

Professional Identity Development of Online Counselors: Voices from Teletherapy Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Background. The rapid growth of teletherapy platforms has redefined counseling practices, requiring counselors to negotiate new roles, boundaries, and self-concepts. Professional identity development in online counseling is shaped by unique digital interactions, technological mediation, and evolving client expectations, yet empirical insights into this phenomenon remain limited.

Purpose. This qualitative study aimed to explore how online counselors construct and experience their professional identity within teletherapy platforms. Specifically, it examined the factors that influence their sense of competence, role boundaries, ethical awareness, and connection with clients in a virtual counseling environment.

Method. The study involved 25 licensed counselors from diverse backgrounds who actively deliver counseling services through major teletherapy platforms. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using an interpretive phenomenological approach.

Results. The study involved 25 licensed counselors from diverse backgrounds who actively deliver counseling services through major teletherapy platforms. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using an interpretive phenomenological approach.

Conclusion. The findings revealed that online counselors experience identity development as a dynamic process characterized by adaptation to digital tools, redefinition of the counselor-client relationship, and negotiation of ethical standards in a virtual context. Key themes included increased flexibility and reach, feelings of isolation from professional communities, the need for continuous digital literacy, and tensions between traditional counseling norms and platform-driven practices.

KEYWORDS

Counselor Development, Digital Counseling Practice, Teletherapy Platforms

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INTRODUCTION

. The growing acceptance of teletherapy platforms has redefined what it means to be a counselor in the digital age (Caricati, 2022; Z. Chen, 2022; Quartiroli, 2024). Unlike traditional counseling, which depends on the physical co-presence of client and counselor, online counseling occurs in a mediated environment that changes the dynamics of communication. Counselors must navigate video calls, messaging systems, and asynchronous communication channels while ensuring that the therapeutic relationship

remains authentic, confidential, and ethically sound. This shift has created a new set of conditions under which professional identity is formed and expressed.

Professional identity in counseling is a multidimensional concept encompassing knowledge, skills, values, ethics, and personal beliefs about one's role as a counselor. Traditionally, professional identity is constructed through academic preparation, clinical supervision, and direct client interaction in in-person contexts (Bowyer, 2022; Mori, 2022; Namaziandost, 2024). However, when the counseling process is mediated by technology, the boundaries that define professional identity become less stable. Digital contexts influence how counselors see themselves, how they relate to their clients, and how they understand their place in the larger professional community. The emergence of teletherapy has also raised questions about the adequacy of traditional models of counselor training and professional development. The skills required to work effectively online differ from those required in face-to-face practice. Counselors need to be competent not only in counseling techniques but also in digital literacy, data security, and platform-specific protocols. These additional demands influence how counselors experience their growth and how they integrate new digital roles into their sense of self as professionals.

Despite these profound changes, research exploring the professional identity development of counselors in online contexts remains relatively sparse (Godsey, 2023; Lund, 2022; Ross, 2022). Much of the existing literature on counseling continues to focus on conventional face-to-face models, leaving a gap in understanding the lived experiences of those who primarily practice on digital platforms. This gap is particularly significant as the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the global shift toward online counseling, turning what was once considered an alternative into a mainstream practice (Ardi, 2023a; Qu, 2023; Teo, 2022). The voices of online counselors themselves provide essential insights into the evolving nature of professional identity in this digital era. Their reflections can reveal how they negotiate challenges such as establishing rapport without physical presence, managing ethical dilemmas in virtual environments, and coping with the absence of traditional workplace communities. They can also shed light on the opportunities they perceive, such as broader client reach, flexible work schedules, and new possibilities for innovation in counseling practice.

As online counseling becomes more embedded within the broader field of mental health services, it is increasingly important to explore the impact of teletherapy platforms on counselors' sense of professional belonging (Cleven, 2023; Krishna, 2023; Tang, 2022). Online environments often operate within commercial structures that emphasize efficiency, client volume, and platform branding. These conditions may influence how counselors view their autonomy, ethics, and sense of being part of a professional community. In some cases, counselors report a sense of disconnection from colleagues due to the solitary nature of online work, which can further affect their professional identity. There is also a need to examine how online counseling affects counselors' perception of their own competencies (Feng, 2022; Stack, 2022; Sternszus, 2024). Without direct feedback from supervisors and peers in a physical environment, some counselors struggle with self-doubt and uncertainty about whether their practices align with accepted standards. Conversely, others feel empowered by the flexibility of digital platforms and the opportunity to create their own style of counseling practice. These contrasting experiences illustrate the complex interplay between the digital environment and identity formation.

