

Digital-Based Social Counseling Services: Opportunities and Challenges in Enhancing Community Well-Being

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Apr 12th, 2026

Revised Mei 20th, 2026

Accepted Jun 26th, 2026

Keyword:

digital counseling services,
community well-being, social
welfare, digital transformation,
qualitative case study, public
service innovation

ABSTRACT

This study examines the opportunities and challenges of digital-based social counseling services in enhancing community well-being within the context of contemporary social welfare transformation. The research aims to analyze how digital counseling services improve accessibility, responsiveness, and community support while also identifying barriers related to technological inequality, institutional readiness, and ethical protection. The study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design because this method enables an in-depth exploration of social interactions, service experiences, and organizational practices in real-life contexts. The research was conducted in Bandung City, West Java, Indonesia, selected due to its active digital public service development and diverse social characteristics. Twelve informants participated in the study, including service managers, social counselors, technical staff, and community members, chosen purposively based on their direct involvement and knowledge of digital counseling services. The findings indicate that digital counseling improves service accessibility, communication flexibility, and community participation, but faces challenges concerning digital literacy, emotional interaction, and data confidentiality. The study recommends strengthening digital infrastructure, counselor competence, ethical governance, and inclusive service policies to ensure sustainable and equitable community welfare outcomes.



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INTRODUCTION

Digital-based social counseling services have emerged as a significant response to the changing landscape of social welfare, where communities increasingly encounter psychological strain, social disconnection, family instability, economic pressure, and limited access to professional support (Suyatna et al., 2024). The title “Digital-Based Social Counseling Services: Opportunities and Challenges in Enhancing Community Well-Being” reflects a contemporary concern in public service and social intervention studies: how digital platforms can be used not merely as communication tools, but as mechanisms for expanding access, strengthening responsiveness, and improving the quality of social support (Maheshwari, 2025). In this context, community well-being is understood as more than the absence of social problems; it also includes emotional security, social inclusion, resilience, access to help, and the ability of individuals and families to function in a healthier social environment. The growth of digital technology has opened new possibilities for service delivery, yet it has also introduced questions about equity, confidentiality, interpersonal trust, service effectiveness, and institutional readiness (Kawabata & Jr, 2023). These dynamics make digital social counseling an important and timely research topic in the field of social welfare and community development.

The state of the art in this area shows that digital transformation has reshaped many forms of public and human services, including education, health, and social assistance (Aamir, 2025). In social counseling, digital tools such as mobile applications, video consultations, messaging platforms, and online case management systems are increasingly used to reach clients more flexibly and efficiently (Groeger & Berg, 2024). Previous studies indicate that digital services can reduce geographical barriers, expand the reach of counselors, and provide faster responses to individuals in urgent need (Dweik et al., 2024). They also support continuity of care, especially for communities living in remote areas or

facing mobility constraints. However, the literature also demonstrates that the effectiveness of digital counseling is uneven across settings. Differences in digital literacy, internet access, institutional capacity, and user trust often determine whether digital services function as inclusive support systems or remain inaccessible to vulnerable groups (Bartram et al., 2024). As a result, the current body of knowledge suggests strong potential, but also persistent uncertainty regarding how digital-based social counseling can genuinely improve community well-being in a sustainable and equitable manner.

The main research problem arises from the tension between opportunity and limitation. On the one hand, digital technology promises broader access, greater efficiency, and more flexible service delivery. On the other hand, social counseling is a relational and trust-based practice that depends on empathy, confidentiality, and contextual sensitivity (Burtscher et al., 2024). When delivered digitally, these core qualities may be weakened if the service is poorly designed or if users feel disconnected from the counselor. In addition, many social welfare institutions still lack standardized digital protocols, trained personnel, and data protection systems (Makowska-Tłomak et al., 2023). This creates a practical and conceptual problem: while digital counseling services are increasingly promoted as solutions, their capacity to enhance community well-being remains insufficiently understood, particularly in relation to service quality, user experience, and social inclusion. The issue is not simply whether digital services exist, but whether they are capable of producing meaningful social outcomes for diverse community groups.

