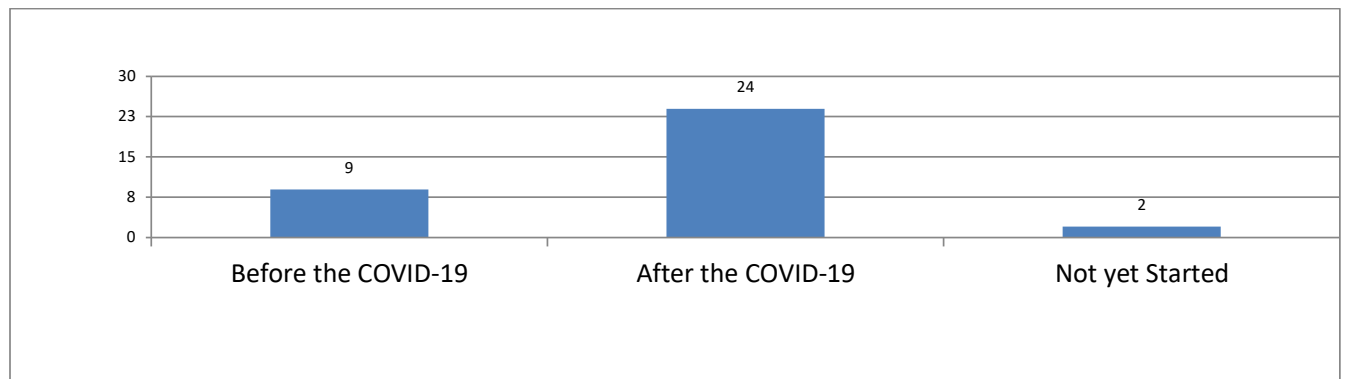
S. No.	Experience (In Years)	Numbers
1	Yes	33
2	No	0
3	No, but I intend to do so in the near future	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 4 Do you provide online consultations to your clients?**

**Table 5 How long have you been offering online consultations?**

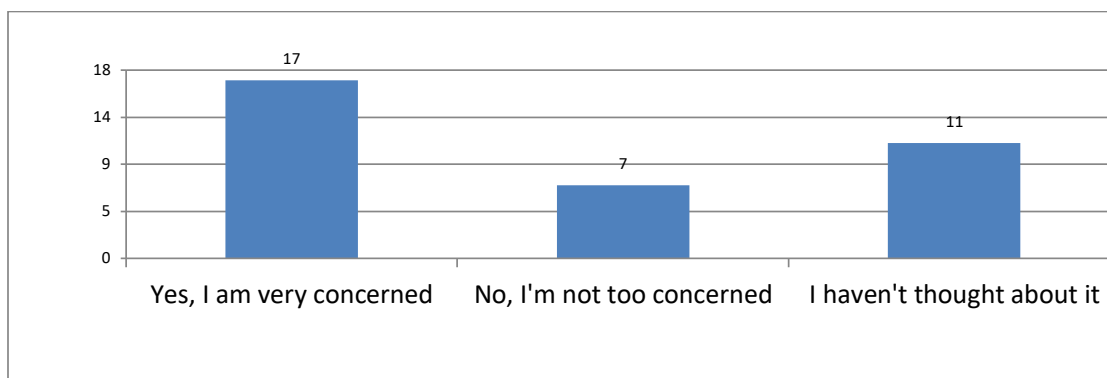
S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Before COVID-19	9
2	After COVID-19	24
3	Not yet Started	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 5** How long have you been offering online consultations?

**Table 6** Are you concerned about the privacy and security of online consultation software?

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Yes, I am very concerned	17
2	No, I'm not too concerned	7
3	I haven't thought about it	11
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