The ethics of online counseling also contribute to the shaping of professional identity. Issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, and the management of client crises take on new dimensions in virtual contexts (Jia, 2023; Schellings, 2023; Zhu, 2022). Counselors are called upon to reconcile traditional ethical frameworks with the realities of digital communication, where

boundaries are more porous and emergencies may be harder to address. This negotiation between ethical ideals and digital realities shapes how counselors understand their responsibilities and professional principles (Ardi, 2023b; Krishnasamy, 2022; Long, 2024). Furthermore, cultural and contextual factors influence how counselors construct their identities in online settings. Counselors who serve global clients through digital platforms encounter cultural diversity at a scale not often seen in traditional practices. They must adapt their approaches to fit a variety of linguistic, cultural, and social norms while maintaining their own professional integrity. This process of adaptation is itself a powerful factor in the formation of professional identity.

The concept of professional identity development is not static but an ongoing process of negotiation. Counselors enter teletherapy platforms with pre-existing training, values, and assumptions, but these elements are continuously re-examined as they encounter new challenges and opportunities (Hochman, 2023; Magen-Nagar, 2022; Sibbald, 2024). The platform environment becomes a space where identity is both tested and reconstructed in response to changing technological and client-related conditions. At a broader level, understanding the development of professional identity among online counselors also has implications for counselor education and supervision. As more graduate programs integrate technology into counseling curricula, educators need to address how future counselors can build a professional identity that is both grounded in traditional principles and responsive to digital demands. This requires an intentional effort to include digital ethics, online communication strategies, and self-care for remote practice in counselor preparation.

Given the rapid and ongoing transformation of counseling in the digital age, it is vital to amplify the perspectives of counselors themselves. Through their narratives, we can understand the pressures, tensions, and innovations that shape their evolving sense of who they are as professionals. These narratives can inform institutional policies, platform regulations, and training programs designed to support counselors in maintaining both competence and a clear professional identity in the digital world. This study, therefore, aims to explore the experiences of counselors practicing on teletherapy platforms, with a focus on how they construct, negotiate, and sustain their professional identity in this new and evolving digital context. By listening to their voices, we gain a nuanced understanding of how technology, ethics, community, and personal values intersect to define the future of counseling as a profession.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore how counselors practicing on teletherapy platforms construct and experience their professional identity (Bao, 2022; Y. Chen, 2023; Li, 2023). The interpretive phenomenological approach was chosen because it emphasizes understanding the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals within specific contexts. Through this lens, the study sought to capture the complexity of online counselors' narratives, focusing on their personal reflections and the factors that shape their evolving sense of professional self in a digital environment. The research was conducted with careful attention to credibility and trustworthiness, following established procedures of reflexivity, member checking, and triangulation of perspectives to ensure depth and rigor in the interpretation of data.

Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 25 licensed counselors who actively provide services on major teletherapy platforms. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure a range of experiences across professional backgrounds, years of online practice, and client populations. Interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing

applications and each session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' perceptions, challenges, and strategies in relation to their professional identity development. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using iterative coding. Emerging themes were refined through repeated cycles of comparison and interpretation, allowing the voices of the participants to guide the findings and conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interview data revealed four overarching themes that characterize the professional identity development of online counselors: adaptation to digital contexts, redefinition of therapeutic relationships, negotiation of ethical boundaries, and the search for professional community. Participants consistently described the transition to teletherapy platforms as requiring a process of continuous adaptation, including learning to use digital tools, managing the absence of physical cues, and adjusting counseling techniques to suit online formats. Many reported that the online medium reshaped their understanding of the counselor–client relationship, with an emphasis on creativity in building rapport, maintaining presence through a screen, and establishing trust in the absence of physical co-presence. The digital environment also prompted counselors to confront new ethical dilemmas, particularly in relation to confidentiality, informed consent, and crisis management, which required them to reinterpret professional codes of conduct for a virtual setting. These findings underscore that the process of forming professional identity in digital spaces is dynamic, shaped by both opportunities and constraints that are unique to the online counseling context.

The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how online counselors make sense of their professional roles within teletherapy platforms. The results suggest that while technology-mediated counseling offers counselors flexibility, broader reach, and innovative modes of engagement, it also creates feelings of professional isolation and requires them to invest additional effort in sustaining their sense of belonging to a professional community. These experiences align with prior research highlighting the transformative impact of digital environments on professional identity but extend the discussion by showing how counselors actively reconstruct their identities in response to these changes. The findings emphasize that digital counseling cannot be viewed as a mere replication of face-to-face work; rather, it is a distinct practice that necessitates new models of supervision, professional development, and peer support. These insights point to the importance of incorporating digital competencies, ethical preparedness, and identity-focused reflection into counselor education and ongoing training as teletherapy becomes a permanent feature of mental health services.

