

Unlocking Student Satisfaction: The Impact of Therapeutic Engagement in University Counseling Services

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Abstract

This quantitative 'cross-sectional correlational study' aimed to examine the relationship between therapeutic engagement and satisfaction levels among university students with their counselors. Sample size consisted of 60 university students from six universities located in Karachi, University road. Twenty students from each university were selected who were receiving mental health counseling. Two tools were utilized to assess the relationship between variables including Working Alliance Inventory for therapeutic engagement and Short Assessment of Patient Satisfaction for satisfaction levels. Findings reveal that students scored high on the therapeutic alliance with strong agreement on mutual goal setting and understanding of changes and majority expressed satisfaction with the counseling services within the university as highest satisfaction noted in decision-making and service quality. The relationship between therapeutic alliance and satisfaction levels was significant through Wilcoxon test, and enhances understanding of the impact of therapeutic engagement on the level of satisfaction in student counseling services, providing insights to improve mental health support and counseling strategies in educational settings. For student satisfaction with counseling services, a strong therapeutic alliance is crucial to overcome mental health issues. The study recommended improvement in accessibility to counseling, professional training programs for counselors, awareness programs for students to access counseling services, and adopting evidence-based practices to enhance counseling efficiency. Further study could explore the impact of different therapeutic approaches such as traditional versus digital therapy.

Keywords: Counseling, University students, Therapeutic engagement, Alliance, Satisfaction, Mental health.

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Introduction

Mental health counseling is a critical aspect of overall well-being, aimed at providing individuals with the support as well as guidance and tools they need to navigate their emotional, behavioral, and psychological challenges (Rehman et al., 2022; WHO, 2022). Traditional mental health counseling has been conducted by humans as counselors, psychologists, or mental health therapists. These professionals undergo tough training in their profession and possess a deep understanding of human psychology with various therapeutic techniques (Zakaria et al., 2024; Nagarajan, 2021).

The counselors offer unique and empathetic therapy to counseling, forming a strong therapeutic alliance with their clients. Through compassion, active listening, and personalized treatment strategies, they create a safe space for individuals to express their feelings, insecurities, and fears (Wheeler, 2007). Counselors within the universities draw upon their experience and training to analyze the root causes of the problems and guide the client/student towards self-discovery and growth (Gonzales, 2022; Voon et al., 2022; Fonagy & Allison, 2014). Furthermore, they developed intervention plans to the unique needs of each individual, fostering a sense of trust and understanding in the therapeutic relationship with them (Banerjee et al., 2024; Tornero-Costa et al., 2023; D'Alfonso et al., 2020). They provide a safe environment and ensure security, safety, & well-being of their clients/students (Zakaria et al., 2024; Gonzales, 2022; Tong et al., 2022).

To provide more comprehensive mental health support for students, student counseling services have evolved significantly from their early roots in academic advising. In general, the counseling domain in the field of education was primarily focused on academic guidance and related career planning, but now it is increasingly addressing the broader mental health issues of students (see also Shah et al., 2023; Gordon, 2018). In higher education, the counseling services are crucial for supporting students with mental health-related issues, academic stress, and overall psychological well-being by providing holistic support (Harris & Rogers, 2018). These mental health issues directly or indirectly impact students' academic performance. These counseling services, provided by university counselors, are often grounded in various therapeutic approaches including cognitive behavioral therapy, person-centered therapy, and eclectic approaches, whose purpose is to accentuate building a strong therapeutic alliance and positive satisfaction, addressing academic and mental health issues. These services are designed to meet the specific need of each individual by tailoring interventions (Boerma et al., 2024; Smith & Wiggins, 2020).

According to previous studies, effective counseling relies on the quality of the therapeutic engagement and relationship between counselors and their students (Tong et al., 2022; Jones & Lee, 2021) that is emphasized by trust, empathy, and active listening (Adams & Wallace, 2017). In the therapeutic engagement, these factors; trust, empathy, and active listening, significantly impact the effectiveness of counseling interventions and student mental health outcomes.