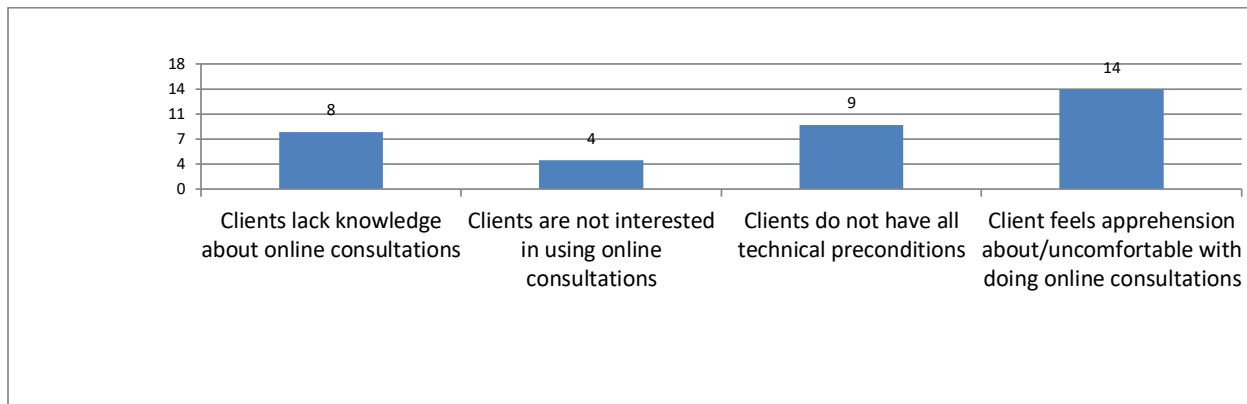


**Figure 6** Are you concerned about the privacy and security of online consultation software?



**Table 7 What other challenges, if any, did you face when counselling clients online?**

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Clients lack knowledge about online consultations	8
2	Clients are not interested in using online consultations	4
3	Clients do not have all technical preconditions	9
4	Client feels apprehension about/uncomfortable with doing online consultations	14
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

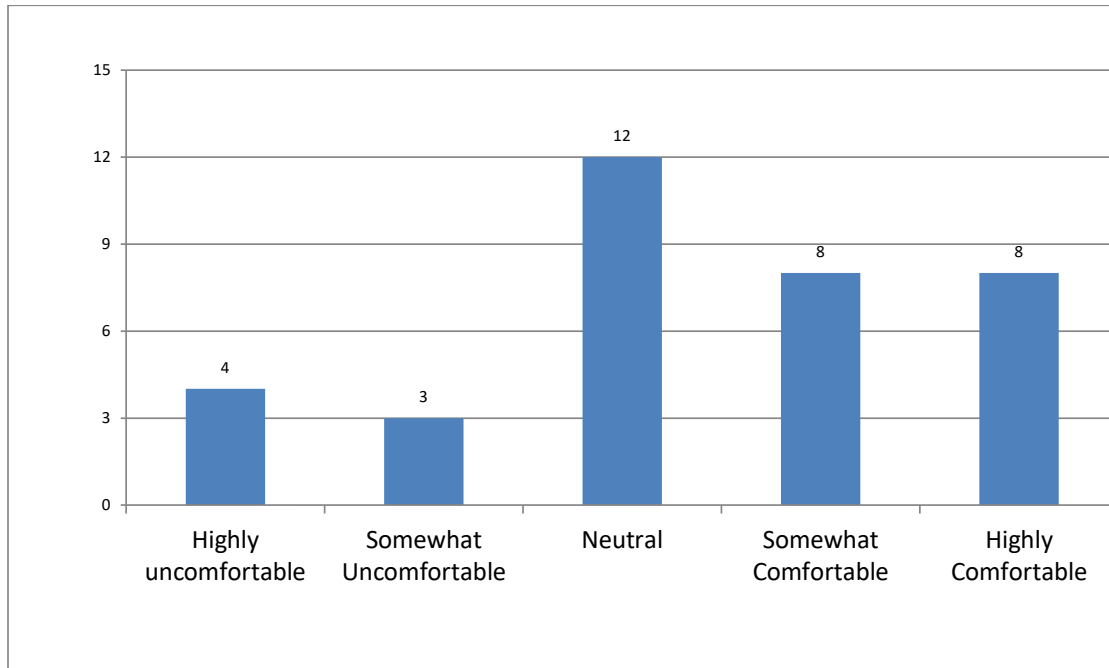


**Figure 7** What other challenges, if any, did you face when counselling clients online?

**Table 8 To what extent do you consider yourself comfortable with online consultations?**

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Highly uncomfortable	4
2	Somewhat Uncomfortable	3
3	Neutral	12
4	Somewhat Comfortable	8