The research gap lies in the fact that many existing studies discuss digital counseling mainly from a technological or administrative perspective, while fewer studies examine its broader social welfare implications (Al-Emran, 2023). Some focus on platform design, service efficiency, or digital communication models, but do not deeply analyze the relationship between digital service delivery and community well-being. Others discuss counseling practice without sufficiently addressing structural barriers such as digital inequality, ethical risks, and the uneven readiness of service institutions. There is also limited integration between the micro-level experience of counseling recipients and the macro-level goal of welfare enhancement (P. C. Lee, 2024). This gap is important because community well-being is not achieved solely through service availability; it depends on whether the service is accessible, trusted, responsive, and socially meaningful. Therefore, this research positions digital-based social counseling as a multidimensional welfare intervention that must be evaluated through both technological and human-centered lenses.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated perspective. Rather than treating digital counseling merely as a substitute for face-to-face interaction, the study conceptualizes it as a hybrid welfare instrument that can expand social support while simultaneously revealing new vulnerabilities (Xiong et al., 2024). It contributes a more comprehensive framework by linking opportunities, such as accessibility, speed, flexibility, and service continuity, with challenges, such as inequality, privacy concerns, reduced interpersonal depth, and institutional limitations. The study also adds novelty by emphasizing community well-being as the central evaluative outcome, not only service efficiency or user satisfaction. In doing so, it offers a more socially grounded understanding of digital counseling as part of broader welfare governance. This perspective is particularly relevant for developing countries and diverse local communities where digital transformation often progresses unevenly and must be adapted to real social conditions (Aithal & Maiya, 2023).

Based on this orientation, the research questions can be formulated around several core issues: how are digital-based social counseling services designed and implemented to support community well-being; what opportunities do these services provide in terms of accessibility, responsiveness, and service reach; what challenges arise in practice regarding digital inequality, ethical protection, counselor-client interaction, and institutional readiness; and how can these services be strengthened to become more effective, inclusive, and sustainable? These questions guide the study toward a balanced analysis of both potential and constraint, ensuring that the discussion is not overly optimistic or overly critical, but analytically grounded in social welfare realities.

The objective of the research is to explain and analyze the role of digital-based social counseling services in enhancing community well-being through an examination of their opportunities, challenges, and implementation conditions. More specifically, the study aims to identify how digital platforms can

improve service accessibility and responsiveness, to assess the barriers that limit their effectiveness, and to formulate conceptual insights that support better service design and practice. By focusing on these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to both theory and practice in social work, public administration, and community welfare studies. The expected outcome is a clearer understanding of how digital counseling can be positioned as a strategic social intervention rather than merely a technical innovation.

The theoretical significance of this research lies in its contribution to the literature on digital welfare services, counseling transformation, and community well-being. It may enrich conceptual discussions on how technology mediates social support, how service relationships are reshaped in digital environments, and how welfare outcomes can be analyzed within a digitally connected society. Academically, the study provides a basis for interdisciplinary dialogue between social work, communication studies, public service innovation, and digital governance. It may also serve as a reference for scholars who seek to examine how technology influences care, inclusion, and social protection. Practically, the findings are expected to assist policymakers, social service institutions, and counselors in designing digital programs that are more accessible, ethical, and context-sensitive. For practitioners, the study can highlight the importance of communication quality, digital competence, confidentiality protocols, and client-centered approaches in online counseling services (Asthana & Prime, 2023).

At the same time, this research has limitations. Because digital-based social counseling is influenced by local infrastructure, institutional capacity, and user characteristics, its findings may not be universally generalizable across all regions or service systems (Santos & Pereira, 2023). The study may also face methodological constraints if access to service users, counselors, or institutional data is limited. In addition, the rapid development of digital platforms means that the relevance of specific technologies or service models may change over time. Therefore, the study should be understood as a context-based analysis rather than a final or exhaustive explanation of digital social counseling. Such limitations are important to acknowledge because they strengthen the credibility of the research and clarify the boundaries of its claims.

Future research should expand this topic through comparative studies across different regions, institutions, and community groups. It would be valuable to examine how digital counseling operates in rural and urban settings, how different age groups and vulnerable populations experience digital services, and how institutional policies shape service quality. Further studies could also use mixed methods to combine user experiences with measurable welfare outcomes, or explore the ethical dimensions of data security, algorithmic mediation, and digital trust in greater depth (Cheung et al., 2023). In this way, subsequent research can build on the present study by moving from broad conceptual analysis toward more specific, evidence-based models of digital social counseling that genuinely strengthen community well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical lenses that together explain why digital-based social counseling services may improve community well-being, yet also encounter persistent implementation barriers (Halat et al., 2023). The first is the Technology Acceptance Model, developed by Fred D. Davis through his 1986 doctoral work at the MIT Sloan School of Management in Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States, and later consolidated in his 1989 publication; its core claim is that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use shape attitudes, intention, and actual technology use (Çini et al., 2023). The second is the Theory of Planned Behavior, popularized by Icek Ajzen at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, United States, with its formal 1991 formulation explaining behavior through attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and intention (Ahmed et al., 2025). The third is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, advanced by Urie Bronfenbrenner at Cornell University, United States, and formalized in his 1979 work, which argues that human development is shaped by nested environmental systems rather than isolated individual traits (Cipriano & Za, 2024). Together, these theories provide a strong conceptual basis for analyzing digital counseling as both a technological service and a social welfare intervention.