So, the effective counseling lead to improvements in academic performance, reduced stress & burnout, and improved emotional resilience (Boerma et al., 2024). Similarly, Kraft and Beck (2019) highlighted that counseling services help students navigate personal and academic related challenges, leading to better mental health and academic success. Likewise, Gonzales (2022) mentioned that student counselors provide a safe, confidential space for students to

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discuss sensitive issues, fostering trust and openness, within the premises of university. Student counseling services face challenges despite the mentioned benefits such as limited resources, increasing demand, availability issues such as difficulty getting appointments on time, stigma or avoidance due to fear of being labeled by peers, and the need for culturally competent practices (Turner et al., 2024; Rehman et al., 2023; Adams & Wallace, 2017; Sajjad et al., 2016).

Objectives

1. To assess the strength of the therapeutic engagement between mental health counselors and students.
2. To explore students' satisfaction levels and perceived benefits with their counselors.
3. To identify the relation between the therapeutic engagement and satisfaction level among students and their counselors.
- 4.

Significance

The study can enhance understanding of the quality of therapeutic engagement in counseling services by student counselors. The study further provides insights into students' satisfaction and perceived benefits of counseling services. The scope of this study underscores how therapeutic engagement influences satisfaction and provides insights for enhancing counseling practices in education settings. This can help improve mental health services and facilitate treatment plans or interventions tailored to student needs. The study will contribute to the development of effective counseling strategies in educational settings especially in universities and suggest exploring different approaches for future research directions.

Research Gap

There is limited research found on the effectiveness of human counseling in student populations. Majority of studies lack exploration of the quality of therapeutic engagement between student counselors and students and have unsatisfactory information about student satisfaction and perceived benefits of student counseling services. So, this study was designed to explore the therapeutic engagement and satisfaction of students with their counselors to fill the gaps in understanding how student counseling impacts mental health outcomes.

Research Methodology

This quantitative research employs a 'cross-sectional correlational study' design to explore the relationship at a single point in time between therapeutic alliance and the satisfaction level among university students toward their student counselors. Through systematic sampling methods and with the help of statistical power analysis, 60 university students from six big universities located or nearby university road Karachi were selected. Subsequently, 20 students from each university were selected, who were taking mental health counseling for their various mental health related issues as identified by their university counselor or psychologist.

For therapeutic alliance 'Working Alliance Inventory (WAI)' and for satisfaction level Short Assessment of Patient Satisfaction (SAPS) were utilized with the permission of primary

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authors. Both tools have very strong reliability as WAI has 12 items with reliability of .86 (Oudshoorn et al., 2023), whereas SAPS has 7 items with strong reliability of .85 (Little et al., 2023). The researcher conducted pilot study on 10 students to test the survey instruments and refine them based on feedback. However, no recommendations or changes were made after pilot testing and then these 10 students were added in the final data. See table 1 for demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1.*Demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

	Frequency	Percent	M	SD
Gender			1.50	.504
Male	30	50.0		
Female	30	50.0		
Total	60	100.0		
Age			1.43	.745
18 - 21	40	66.7		
22 - 25	17	28.3		
26 - 30	3	5.0		
30 or above	0	0		

The questionnaire was shared with the remaining 50 participants through online google form after ensuring that all participants have provided informed consent and understand the study's purpose and procedures. The data were analyzed through SPSS for descriptive statistics and hypothesis testing through Wilcoxon signed rank test.

The table 2 below displays the normality test of the data (N=60) using the Shapiro-Wilk normality test, which indicates that the data is not normally distributed because the significant value is less than 0.05. Therefore, a nonparametric test was utilized to test the hypothesis.

Table 2.*Test of Normality*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
WAI Score	.141	60	.005	.948	60	.012
Satisfaction Score	.195	60	.000	.893	60	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Findings***Therapeutic Engagement between Counselors and Students***

The analysis of the therapeutic engagement between counselors and students, assessed through the WAI-SR based on 12 items (see table 3). It shows that a majority of students (54.72%) consistently reported 'always' being comfortable with their positive relationship with their counselors and 38.77% reported 'very often'. Specifically, the highest mean scores were shown in item number 6 that was 'working on mutually agreed-upon goals', and item number 11 'we both have established a good understanding of the kind of changes', both

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presenting a mean of $M = 4.57$ with SD of .563 and .593, respectively. The overall mean score was $M = 53.69$ with $SD = 2.259$, demonstrating a moderate level of agreement in the therapeutic engagement aspect (see fig. 1).

Table 3.