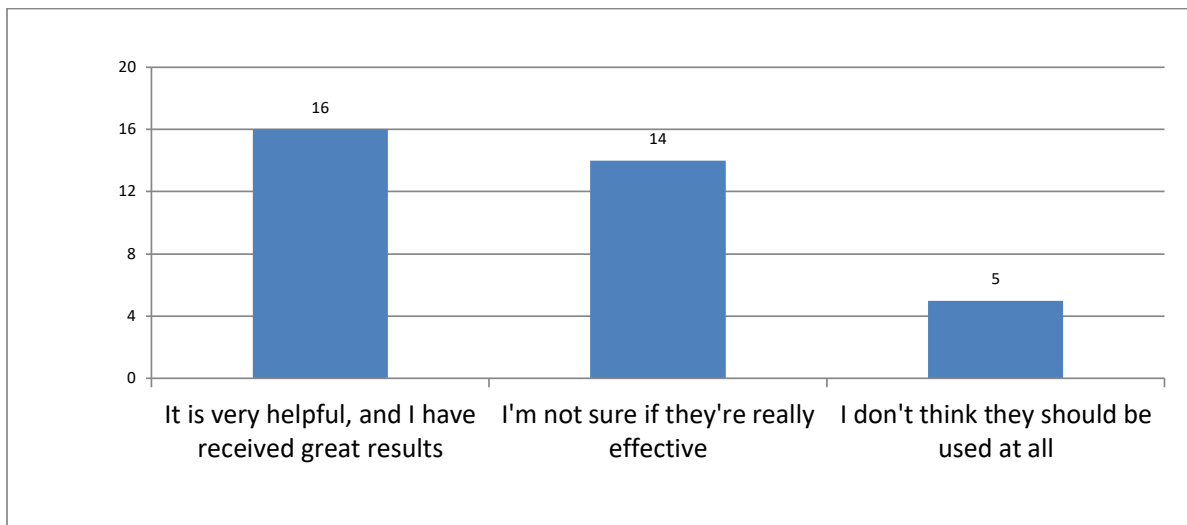
5	Highly Comfortable	8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 8** To what extent do you consider yourself comfortable with online consultations?

**Table 9** What are your thoughts on using online consultations with children and young people?

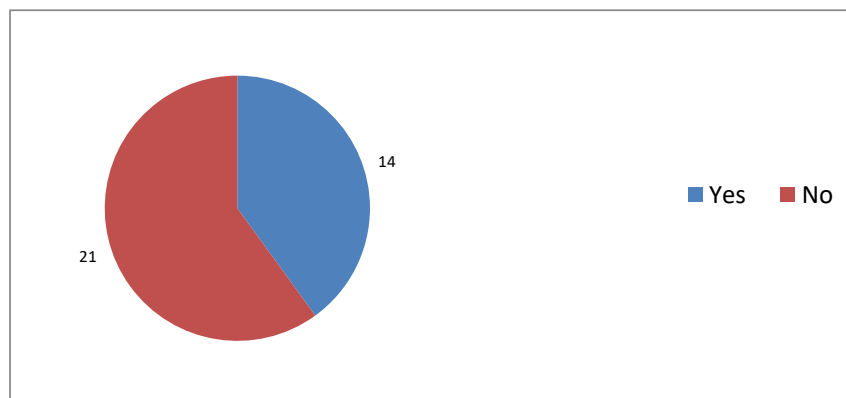
S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	It is very helpful, and I have received great results	16
2	I'm not sure if they're effective	14
3	I don't think they should be used at all	5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 9** What are your thoughts on using online consultations with children and young people?

**Table 10** Have you had any specific training regarding online consultations?

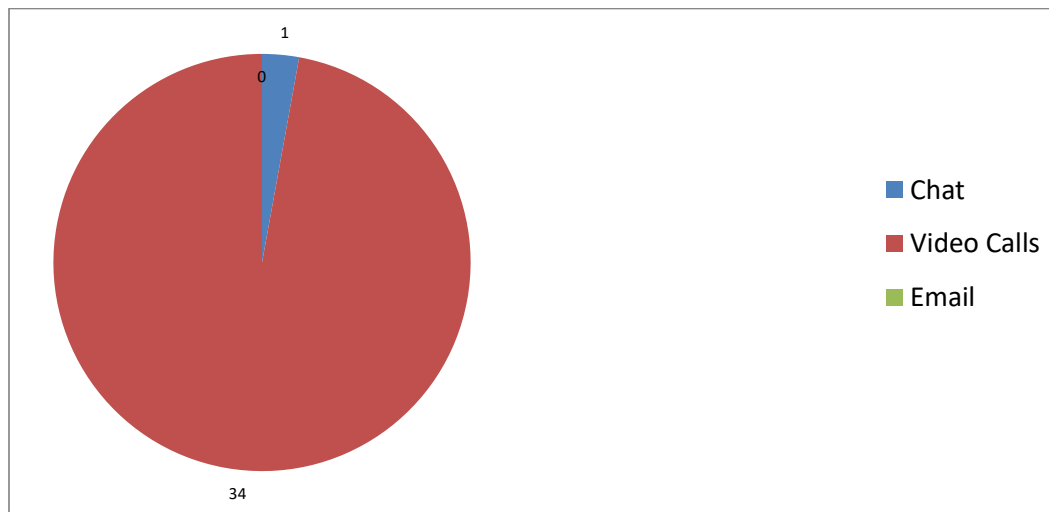
S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Yes	14
2	No	21
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 10** Have you had any specific training regarding online consultations?