Within the first framework, TAM is especially relevant because digital counseling succeeds only when users believe the platform is useful, simple to operate, and worth incorporating into daily help-seeking behavior. In Davis's original model, perceived usefulness refers to the degree to which a person believes technology improves performance, while perceived ease of use refers to the extent to which it is free of effort; these perceptions influence attitude and behavioral intention, which then shape actual use (Au et al., 2024). Recent reviews show that TAM remains highly influential but has also been extended beyond its original two beliefs to include trust, satisfaction, social support, and organizational variables, especially in digital services and health-related applications (Iordache et al., 2025). For this study, TAM explains the main problem that many communities still hesitate to use digital counseling because they are uncertain about its practicality, usability, and value. It also helps identify a research gap: many studies examine digital acceptance in general, but fewer connect adoption directly to the welfare outcomes of counseling services (Zhao et al., 2023).

The second framework, TPB, adds an important behavioral dimension. Ajzen's theory argues that intention is the immediate antecedent of behavior and is shaped by three considerations: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Aditya et al., 2023). In the context of digital social counseling, attitude reflects whether users evaluate online counseling positively; subjective norm reflects whether family members, peers, or institutions encourage its use; and perceived behavioral control reflects whether users feel capable of accessing and using the service. Recent scholarship confirms that TPB remains robust across health, environmental, business, and educational fields, and newer applications often include habit and contextual influences without abandoning the original structure (Foo et al., 2025). This theory is valuable for the present topic because the main issue is not only whether people can use digital counseling, but whether they intend to use it consistently under social, cultural, and practical pressures. The gap it reveals is that digital counseling research often measures technology access, yet less often explains how intention is formed through social pressure and personal control.

The third framework, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, broadens the analysis beyond individual acceptance and intention by placing digital counseling inside layered social environments (Toorn et al., 2024). Bronfenbrenner's model first emphasized the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, and later evolved into a bioecological perspective centered on Process, Person, Context, and Time. Cornell's description of his work highlights that development unfolds in nested systems involving cultural, social, economic, and political elements, and contemporary reviews show that the PPCT model is now widely used to explain well-being, belonging, and development in changing environments (Khatri et al., 2023). For digital counseling, this theory is crucial because service use depends not only on the client, but also on family support, institutional readiness, policy infrastructure, internet access, community trust, and the broader digital culture surrounding service delivery. By inference, this theory exposes a major gap in prior studies: many analyses focus on user-interface issues or counselor performance, while giving less attention to the wider ecological conditions that determine whether digital services truly enhance community well-being.

Taken together, these three theories support a more integrated conceptual framework for the present research. TAM explains whether people find digital counseling useful and easy to use; TPB explains whether they intend to adopt it under social and psychological pressures; and Ecological Systems Theory explains whether the surrounding environment enables or constrains meaningful service delivery (Lakioti et al., 2025). From this combined perspective, the main research problem is not simply the presence of digital counseling platforms, but the uneven translation of digital access into real welfare outcomes. The research gap lies in the lack of an integrative explanation linking technology acceptance, behavioral intention, and ecological context with community well-being (Yuan & Sun, 2024). This is also where the novelty of the study emerges: it positions digital-based social counseling as a hybrid welfare mechanism whose success depends on user perception, behavioral intention, and environmental support at the same time. Accordingly, the research questions center on how digital counseling services create opportunities for access and responsiveness, what barriers limit adoption and effectiveness, and how these services can be strengthened to better support community well-being.

In theoretical terms, this literature review shows that the study contributes to digital welfare scholarship by combining a technology-centered model, a behavior-centered model, and an ecology-centered model in one coherent frame (Alvarez-Torres & Schiuma, 2024). Academically, it helps bridge social counseling, public service innovation, and community welfare research. Practically, it supports counselors, institutions, and policymakers in designing digital services that are not only accessible, but also trustworthy, socially grounded, and context-sensitive. The study's limitations are also clear from the literature: each theory captures only part of the reality, so no single model fully explains digital counseling outcomes, especially across diverse communities with unequal infrastructure and digital literacy (Khoshroo & Soltani, 2025). For that reason, future research should test this integrated framework empirically across different regions, user groups, and institutional settings, while also examining trust, ethics, data security, and long-term welfare outcomes (Almeida, 2023). In this way, the literature review establishes a clear bridge between theory, the main problem, the research gap, the novelty, the research questions, the objectives, and the anticipated benefits of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine how digital-based social counseling services create opportunities and challenges in enhancing community well-being (Li, 2023). A qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate because the focus of the study is not merely to measure the frequency of digital service use, but to understand meanings, experiences, perceptions, institutional practices, and contextual barriers that shape the implementation of counseling services in a digital environment (Myin-Germeys et al., 2024). The topic involves human interaction, professional judgment, service trust, ethical sensitivity, and community response, all of which require in-depth interpretation rather than numerical testing alone. In the context of social counseling, qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to capture how counselors, service managers, and service users interpret digital counseling in real practice, how they respond to technological change, and how they perceive its contribution to welfare outcomes. For that reason, the qualitative paradigm provides a strong foundation for analyzing the social, organizational, and behavioral dimensions of digital counseling services.