WAI Scores of the Students Received Counseling from Human Counselors

<i>After Counseling Sessions:</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>Some-what</i>	<i>Fairly Often</i>	<i>Very Often</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I am clearer as to how I might be able to change	0	1 (1.7%)	4 (6.7%)	22 (36.7%)	33 (55%)	4.45	.699
It gives me new ways of looking at my problem	0	3 (5%)	5 (8.3%)	20 (33.3%)	32 (53.3%)	4.35	.840
My counselor likes me.	0	1 (1.7%)	4 (6.7%)	30 (50%)	25 (41.7%)	4.32	.676
Me and my counselor collaborate on setting goals for my therapy	0	0	3 (5%)	22 (36.7%)	35 (58.7%)	4.53	.596
We both respect each other	0	0	4 (6.7%)	26 (43.3%)	30 (50%)	4.43	.621
We worked on mutually agreed upon goals	0	0	2 (3.3%)	22 (36.7%)	36 (60%)	4.57	.563
my counselor appreciates me	0	0	4 (6.7%)	25 (41.7%)	31 (51.7%)	4.45	.622
We both agree on what is most important for me to work on	0	1 (1.7%)	3 (5%)	23 (38.3%)	33 (55%)	4.47	.676
My counselor cares for me, even when I do things that he/she don't favor of	0	0	3 (5%)	21 (35%)	36 (60%)	4.55	.594
Things I do in counseling sessions help me to accomplish the changes that I want in my life.	0	0	5 (8.3%)	23 (38.3%)	32 (53.3%)	4.45	.649
We established a good understanding of the kind of changes that would be good for me.	0	1 (1.7%)	0	23 (38.3%)	36 (60%)	4.57	.593
The way we are working together with my problems is correct.	0	0	2 (3.3%)	23 (38.3%)	35 (58.3%)	4.55	.565
Total	0	7 (0.97%)	39 (5.4%)	280 (38.88%)	394 (54.72%)	53.6 8	2.25 9

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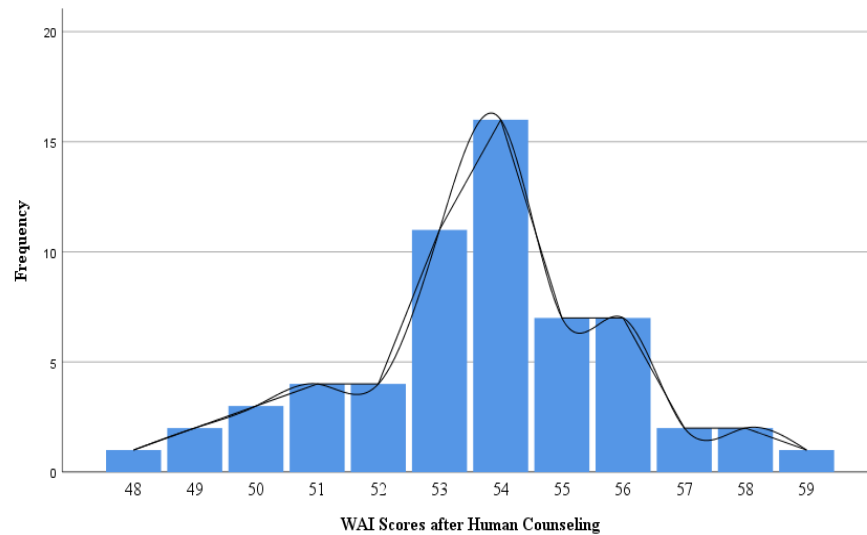


Fig. 1 illustrate the mean scores of therapeutic alliance between counselors and students

Students' Satisfaction Level for Human Counseling Services

The SAPS scores, as displayed in Table 4 reflect student satisfaction regarding counseling from human counselors. The results revealed that a significant majority (74.28%) of students expressed satisfaction, with a notable proportion feeling satisfied (56.9%) and very satisfied (17.38%). In contrast, about a quarter (25.47%) of the students reported feeling neutral—neither satisfied nor dissatisfied—with the counseling offered by student counselors. Strikingly, only one student (.23%) expressed dissatisfaction with their student counselor. The overall mean score was observed 20.40 with $SD=1.4166$. The highest mean scores were associated with item number 4 ($M=3.18$, $SD=.596$) and item number 7 ($M=3.13$, $SD=.623$), indicating higher satisfaction levels in these areas. The lowest mean score was observed for item number 5 ($M=2.53$, $SD=.596$), for how much time students feel respected by their counselors. According to SAPS scoring system, the satisfaction levels are within the range of 19 to 26. Thus, the current findings reveal that the students were satisfied with AI-based counseling services (see fig. 2).

