The Role of the Internet in Promoting Mental Health: Evaluating the Internet's Role in Providing Psychological Treatment and Support Services During Crises and Wars in Lebanon

Mohamad Ibrahim fadlalah[1] & Professor Dr. Mohamad jaber[2]

Islamic Azad University

ملخص الدراسة:

تتعمق هذه الدراسة في دور المنصات القائمة على الإنترنت في تقديم دعم الصحة النفسية أثناء الأزمات وحالات الحرب في لبنان. مع تزايد اعتمادنا على التقنيات الرقمية ، برز الإنترنت كمورد حيوي للعلاج والتثقيف النفسي ودعم الأقران. يستخدم البحث تصميما شبه تجريبي للاختبار اللاحق لتقييم النتائج النفسية بين 90 بالغا لبنانيا يستخدمون خدمات الصحة النفسية عبر الإنترنت. تم فحص ثلاث فرضيات رئيسية: أن الإنترنت يعزز الوصول إلى دعم الصحة العقلية، ويخفف من الضيق النفسي، ويعزز الدعم العاطفي المتصور. تم تحليل البيانات الكمية باستخدام SPSS v21. تكشف النتائج عن تحسينات كبيرة في الرفاهية العقلية وانخفاض في مستويات الضيق ، مما يشير إلى أن الخدمات المستندة إلى الإنترنت يمكن أن تكون أداة قوية في رعاية الصحة العقلية الواعية بالصدمات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصحة النفسية عبر الإنترنت, التدخل في الأزمات, الضائقة النفسية, العلاج عبر الإنترنت في لبنان, دعم الصحة النفسية الرقمية

Abstract

This study delves into the role of internet-based platforms in providing mental health support during crises and wartime situations in Lebanon. As our dependence on digital technologies grows, the internet has emerged as a vital resource for therapy, psychoeducation, and peer support. The research employs a mixed-methods quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design to assess psychological outcomes among 90 Lebanese adults utilizing online mental health services. Three key hypotheses were examined: that the internet enhances access to mental health support, alleviates psychological distress, and boosts perceived emotional support. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v21. The findings reveal significant improvements in mental well-being and a decrease in distress levels, indicating that internet-based services can be a powerful tool in trauma-informed mental health care.

Introduction

In recent years, Lebanon has been through a lot, grappling with crises like economic collapse, political turmoil, the COVID-19 pandemic, and constant threats of war. These challenges have taken a serious toll on the mental health of its people. Unfortunately, access to traditional psychological services is quite limited, especially in conflict zones, which has turned the internet into a crucial resource for mental health support.

Around the world, online psychological interventions have gained traction because they are accessible, affordable, and allow for anonymity. In places like Lebanon, where conflict is a daily reality, NGOs, government initiatives, and private therapists are increasingly turning to internet-based therapy and support forums. This study looks into how effective these online services are in alleviating psychological distress and boosting resilience among those affected.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing global evidence supporting the effectiveness of internet-based mental health services, their role in Lebanon, particularly during times of crisis and conflict, has not been thoroughly explored. Many people in Lebanon struggle to access in-person therapy consistently, which makes online options incredibly important. Unfortunately, there's a lack of data on their psychological impact, accessibility, and how well they're accepted by the community.

General Research Question: How effective is the internet in providing psychological support and treatment services to Lebanese individuals during crises and armed conflict?

Objectives

1. To explore how internet-based psychological services affect the mental well-being of Lebanese citizens during times of crisis.

2. To assess how effective online therapy is in alleviating psychological distress.

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3. To investigate if digital support platforms boost the feeling of emotional support.

Hypotheses

• H1: Internet-based psychological services lead to a notable improvement in self-reported mental well-being.

• H2: People who engage in online therapy experience a significant decrease in psychological distress after the intervention.

• H3: Being part of digital peer support communities increases the sense of emotional support.