**Table 11 What is your preferred method of communication for online consultations?**

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Chat	1
2	Video Calls	34
3	Email	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

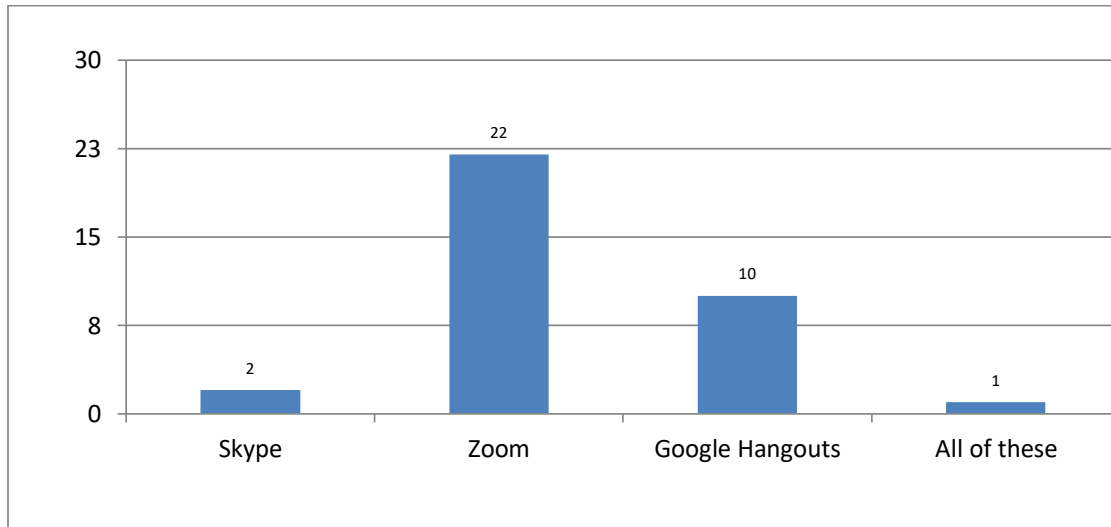


**Figure 11 What is your preferred method of communication for online consultations?**

**Table 12 Which platforms do you use for online consultations?**

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Skype	2
2	Zoom	22
3	Google Hangouts	10

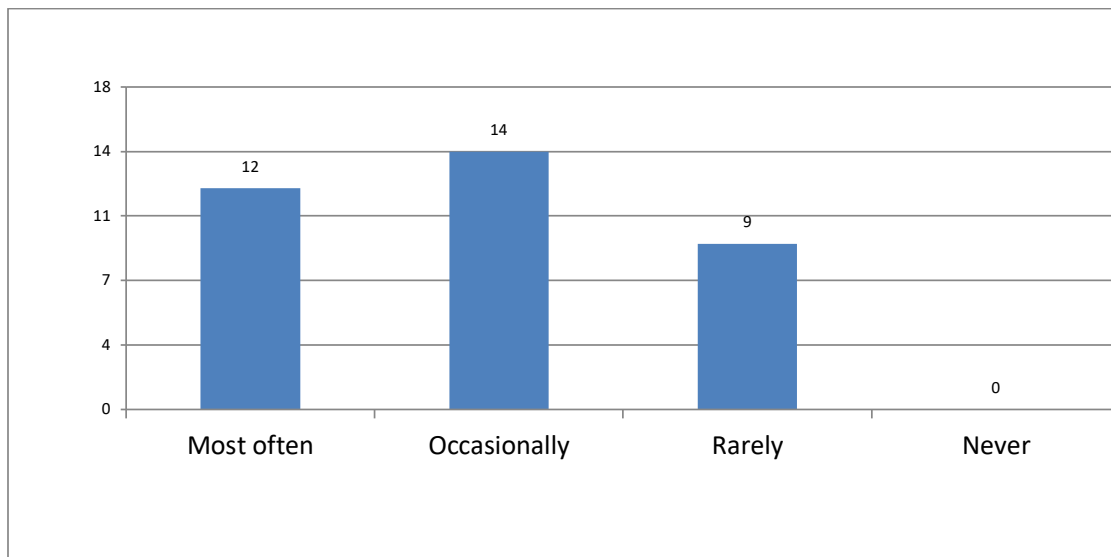
4	All of these	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 12** Which platforms do you use for online consultations?