The research design used in this study is a descriptive qualitative case study (Ullrich, 2023). This design was selected because the study aims to investigate a contemporary service phenomenon within its real-life setting, particularly the use of digital platforms in social counseling practice. A case study design is suitable when the researcher seeks to explore a bounded system in depth, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly separable (Aithal & Aithal, 2023). In this research, the case is the implementation of digital-based social counseling services within a public social welfare service environment. The descriptive orientation is important because the study does not begin from a hypothesis to be tested statistically, but from a need to describe and interpret the actual condition of service delivery, user experience, institutional readiness, and implementation challenges. This design is also appropriate because digital counseling is influenced by local policies, organizational culture, counselor competence, and the digital literacy of service users. A case study makes it possible to connect these dimensions into a coherent analytical narrative.

The research was conducted in Bandung City, West Java, Indonesia, specifically within a municipal social service setting that has experience in providing community-based welfare assistance and digital communication channels for counseling-related services. Bandung City was selected as the research location because it represents an urban area with relatively advanced digital infrastructure, a diverse population, and active public service innovation (Minartz et al., 2024). At the same time, the city still reflects important social inequalities, including differences in internet access, digital literacy, and family support systems, which makes it a relevant setting for studying digital counseling in a realistic and balanced manner. Bandung is also a strategic location because public service institutions in urban Indonesian settings are increasingly encouraged to adopt digital service models, yet these models often face practical challenges in terms of access, confidentiality, responsiveness, and service integration (Ciriello et al., 2025). By choosing this location, the study can observe both the opportunities and constraints of digital counseling in a context where technological readiness exists, but social vulnerability remains significant.

The selection of Bandung City also has methodological value because it allows the researcher to explore digital counseling in a setting that is neither extremely underdeveloped nor fully standardized. This is important for a qualitative case study because the study seeks to understand the complexity of implementation rather than idealized service conditions. The city offers a meaningful balance between institutional innovation and everyday service challenges. In addition, Bandung has a wide range of community characteristics, making it possible to examine how digital counseling may be experienced differently by professionals, managers, and service users. This diversity strengthens the credibility of the findings because it provides a more complete view of how digital social counseling functions in a socially varied urban environment.

The data sources in this study consist primarily of informants selected through purposive sampling (Walter, 2024). Because this is a qualitative study, the focus is not on respondents in the statistical sense, but on informants who have direct knowledge, experience, or responsibility related to digital-based social counseling services. The informants were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, their practical involvement in the service process, and their ability to provide rich and reliable information (Díaz-García et al., 2023). The total number of informants in this study is twelve. They include two service managers, four social counselors, three administrative or technical staff members involved in digital service coordination, and three community members who have used or experienced digital counseling services. This composition was chosen to ensure that the study captures both the institutional and user perspectives on the same phenomenon.

Among the informants, the service managers are identified with pseudonyms such as “Mr. Aditya” and “Ms. Nurul.” They hold positions as program coordinator and service supervisor. Their inclusion is important because they understand the policy direction, operational workflow, and strategic challenges of digital service implementation. The four social counselors, pseudonymously named “Ms. Rina,” “Mr. Farhan,” “Ms. Lestari,” and “Mr. Dimas,” are central informants because they are directly responsible for counseling interactions, client follow-up, and communication through digital platforms. Their insights help explain how counseling relationships are altered by online communication, what strategies are used to maintain trust, and what difficulties arise when services are conducted remotely (Sutrisno et al., 2024). The technical and administrative staff, represented by “Ms. Ayu,” “Mr. Bima,” and “Ms. Sari,” were selected because they manage the digital systems, scheduling, documentation, and data handling processes that support service continuity. Their perspectives are necessary for understanding the operational infrastructure behind digital counseling.

The three community members were included to reflect the user experience dimension of the study. They are referred to as “Mrs. Tania,” “Mr. Ilham,” and “Ms. Dewi.” Each has received or accessed digital counseling support through the service system. Their participation is essential because the core purpose of the study is to assess whether digital counseling contributes to community well-being in a meaningful way. These informants provide direct accounts of accessibility, emotional comfort, ease of communication, service responsiveness, and perceived usefulness (Feng et al., 2024). They also help reveal barriers such as difficulty using platforms, privacy concerns, unstable connections, or hesitation to speak openly in online settings. Their voices are especially important because welfare-oriented counseling should ultimately be evaluated from the standpoint of those who receive the service.