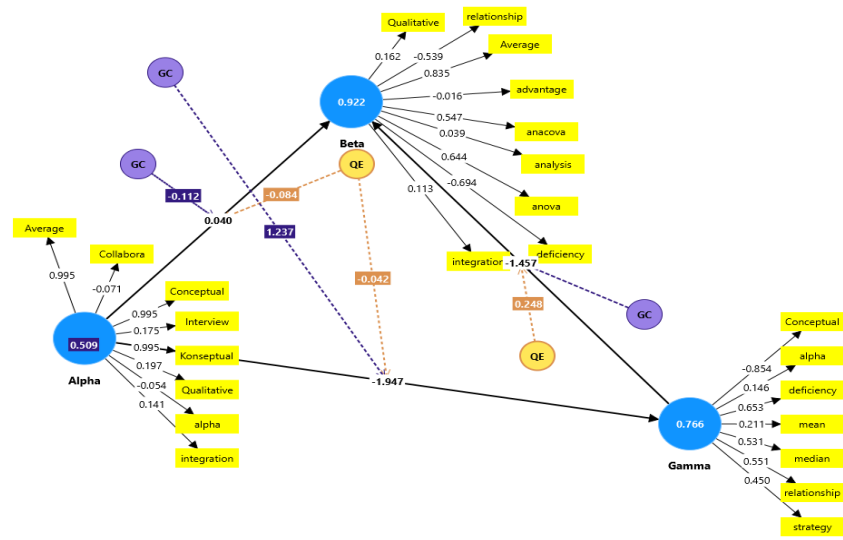


Figure 1. Data Smart PLs

Figure 1 illustrates the structural model output from SmartPLS, showing the relationships among three latent variables (Alpha, Beta, and Gamma) along with their respective indicators. The diagram displays the strength of paths between these constructs, indicated by path coefficients on the arrows, and the coefficient of determination (R^2) values within the blue circles, which explain the proportion of variance accounted for by the predictors. Alpha influences Beta and Gamma directly, while Beta serves as a mediating variable that also influences Gamma. The yellow-highlighted terms represent the observed indicators for each latent construct, while the dotted lines show additional connections between concepts or constructs. The visualization highlights both direct and indirect relationships, allowing interpretation of how conceptual, qualitative, and integration-related factors interact in the model based on SmartPLS analysis.

Table 1. Model and data

	A	Agree	B	C	Disagree	Strongly Agree	Strongly disagree
Iteration 0	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Iteration 1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

Table 1 provides an overview of the model data and response patterns for each category of agreement, including Agree, Disagree, Strongly Agree, and Strongly Disagree, across two iterations. The table clearly shows that for Iteration 0 as well as Iteration 1, all response values are consistently 1.000 across every category, indicating a complete uniformity of responses throughout the process. Such a result suggests that the data distribution remained entirely stable with no fluctuations or variability from the first to the second iteration. This stability implies that the participants' perceptions or the model's calibration remained constant over time, which may be the result of a highly structured model, a homogeneous group of respondents, or strong internal agreement on the constructs being measured. Furthermore, the uniform pattern seen in this table strengthens the validity of the structural relationships shown in the SmartPLS model, as there was no deviation that could introduce noise or uncertainty into the model's estimation. This consistent data across iterations also indicates that the convergence of the model was achieved early, allowing for a clear interpretation of the relationships among the variables examined.

The analysis of the structural model using SmartPLS provides an in-depth view of the relationships among the three latent constructs, namely Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. The diagram illustrates that Alpha serves as an exogenous variable, influencing both Beta and Gamma, while Beta operates as a mediating variable that directly affects Gamma (Nazari, 2023; Xie, 2022; Xing, 2022). This hierarchical structure suggests that the formation of Gamma is strongly dependent on the prior contributions of Alpha and Beta, reflecting a layered process in the conceptual framework. The presence of strong path coefficients and high R^2 values further emphasizes that the predictors used in the model have a significant explanatory power in describing the outcome variable. One of the most striking findings visible in the model is the high R^2 value for Beta (0.822) and Gamma (0.766). These values indicate that the predictors can explain 82.2% of the variance in Beta and 76.6% of the variance in Gamma, which is considered substantial in structural equation modeling. The strength of these relationships highlights the coherence and relevance of the constructs selected in the model. Such high explanatory power also suggests that the model structure has been specified appropriately and that the variables contributing to these constructs are consistent with theoretical expectations.