**Table 13** Do clients have questions about whether online consultations are helpful for them?

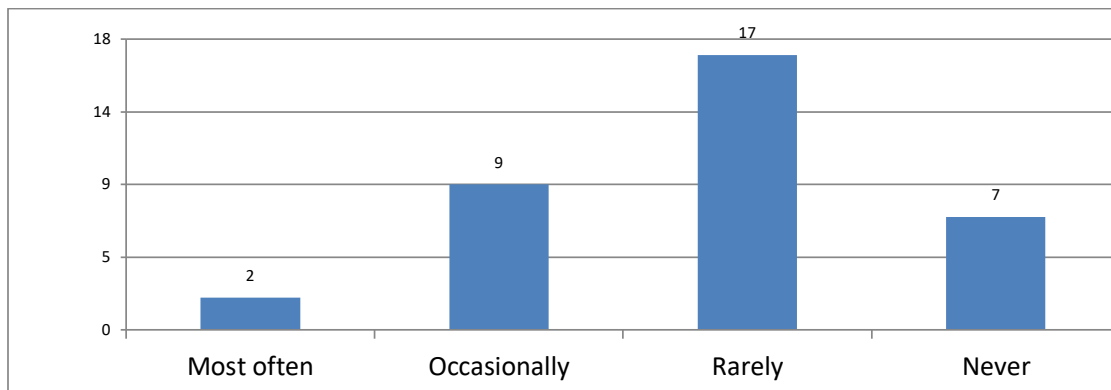
S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Most often	12
2	Occasionally	14
3	Rarely	9
4	Never	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 13** Do clients have questions about whether online consultations are helpful for them?

**Table 14** Do clients have any concerns about privacy regarding data security?

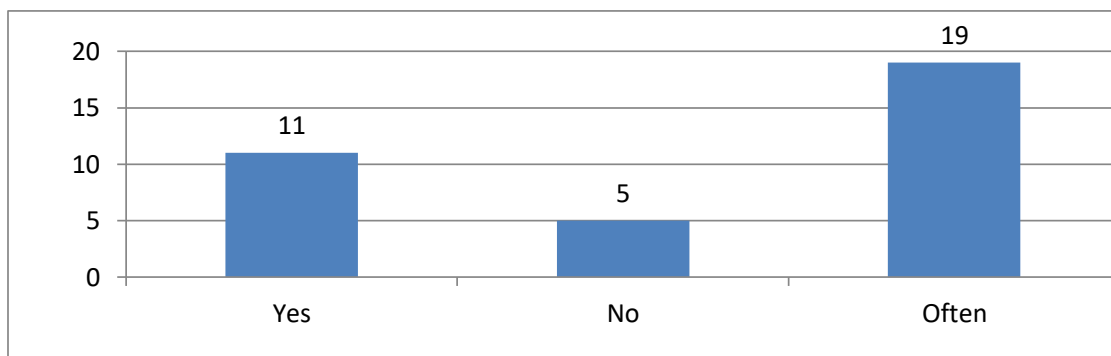
S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Most often	2
2	Occasionally	9
3	Rarely	17
4	Never	7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 14** Do clients have any concerns about privacy regarding data security?