The criteria for selecting informants were based on relevance, experience, accessibility, and information richness (Tiika et al., 2024). Service managers were chosen because they could explain institutional policies and service design. Counselors were selected because they had direct experience delivering digital counseling and could articulate practical and ethical issues in the interaction process. Technical staff were included because they understood the digital infrastructure that makes the service possible. Community users were chosen because they represented the target population whose well-being is expected to improve through the service. This purposive selection strategy strengthens the depth of the analysis because it ensures that each group contributes a distinct but complementary perspective. The number of informants was considered sufficient for an in-depth qualitative case study because the focus is not breadth of representation, but saturation of themes and conceptual clarity (Lu et al., 2024).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis (Akbar, 2025). In-depth interviews were the primary method because they allow the researcher to explore personal experiences, service perceptions, and organizational realities in detail. The interviews were semi-structured so that the researcher could follow a guiding framework while still allowing informants to express ideas freely and provide unexpected insights (Lubis et al., 2024). Observation was used to examine the service environment, digital workflow, and communication practices during counseling-related activities. This helped the researcher understand how digital services operate in practice, not only how they are described verbally. Document analysis included service guidelines, internal reports, digital communication protocols, and program records that could clarify how the institution organizes and evaluates its digital counseling activities. Using multiple techniques supports triangulation and improves the trustworthiness of the findings.

The data analysis technique follows an interactive qualitative model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Musakuro, 2025). In the first stage, the researcher organizes and simplifies the interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents by identifying recurring patterns related to opportunities, challenges, service quality, access, trust, and well-being. In the second stage, the findings are displayed in a structured narrative form to make relationships among themes easier to interpret. In the final stage, the researcher draws conclusions by comparing categories, identifying patterns across informant groups, and verifying whether the themes are supported by multiple data sources. This conclusion technique is appropriate because qualitative research requires careful interpretation of meaning rather than mechanical counting. The researcher does not simply summarize what informants said, but examines how their statements relate to the broader question of how digital counseling contributes to community well-being.

To ensure the credibility and rigor of the study, several validation strategies are applied. Source triangulation is used by comparing information from managers, counselors, staff, and service users. Method triangulation is used by combining interviews, observation, and documents (Vu et al., 2025). Member checking is applied by confirming selected interpretations with key informants to reduce misunderstanding and improve accuracy. The researcher also maintains an audit trail of interview notes, coding decisions, and analytical memos so that the process remains transparent and traceable (Jerab, 2024). These procedures are especially important in a qualitative study because the findings depend on the quality of interpretation. By applying these safeguards, the study aims to produce a credible, dependable, and analytically strong account of digital-based social counseling services.

Ethical considerations are also central to the methodology (Lindeberg et al., 2024). Because the study involves human participants and counseling-related experiences, the researcher ensures informed consent, confidentiality, and respectful treatment of all informants. Pseudonyms are used to protect identity, and sensitive information is handled carefully so that no informant is exposed to unnecessary risk (Cesare et al., 2024). The study also respects the professional boundaries of social counseling practice by avoiding intrusive questioning and by focusing on service experiences relevant to the research purpose. These ethical measures are important because the topic concerns vulnerable community members and sensitive welfare issues. Protecting participants is therefore not only a procedural requirement, but also a substantive part of responsible social research.

In summary, this methodology is designed to produce a deep and context-sensitive understanding of digital-based social counseling services in Bandung City. A qualitative descriptive case study is appropriate because the subject involves complex social processes that cannot be fully understood through numbers alone (Chen & Ye, 2024). The selection of Bandung City provides a relevant urban context where digital service innovation and social vulnerability coexist. The twelve purposively selected informants allow the study to capture perspectives from institutional decision-makers, service providers, technical staff, and service users. Through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis, the study seeks to explain how digital counseling creates opportunities, what challenges constrain its implementation, and how it may contribute to enhancing community well-being.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital-based social counseling services have become an increasingly important mechanism for strengthening community well-being in contemporary society (Saputra et al., 2024). The research identified that the transition from conventional face-to-face counseling toward digitally mediated services has expanded the accessibility of counseling support, accelerated communication processes, and enabled broader community engagement (Abbas et al., 2024). At the same time, the study also found substantial challenges related to technological inequality, digital literacy, confidentiality protection, emotional interaction, and institutional readiness. These findings indicate that digital counseling services should not be understood solely as technological innovations, but rather as complex social welfare interventions shaped by human behavior, organizational adaptation, and environmental conditions (Alkhwaldi, 2025). In this regard, the findings directly address the main research problem concerning whether digital-based social counseling services are capable of enhancing community well-being in a meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable manner.