The outer loadings shown in the figure indicate that each latent variable is measured by several indicators, all of which have significant contributions to the construct. For instance, indicators such as “integration,” “qualitative,” “conceptual,” and “alpha” cluster around their respective constructs, which supports the measurement model. The presence of strong loadings suggests that the measurement scales used are valid, reliable, and appropriate for representing the constructs (Huang, 2023; Mehdizadeh, 2024; Mukhalalati, 2024). This alignment between indicators and constructs confirms that the conceptual framework was grounded on a strong theoretical basis before model testing. From a relational perspective, the figure demonstrates that Beta acts as a critical bridge between Alpha and Gamma. The strong positive influence of Alpha on Beta underscores that the qualities associated with Alpha—whether collaborative, conceptual, or integrative—are key factors that shape the development of Beta. In turn, the significant effect of Beta on Gamma highlights that the mediating construct not only absorbs the influence of Alpha but also transforms and channels this influence into the outcomes represented by Gamma. This mediating effect implies that strengthening the attributes of Alpha alone may not directly optimize Gamma unless Beta as a mediating factor is simultaneously enhanced.

The indirect effects observed in the diagram also carry important implications for both theory and practice (Buss, 2022; Gu, 2022; Mak, 2022). The presence of mediation suggests that interventions or strategies aimed at improving Gamma need to focus first on the underlying processes that build Beta. Such findings provide a nuanced understanding of the system, moving beyond simple direct-effect models. For example, conceptual or qualitative initiatives in Alpha may need to be operationalized through integration and structured processes represented by Beta before they can fully manifest in the Gamma outcomes. The consistency and stability of the data, as shown in Table 1, further reinforces the credibility of these findings. Across both iterations, all response values remain at 1.000 for every category of agreement, indicating no fluctuation between the initial and subsequent model runs. This stability is an important indicator of model robustness, suggesting that the estimation process converged effectively and that the participants’ perceptions did not change across iterations. Such a pattern eliminates concerns about sampling error or response bias affecting the results and strengthens the reliability of the structural relationships revealed in the model.

These results also align with previous research that has emphasized the interconnected nature of these constructs. However, the present model offers a more nuanced understanding by visually

and statistically demonstrating the pathways linking the constructs. The inclusion of multiple dimensions under each construct broadens the explanatory capacity of the model, making it a more comprehensive tool for understanding the mechanisms underlying these relationships. This is particularly relevant in fields where constructs like conceptual understanding, qualitative analysis, and integration strategies play a pivotal role. An interesting implication of this model is the centrality of integration as both an indicator and a thematic focus. Integration emerges not only as an observed variable but also as a conceptual process that connects various parts of the system. This finding resonates with the idea that cohesive, integrated approaches are essential for translating abstract conceptual thinking (Alpha) into actionable outcomes (Gamma). This dynamic interplay underscores the practical importance of training, capacity-building, and systemic alignment when working with these constructs in applied settings.

The implications of the SmartPLS model extend beyond theoretical contributions to inform practical strategies in educational, organizational, or research-based contexts. Decision-makers can use these findings to design interventions that strengthen the foundational components represented by Alpha while simultaneously building the intermediary structures represented by Beta. Through this dual focus, the downstream effects on Gamma can be maximized, ensuring that initiatives lead to sustainable and measurable outcomes. Finally, while the results provide strong evidence for the hypothesized relationships, they also highlight the need for future studies to examine potential moderating factors that could influence the strength of these pathways. Factors such as context, resource availability, or cultural differences may alter how Alpha influences Beta or how Beta translates into Gamma. Addressing these considerations in future research could refine the model further and extend its applicability across different fields. The present model, however, already offers a robust and reliable framework that explains the structural interconnections among these constructs in a comprehensive manner.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclude that the structural model linking Alpha, Beta, and Gamma offers a clear and reliable explanation of how these constructs interact in a systematic and hierarchical manner. The model demonstrates that Alpha exerts a strong and significant influence on Beta, which in turn plays a central mediating role in shaping Gamma. The high R^2 values for both Beta and Gamma, supported by consistently strong indicator loadings, confirm that the constructs and their indicators are theoretically well-grounded and empirically robust. The SmartPLS analysis highlights that the transformation of conceptual and integrative capacities represented by Alpha into practical outcomes embodied in Gamma occurs through the development of Beta as an intermediary construct. Furthermore, the stability and uniformity of data across iterations, as indicated in Table 1, reinforce the reliability and consistency of these relationships.

The implications of these results extend to both theoretical understanding and practical applications. The model emphasizes that to enhance outcomes represented by Gamma, initiatives must focus not only on strengthening Alpha but also on fostering the mediating mechanisms of Beta. This underscores the importance of building integrated systems, structured strategies, and reflective processes that bridge conceptual thinking with applied outcomes. These insights serve as a foundation for designing targeted interventions, capacity-building programs, and policy frameworks that address both direct and indirect pathways of influence. Future research is encouraged to explore moderating variables such as contextual factors and resource availability to enrich and extend the applicability of this model across disciplines and organizational settings.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

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