**Table 15** Do clients have all the technical preconditions and undisturbed quiet space for online consultations?

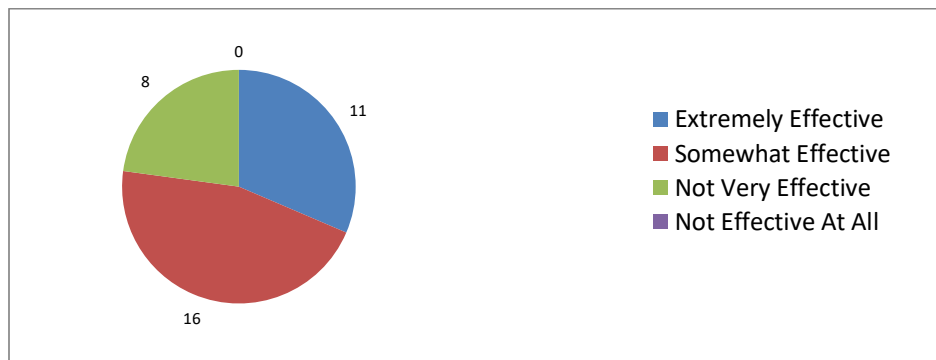
S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Yes	11
2	No	5
3	Often	19
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 15** Do clients have all the technical preconditions and undisturbed quiet space for online consultations?

**Table 16 Do you think online consultations are equally effective as face-to-face consultations?**

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Extremely Effective	11
2	Somewhat Effective	16
3	Not Very Effective	8
4	Not Effective At All	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

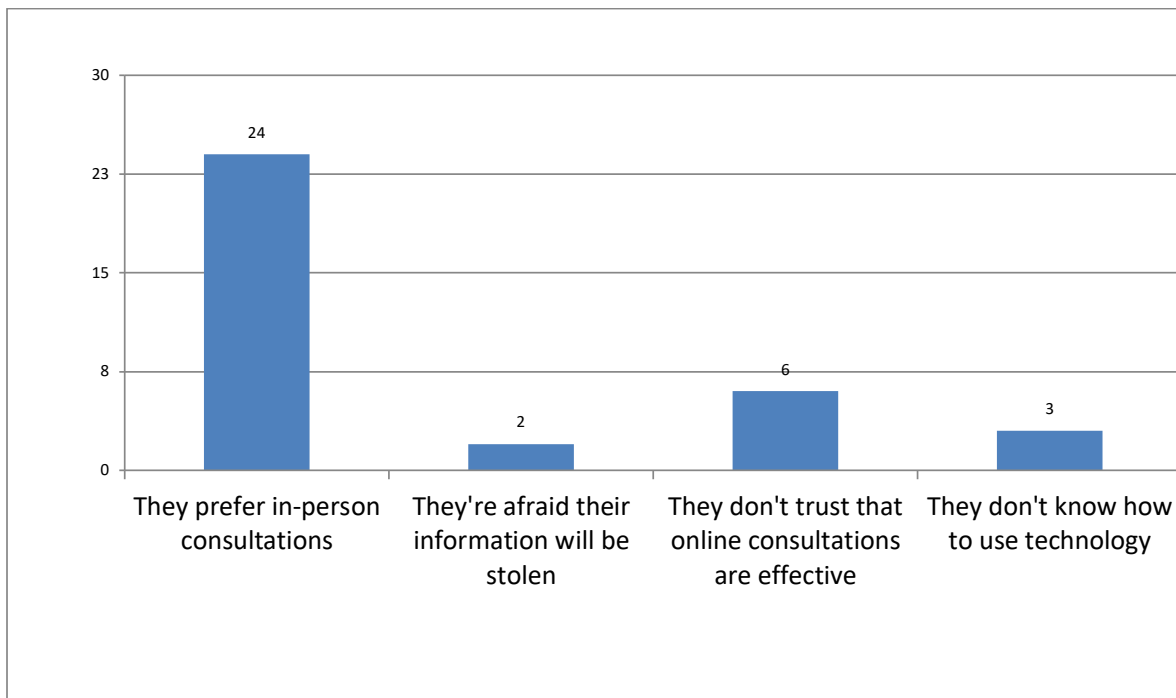


**Figure 16 Do you think online consultations are equally effective as face-to-face consultations?**

**Table 17 What do you think is why clients do not opt for online consultations?**

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	They prefer in-person consultations	24
2	They're afraid their information will be stolen	2
3	They don't trust that online consultations are effective	6
4	They don't know how to use technology	3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