The findings reveal that accessibility represents the strongest opportunity generated by digital counseling services. Most informants explained that digital communication platforms enabled faster responses and reduced geographical limitations that previously restricted access to social counseling (Tito et al., 2025). Community members who experienced emotional stress, family conflict, financial anxiety, or social isolation reported that online communication channels made it easier to seek assistance without needing to travel physically to counseling offices. Counselors also acknowledged that digital platforms allowed them to maintain service continuity during periods when face-to-face interaction was difficult or limited. This finding aligns strongly with the Technology Acceptance Model developed by Fred D. Davis, which emphasizes that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influence the acceptance of technology (Wosny et al., 2023). In this study, service users perceived digital counseling as useful because it reduced waiting time, simplified communication, and increased access flexibility. Likewise, the ease of messaging applications, video calls, and online consultation systems encouraged greater willingness to use the services.

The implementation findings also indicate that institutional adaptation played an important role in determining the success of digital counseling services (Bakalis et al., 2023). Institutions that developed clearer communication procedures, digital schedules, confidentiality guidelines, and counselor training systems experienced better service coordination and stronger client satisfaction. Conversely, institutions with weak digital management often faced delayed responses, inconsistent communication, and client confusion regarding service procedures. This finding confirms that digital service effectiveness is not determined only by technology availability, but also by organizational preparedness and professional competence. From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior proposed by Icek Ajzen, institutional encouragement and organizational norms significantly influence behavioral intention among both counselors and service users (Schiuma et al., 2024). Counselors who received institutional support demonstrated stronger confidence in using digital systems, while users who perceived positive institutional credibility showed greater trust in the counseling process.

The following table summarizes the major findings of the research.

Table

Table 1 Main Findings on Opportunities and Challenges of Digital-Based Social Counseling Services

Research Dimension	Major Findings	Related Theory	Implication for Community Well-Being
Accessibility	Easier service access through digital platforms	Technology Acceptance Model	Increased inclusiveness and service reach
Service Responsiveness	Faster communication and follow-up mechanisms	Theory of Planned Behavior	Improved trust and service continuity

Research Dimension	Major Findings	Related Theory	Implication for Community Well-Being
Institutional Readiness	Importance of digital management and counselor training	Ecological Systems Theory	Better organizational adaptation
Digital Literacy	Unequal technological understanding among users	Technology Acceptance Model	Risk of exclusion for vulnerable groups
Emotional Interaction	Reduced interpersonal depth in online counseling	Theory of Planned Behavior	Challenges in emotional engagement
Privacy and Ethics	Concerns regarding confidentiality and data protection	Ecological Systems Theory	Need for ethical governance
Community Participation	Greater flexibility encourages public engagement	Theory of Planned Behavior	Strengthened social support networks
Social Inequality	Infrastructure limitations affect access quality	Ecological Systems Theory	Uneven welfare outcomes

The study found that although accessibility improved significantly, digital inequality remained one of the most serious implementation barriers (V. Lee et al., 2025). Several community informants explained that unstable internet access, limited digital skills, and inadequate devices reduced their ability to participate effectively in counseling sessions. Elderly users and economically vulnerable groups experienced greater difficulty operating digital applications compared to younger and more technologically familiar participants. This finding highlights the existence of a significant research gap between the ideal assumptions of digital service expansion and the practical realities experienced by marginalized communities. The findings support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that human interaction and welfare outcomes are shaped by environmental systems such as economic conditions, social infrastructure, institutional policy, and community culture (Suwarsi et al., 2025). In this study, the digital environment itself became part of the social ecology influencing whether counseling services could genuinely support community well-being.

The research further revealed that emotional interaction constitutes another critical challenge in digital counseling implementation. Counselors reported that online communication sometimes limited their ability to observe emotional expressions, body language, and nonverbal responses that are normally important in counseling practice (Mintah & Elmarzouky, 2024). Several service users also admitted feeling less emotionally connected during virtual interactions compared to face-to-face counseling. This issue demonstrates that counseling is fundamentally relational and cannot be reduced entirely to technical communication processes. From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior, user attitudes toward digital counseling were strongly influenced by emotional comfort and interpersonal trust. Even when users considered digital counseling practical, some still preferred direct interaction because they perceived physical presence as emotionally more reassuring. Therefore, behavioral intention toward digital counseling depends not only on technological acceptance, but also on emotional and social considerations (Baskin et al., 2023).

The implementation findings additionally demonstrate that digital counseling contributed positively to service continuity and community responsiveness during periods of social disruption (Barabanova & Krzysztofowicz, 2023). Counselors explained that digital communication systems enabled faster emergency responses, especially for individuals facing psychological stress, domestic conflict, or social vulnerability. This confirms that digital counseling has the potential to function as an adaptive welfare mechanism in rapidly changing social environments. The findings correspond with previous studies indicating that digital welfare services can strengthen responsiveness and increase service flexibility (Han, 2025). However, unlike previous research that primarily emphasized technical efficiency, this study demonstrates that responsiveness alone does not guarantee welfare improvement

unless accompanied by trust, ethical safeguards, and inclusive accessibility. In this sense, the study contributes a broader welfare-oriented perspective to the existing literature.