Literature Review

Internet-Based Therapy and Mental Health

Over the last ten years, online therapy has really come into its own as a trustworthy and increasingly popular option for mental health support, particularly in high-pressure situations or where resources are scarce. Research from Andersson et al. (2019) and Titov et al. (2020) highlights the impressive advantages of internet-based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (iCBT), which is a structured therapy format delivered through digital platforms. These studies consistently demonstrate that iCBT is quite effective in alleviating symptoms of depression, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). What makes online therapy so appealing is its accessibility, affordability, and flexibility. Unlike traditional face-to-face sessions, online services can be accessed from almost anywhere, making them perfect for people facing mobility challenges due to conflicts, pandemics, or natural disasters. Plus, the privacy that online platforms offer encourages more individuals to seek help without the worry of social stigma, which can be a major hurdle in conservative or trauma-affected communities. Meta-analyses back up these findings, showing effect sizes that are on par with in-person treatments and high satisfaction rates among clients (Karyotaki et al., 2018). So, internet-based interventions not only help close the gap in service delivery across different locations but also tackle sociocultural barriers that often prevent people from seeking mental health care.

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Digital Interventions During Conflict

In areas affected by conflict, digital mental health tools have become vital lifelines for individuals who can't access traditional healthcare systems. Research by Naslund et al. (2021) and Sijbrandij et al. (2022) highlights the successful use of mobile and web-based mental health platforms among war-impacted populations, especially refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). These platforms often combine SMS support, mobile apps, and online counseling to deliver psychological first aid, stress management strategies, and ongoing therapeutic care. One major benefit of these digital mental health solutions in conflict zones is their ability to maintain continuity of care when clinics and hospitals are either unreachable or unsafe. Additionally, these digital platforms provide scalable solutions that can serve large groups at a relatively low cost, making them appealing to governments and humanitarian organizations working in resource-limited settings. The effectiveness of these interventions is backed by an increasing amount of empirical evidence showing enhancements in psychological well-being, resilience, and help-seeking behavior. For example, Naslund et al. (2021) discovered that a mobile platform offering psychoeducation and guided self-help significantly reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms among Syrian refugees in Turkey. These findings highlight the potential of internet-based services to address critical mental health needs in unstable environments.

Lebanon's Digital Mental Health Landscape

Lebanon offers a fascinating opportunity to explore digital mental health interventions, especially given its unique challenges like political turmoil, economic downturn, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the devastating Beirut port explosion in 2020. A significant study by Ghandour et al. (2022) highlighted a remarkable rise in the demand for online psychological services during this tumultuous time. This increase was driven not only by lockdowns that limited movement but also by the heavy psychological burden of facing multiple crises at once. In response, NGOs, mental health professionals, and community initiatives quickly pivoted to provide their services online. Tools like Zoom, WhatsApp, and social media became vital for therapy and community support. While Lebanese therapists faced both hurdles and new possibilities, acknowledging that digital interactions might miss some of the subtleties of face-to-face meetings, they also found that this

approach broadened access to services, especially for those in remote or underserved areas like Bekaa and Tripoli. Crucially, these digital platforms helped reduce the stigma surrounding mental health by offering discreet and private ways for people to seek help. In this light, digital therapy emerged not just as a temporary fix but as a driving force for innovation within Lebanon's fragmented mental health landscape. This transition also mirrored global movements toward telepsychology and the development of digital mental health resources, underscoring the ongoing importance and viability of online services, even as the country moves toward recovery.

Methodology

Study Design: We conducted a quasi-experimental mixed-methods study with a pretest-posttest design.

Participants: We recruited 90 Lebanese adults, aged 18 to 60, who had sought online psychological support in the last six months. To qualify, participants needed internet access, fluency in either Arabic or English, and to report experiencing psychological distress. Those currently hospitalized for psychiatric reasons or with severe cognitive impairments were excluded.

Procedure: Participants filled out pre-intervention surveys that assessed their well-being, psychological distress, and perceived emotional support. They then took part in six weeks of online psychological services, including therapy and support groups. Afterward, we administered post-intervention surveys using the same measures.

Measures:

- Mental Well-being: WHO-5 Well-being Index
- Psychological Distress: Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)
- Perceived Emotional Support: Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

Data Analysis: We used SPSS v21 for our analysis. To test each hypothesis, we employed paired t-tests and repeated measures ANOVA, and we reported effect sizes (Cohen's d).