Table 4.

Descriptive Statistics of SAPS scores for Human Counselor Group

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither Satisfied / Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	M	SD
1 Are you satisfied with the effect of your mental health outcome?	0	0	19 (31.7%)	38 (63.3%)	3 (5%)	2.73	.548

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2	Are you satisfied with the explanations the students' counselor has given you about the results of your mental health treatment?	0	0	16 (26.7%)	32 (53.3%)	12 (20%)	2.93	.686
3	Your students' counselor carefully checks everything without label you, when examining	0	0	16 (26.7%)	33 (55%)	11 (18.3%)	2.92	.671
4	Were you satisfied with the choices you had in decisions with the counselor, affecting your mental health care?	0	0	6 (10%)	37 (61.7%)	17 (28.3%)	3.18	.596
7	Are you overall satisfied with the counseling services and care by your counselor?	0	0	8 (13.3%)	36 (60%)	16 (26.7%)	3.13	.623
5	How much of the time did you feel respected by your counselor?	0	1 (1.7%)	28 (46.7%)	29 (48.3%)	2 (3.3%)	2.53	.596
6	The time period of sessions you had with your counselor was too short?	0	0	14 (23.3%)	34 (56.7%)	12 (20%)	2.97	.663
Total		0	1	107 (0.23%)	239 (25.47%)	73 (56.9%)	20.4	1.4166 (17.38 %)

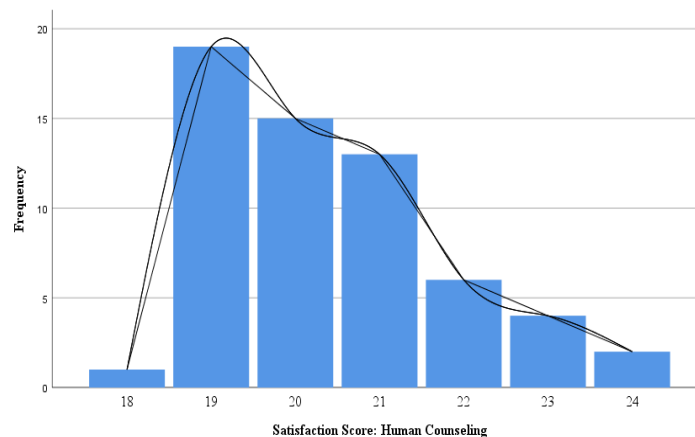


Fig. 2 SAPS scores for the satisfaction level among students with students' counselor

Hypothesis Testing

H₁: There is a significant relationship found between the therapeutic engagement and satisfaction level among students and their counselors.

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H₀: There is no significant relationship found between the therapeutic engagement and satisfaction level among students and their counselors.

To test this hypothesis, the researcher utilized non-parametric test 'Wilcoxon signed rank test' that reject the null hypothesis as the median of differences between the scores of working alliance and satisfaction scale is equals to 0, at .05 significant level. The results indicate a significant difference between the paired observations, as evidenced by the standardized test statistic ($W = 135.489$, $Z = 6.753$) and the p -value which is less than .001 (see table 5 & fig 3 for further understanding).

Table 5.

Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

Total N	Test Statistic	Standard Error	Standardized Test Statistic	Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)
60	.000	135.489	-6.753	.000