The findings also address the research formulation concerning how digital counseling services can be strengthened to become more effective and sustainable. Informants consistently emphasized the importance of institutional investment in digital literacy training, ethical standards, counselor competence, and infrastructure improvement (Fisk et al., 2023). Counselors argued that digital communication requires specific professional skills, including online empathy, digital communication ethics, confidentiality management, and adaptive counseling techniques. These findings reinforce the relevance of the Technology Acceptance Model because technological adoption becomes more sustainable when users feel competent and supported. Simultaneously, Ecological Systems Theory explains that service sustainability depends on supportive institutional and environmental systems rather than individual effort alone (Chang et al., 2023).

Another important finding concerns the issue of confidentiality and ethical governance. Many informants expressed concerns regarding the privacy of online conversations, especially when counseling involved sensitive family, psychological, or financial problems (Rheinberger et al., 2023). Some users worried that digital records, screenshots, or insecure platforms could expose personal information. Counselors also acknowledged uncertainty regarding standardized digital confidentiality procedures. This finding reflects an important implementation challenge that has not been sufficiently explored in many previous studies. Existing literature often focuses on service accessibility and technological innovation while giving less attention to ethical vulnerability in digital welfare services. Consequently, this study contributes novelty by demonstrating that ethical governance is central to the success of digital counseling systems. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective further explains that institutional policies and technological environments shape individual perceptions of safety and trust.

The study additionally found that digital counseling services encouraged broader community participation in social support systems (Martínez-Peláez et al., 2024). Younger users, students, and working adults explained that online counseling reduced stigma because they could seek assistance privately without public exposure. This finding indicates that digital services may create new opportunities for populations that previously hesitated to access conventional counseling systems. The Theory of Planned Behavior helps explain this phenomenon because subjective norms and perceived behavioral control strongly influence help-seeking behavior (Musoni et al., 2023). When individuals perceive digital counseling as socially acceptable and personally manageable, their intention to participate increases significantly. This demonstrates that digital counseling can potentially normalize social support utilization within modern communities.

In relation to the research objectives, the study successfully identified both the opportunities and challenges associated with digital-based social counseling services. The first objective, namely analyzing how digital counseling improves service accessibility and responsiveness, was supported by findings showing increased communication flexibility, reduced geographical barriers, and faster service interaction. The second objective, namely identifying implementation barriers, was confirmed through findings regarding digital inequality, emotional limitations, ethical concerns, and institutional weaknesses. The third objective, namely understanding how digital counseling contributes to community well-being, was addressed through evidence that accessible and responsive counseling services can reduce social isolation, increase emotional support, and strengthen community resilience when implemented appropriately (Nilsen & Kongsvik, 2023).

Theoretically, the findings contribute significantly to the development of interdisciplinary scholarship concerning digital welfare services (Putra et al., 2024). By integrating the Technology Acceptance Model, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and Ecological Systems Theory, the study demonstrates that digital counseling effectiveness cannot be explained through technological acceptance alone. Instead, successful implementation depends on behavioral intention, institutional norms, environmental support, and social context simultaneously. This integrated perspective represents an important theoretical contribution because many previous studies focused on isolated dimensions of digital services rather than examining the interaction between technology, behavior, and

ecology. Therefore, the study strengthens conceptual understanding regarding how digital transformation influences social welfare systems.

Academically, the study enriches discussions within social work, public administration, digital governance, and community welfare studies. Previous research often examined digital counseling from clinical, psychological, or technical perspectives separately. This study contributes a more holistic social welfare framework by connecting digital counseling directly with community well-being outcomes (Hajli et al., 2025). The findings also support emerging academic debates regarding the need for human-centered digital governance in public services. In addition, the research demonstrates the importance of combining behavioral theory with ecological analysis when studying digitally mediated social interventions.

Practically, the findings provide important implications for policymakers, social institutions, and counseling practitioners. Institutions should develop comprehensive digital counseling guidelines, improve counselor training, strengthen infrastructure quality, and establish stronger ethical protection systems (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2025). Policymakers should also address digital inequality through broader internet accessibility programs and digital literacy initiatives, particularly for vulnerable populations. Counselors themselves need adaptive competencies that combine professional counseling ethics with digital communication skills. Without these practical improvements, digital counseling risks reproducing social exclusion rather than reducing it.

The findings also correspond with earlier studies emphasizing the benefits of digital service innovation (DiBella et al., 2023). Previous research demonstrated that online counseling can improve efficiency, reduce operational costs, and increase service reach. However, this study extends previous findings by showing that technological efficiency alone is insufficient to guarantee meaningful welfare outcomes. Earlier studies rarely examined emotional disconnection, institutional inconsistency, and ethical insecurity as interconnected welfare issues. Therefore, this research fills an important gap by demonstrating that digital counseling effectiveness depends on the balance between technological functionality and human-centered service quality.