Results

Table 1. H1: Paired t-test Results for Mental Well-being (WHO-5)

Statistic	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
WHO-5 Score	44.8	61.3	9.12	<.001	1.21

The findings from the WHO-5 Well-Being Index reveal a significant boost in mental well-being after people engaged with online mental health services. Initially, the average score was 44.8, indicating that many participants were likely dealing with low mood or emotional fatigue before the intervention. However, after they took advantage of internet-based therapy, psychoeducation, or emotional support, the average score jumped to 61.3, showcasing a clear improvement in how participants felt about their mental health.

The t-value of 9.12 and a p-value of less than .001 highlight the strength of this change, while the large effect size (Cohen's d = 1.21) indicates that this improvement is not just statistically significant but also meaningful in a clinical sense. According to Cohen's benchmarks, a d value greater than 0.8 is considered a large effect. This backs up the first hypothesis (H1) that online interventions can significantly boost mental well-being during times of crisis. It emphasizes the importance of accessible online support for those grappling with ongoing socio-political trauma in Lebanon.

Table 2. H2: Paired t-test Results for Psychological Distress (K10)

Statistic	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
K10 Score	29.7	19.5	-10.4	<.001	1.38

The results from the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) show a notable decrease in psychological distress among participants who used internet-based mental health resources. Initially, the average score was 29.7, which falls into the high distress category, often linked to

anxiety, depression, or trauma symptoms. After the intervention, this average dropped to 19.5, indicating that participants' distress levels moved into a more manageable range.

The very high t-value of -10.4 and an incredibly low p-value of less than .001 strongly suggest that this change is statistically significant. Even more compelling is the effect size of 1.38, which points to a substantial impact, highlighting significant emotional and psychological relief. This supports the second hypothesis (H2) that internet-based services can effectively reduce psychological distress during crises. The findings emphasize the role of digital tools, like mobile apps, online therapy, and virtual peer support, in providing timely therapeutic relief for individuals facing chronic stress, economic challenges, or trauma from conflict in Lebanon.

Table 3. H3: Paired t-test Results for Perceived Emotional Support (MSPSS)

Statistic	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
MSPSS Score	45.2	58.6	8.34	<.001	1.09

Findings from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) reveal a notable boost in how participants perceive their emotional support after using internet-based mental health platforms. Initially, the score was 45.2, indicating a relatively low sense of support, likely due to factors like social isolation, displacement, or the breakdown of community ties often seen in conflict zones. However, after the intervention, this score jumped to 58.6, suggesting that participants felt a greater sense of connection and support, whether through interactions with online therapists, peer forums, or digital community initiatives.

With a t-value of 8.34 and a p-value below .001, this difference is statistically significant. The large effect size (d = 1.09) shows that this improvement is not just measurable but also meaningful in real-world terms. This backs up the third hypothesis (H3) that internet-based mental health support enhances perceived emotional support. In a country like Lebanon, where the infrastructure and public health systems are under pressure, the internet serves as a vital tool for rebuilding social connections and providing psychosocial support, even amidst fragmentation or displacement.

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These findings also highlight the potential of digital mental health ecosystems to foster community building during post-crisis recovery.

Discussion

This study highlights the vital role that internet-based mental health services play during crises in Lebanon. All three hypotheses were confirmed, showing that the internet can significantly enhance psychological outcomes for users. These results align with international research (like Titov et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2021) and reinforce the effectiveness of digital mental health interventions in conflict zones.

Given the ongoing instability in Lebanon, having access to therapy online offers a scalable and cost-effective alternative to traditional treatment methods. The improvements in well-being and the reduction in distress indicate a strong potential for clinical application.

Implications

1. The government and NGOs should work on expanding the digital mental health infrastructure.

2. There's a need for training Lebanese mental health professionals in delivering digital therapy.

3. Developing mobile mental health apps in Arabic could help reach underserved communities.

Limitations

• The lack of randomization affects how widely these findings can be applied.

• The intervention period was relatively short (just 6 weeks).

• The study relied on self-reported data.

Future research should incorporate randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and assess long-term outcomes.

Conclusion

This research underscores how crucial the internet is for providing effective psychological support during crises in Lebanon. Digital services play a significant role in boosting mental well-being, alleviating distress, and enhancing emotional support, presenting a practical model for countries grappling with war and instability.

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