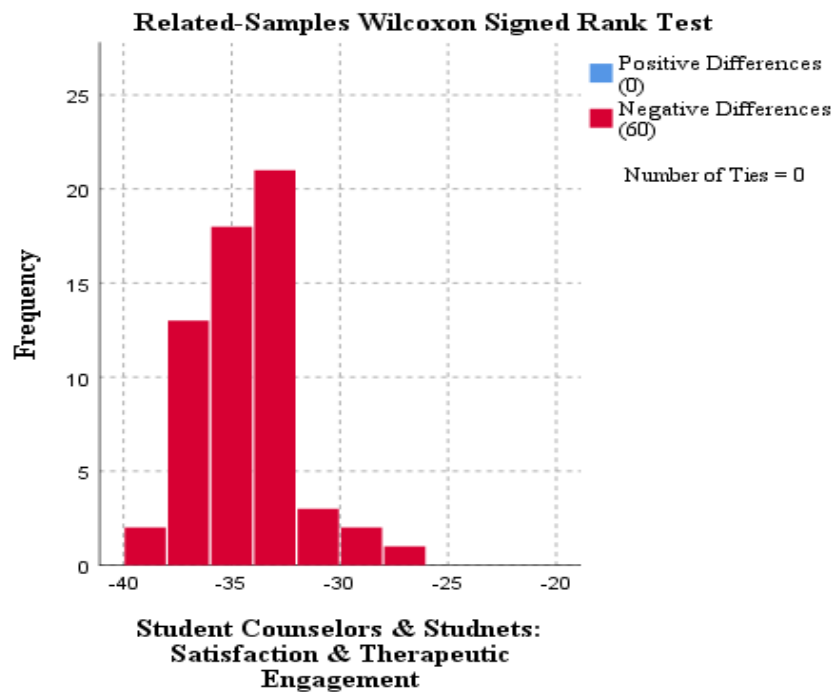


Fig. 3 Relationship between therapeutic engagement and satisfaction

Discussion

The current study's findings provide valuable insights into the relationship between satisfaction levels and therapeutic engagement among university students and their counselors and the study reveals a meaningful relationship between these two. The study underscores the significance of the therapeutic alliance in determining students' satisfaction with mental health counseling services. The study findings highlight the significant relationship between therapeutic engagement and satisfaction levels among students and their counselors. These findings are supported by previous studies who stated that the

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quality of therapeutic alliance with the counselors or psychologist results in an increase in satisfaction levels among clients which strongly impact their mental well-being (see Polatajko et al., 2024; Prusiński, 2022; Ring & Gysin-Maillart, 2020).

If the counselor provides a safe and comfortable environment that assures students that his or her conversation is safe with the counselor then he or she will share everything with the counselor that will help the client or student cope with the mental health issues with the help of different therapeutic strategies. These factors satisfy the client or student and they will return to the counselor for each and every issue. The findings align with previous studies which emphasize the critical role of therapeutic engagement in enhancing the effectiveness of counseling interventions and process (see also Boerma et al., 2024; Jones & Lee, 2021; Smith & Wiggins, 2020). Emphasis is given to the trust provided by the counselor in the counseling process and empathy with emotional attachment, and effective two-way communication contribute to a strong therapeutic relationship which enhances satisfaction among clients or students and results in better mental health outcomes (see Martin & Johnson, 2024; Ring & Gysin-Maillart, 2020; Zainudin & Yusop, 2018).

Furthermore, variations in therapeutic engagement are associated with corresponding changes in satisfaction levels which underscores the need for counselors to focus on building and maintaining a robust therapeutic alliance to enhance overall satisfaction with clients/students. Similarly, Martin and Johnson (2024) stated that the counselors can address students' mental health and emotional needs more effectively by fostering a supportive and empathetic counseling environment that can lead to increased satisfaction with positive outcomes.

Moreover, the study's results underscore that the counseling services within the university premises should continuously evaluate and adapt their approaches to meet students' needs and preferences through regular feedback mechanisms, providing professional training for counselors, and implementing evidence-based practices that emphasize relational dynamics. Further recommendations include: increase access to counseling, requiring the development of strategies to make counseling services more accessible, such as reducing wait times and providing remote counseling options, and establishing awareness programs that address mental health related issues among students.

Conclusion

The study reinforces the value of a strong therapeutic alliance in the counseling process for satisfaction and provides a basis for further research into optimizing counseling practices within the universities to improve student outcomes both academic and mental health. Future research could explore additional factors influencing therapeutic engagement and satisfaction, as well as the impact of different therapeutic approaches on these variables.

In the era of advanced technology, student counseling remains crucial for several reasons such as human touch, tailored interventions, empathy, validation, face-to-face interaction, safe space, comprehensive care, and cultural competence. Many applications are providing counseling services for all and students are using these services but these apps may not fully capture the nuances of human emotions and relationships, leading to potential gaps in understanding and support.

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