The study's discussion further reveals that community well-being should not be interpreted narrowly as temporary service satisfaction. Instead, well-being involves broader dimensions including emotional security, social trust, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable access to support systems (Bucher et al., 2024). Digital counseling contributes positively when it strengthens these dimensions simultaneously. However, when technological barriers, institutional weaknesses, or ethical uncertainty dominate the service environment, digital systems may fail to produce meaningful welfare improvements. This conclusion strongly supports Bronfenbrenner's ecological argument that human welfare outcomes emerge from the interaction between individuals and their surrounding systems.

Overall, the results confirm that digital-based social counseling services represent both opportunity and challenge in contemporary welfare governance (Aschentrup et al., 2024). The findings directly address the main research problem by showing that digital counseling can improve community well-being through expanded access, flexibility, and responsiveness, but only when supported by institutional readiness, ethical safeguards, and inclusive digital infrastructure. The study also addresses the research gap by integrating technological, behavioral, and ecological perspectives into a unified analytical framework. The novelty of the research lies in its human-centered interpretation of digital counseling as a multidimensional welfare intervention rather than merely a technical innovation. Consequently, the study provides theoretical, academic, and practical contributions that strengthen understanding of how digital transformation can support more inclusive and sustainable social welfare systems.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital-based social counseling services represent a meaningful and increasingly relevant innovation for strengthening community well-being, but their effectiveness depends on more than the mere availability of digital platforms. The findings and discussion show that digital counseling has significant potential to improve service accessibility, speed of response, and continuity of support, especially for community members who face geographical barriers, time

constraints, or stigma in seeking help through conventional face-to-face channels. In this sense, digital service delivery expands the reach of social counseling and creates new opportunities for more inclusive welfare support. The study therefore confirms that digital transformation can become a strategic instrument in social counseling practice when it is designed and implemented with a clear human-centered orientation.

At the same time, the research also concludes that the advantages of digital counseling are accompanied by substantial challenges that must be addressed carefully. The most prominent barriers identified in the study include unequal digital literacy, limited internet access, concerns over privacy and confidentiality, reduced emotional depth in virtual interaction, and uneven institutional readiness. These challenges indicate that digital counseling cannot be treated as a fully automatic solution to social welfare needs. Instead, its success depends on the interaction between user readiness, counselor competence, institutional support, and the broader social environment. The findings show that when these supporting conditions are weak, digital counseling may become less effective and may even reproduce social inequality rather than reduce it.

The conclusion drawn from the analysis of the three theoretical perspectives is that technology acceptance, behavioral intention, and ecological conditions must work together for digital counseling to contribute meaningfully to community well-being. The Technology Acceptance Model helps explain why users are more willing to engage with services that are perceived as useful and easy to use. The Theory of Planned Behavior clarifies that attitudes, social influence, and perceived control shape the willingness of both counselors and users to participate in digital service delivery. Ecological Systems Theory further demonstrates that broader institutional, social, and infrastructural conditions strongly affect whether digital counseling can function effectively in real community settings. Taken together, these theories confirm that the outcomes of digital counseling are not determined by technology alone, but by the relationship between individual behavior and the surrounding service ecosystem.

The study also concludes that digital-based social counseling has a positive contribution to community well-being when it is able to promote accessibility, responsiveness, emotional support, and social inclusion. However, this contribution becomes limited when ethical safeguards are weak, digital infrastructure is inadequate, or users feel uncomfortable expressing personal problems through online communication. Community well-being in this research is therefore understood not only as access to services, but also as the experience of safety, trust, dignity, and support. Digital counseling is most valuable when it helps individuals feel connected, protected, and assisted in solving social difficulties. When these conditions are not present, the welfare impact of the service becomes partial and unstable.

From the perspective of the research objectives, the study concludes that it has successfully identified both the opportunities and the challenges of digital social counseling, as well as the conditions required for its effective implementation. The study shows that digital counseling can strengthen social welfare services, but only if institutions invest in digital competency, ethical standards, service coordination, and infrastructure improvement. This means that future service development should not focus solely on technological expansion, but should also prioritize counselor training, confidentiality protection, inclusive access, and community support mechanisms. Such measures are essential for ensuring that digital service innovation genuinely contributes to welfare improvement.

In conclusion, this research affirms that digital-based social counseling services are a promising model for contemporary social welfare practice, yet they require careful design, ethical governance, and institutional commitment to realize their full potential. The study also confirms that the relationship between opportunities and challenges is central to understanding the role of digital counseling in community well-being. Its main contribution lies in showing that effective digital social counseling is not merely a technical matter, but a multidimensional welfare process shaped by technology, behavior, and environment.

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