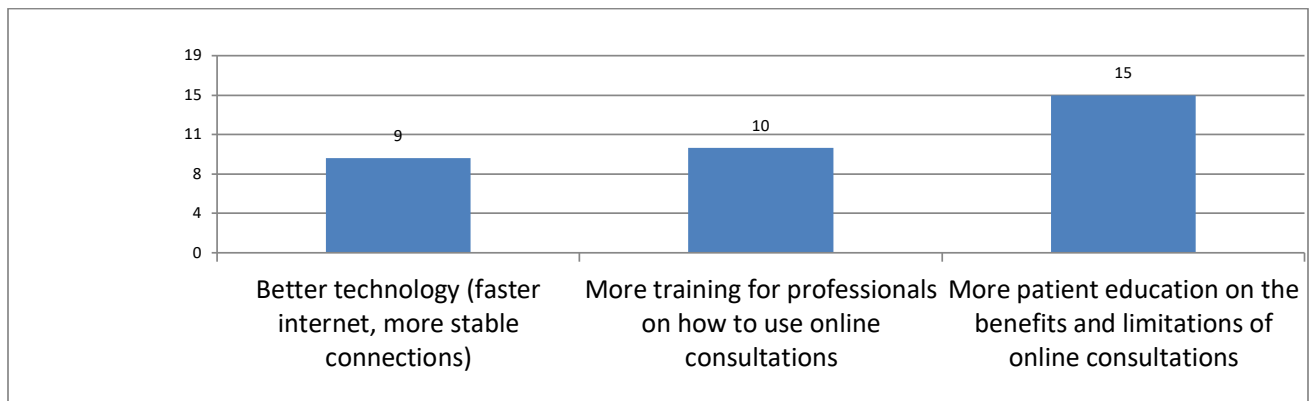




**Figure 17** What do you think is why clients do not opt for online consultations?

**Table 18** What do you think are the best ways to improve online consultations?

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Better technology (faster internet, more stable connections)	9
2	More training for professionals on how to use online consultations	10
3	More patient education on the benefits and limitations of online consultations	15
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 18** What do you think are the best ways to improve online consultations?

**Table 19** Finally, how would you summarise your overall experiences with online consultations?

S. No.	Particulars	Numbers
1	Highly Negative	0
2	Somewhat Negative	0
3	Neutral	10
4	Somewhat Positive	14
5	Highly Positive	11
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



**Figure 19** Finally, how would you summarise your overall experiences with online consultations?

## **FINDINGS**

1. In the present study, most respondents agreed that they provide online consulting services.
2. Almost 70 per cent of the respondents agreed that they started their online consultancy after COVID-19.
3. Almost half of the respondents agreed that they were concerned about the privacy and security of online consultation software.
4. The most challenging part of providing online consultancy is that clients feels apprehensive about online consultations.
5. Almost half of the respondents are comfortable with online consulting.
6. Almost half of the respondents agreed that consultancy is also helpful for children and young people.
7. Nearly 60% of the people who answered agreed that they had not gotten specific training on how to do online consultations.
8. A very high majority of respondents, i.e., 97 per cent, agreed that they prefer video calls as a method of communication for online consultations.
9. The respondents mainly use platforms such as Zoom and Google for online consultations.
10. A vast majority of respondents agreed that clients rarely or never express privacy concerns regarding data security.
11. Only 30% of respondents agreed that clients have all of the technical prerequisites and uninterrupted quiet space for online consultations.
12. Almost 80 per cent of respondents agreed that online consultations are equally effective as face-to-face consultations.
13. In the analysis of why clients do not opt for online consultations, most respondents agreed that the clients prefer in-person consultations.
14. Almost 72 per cent of respondents agreed that their overall experiences with online consultations are positive.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

It is evident that many Indian counsellors started taking online sessions after the COVID-19 pandemic. These counsellors include career counsellors, youth mentors, spiritual guides, and doctors, apart from mental health professionals. Even though clients and patients showed concern about online counselling and counsellors found the biggest challenge was to convince their clients to take online counselling sessions, there is a more extensive adoption by clients, including children and young people. Correspondingly, more and more counsellors are getting comfortable with online counselling. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from counsellors and clients is a testament to this changing behaviour.

Further research into the many reasons behind their behaviour change can lead to greater clarity. However, this change in client-counsellor is unprecedented, and consequently, counsellors had to learn how to develop such online service models on their own. 60% of respondents agreed that they had no training for this, but now around 97% of them prefer online calls as the preferred mode of online communication. On the client side, there is still insufficient clarity about data privacy as the respondents didn't receive such concerns from their clients. Further research into the many reasons for internet usage and literacy can shed more light on these behaviour changes.

Moreover, our research shows that most clients were technically and technologically equipped for online sessions. This shows how increased technology adoption contributes to increased adoption of online counselling services, but it might not reflect internet safety awareness among the service participants. This study hopes to kindle more research into these topics and their associated behaviours.

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