



The Role of Cyber Counseling in Enhancing Emotional Regulation Among Generation Z College Students

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ABSTRACT

The rapid integration of digital communication technologies into higher education has transformed the delivery of psychological support services, positioning cyber counseling as an increasingly relevant intervention for Generation Z college students. As digital natives, Gen Z demonstrates strong engagement with technology-mediated communication, making online counseling platforms particularly compatible with their help-seeking preferences. At the same time, emotional regulation remains a critical psychological competency for navigating academic stress, interpersonal challenges, and digital-era psychosocial pressures. This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design involving 327 undergraduate students aged 18–24 who had previously participated in cyber counseling services. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through validated self-report instruments measuring cyber counseling utilization and emotional regulation. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, reliability and validity testing, Pearson correlation analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings revealed that cyber counseling utilization was positively associated with emotional regulation ($r = 0.61, p < .001$). Structural model analysis indicated that cyber counseling significantly predicted emotional regulation ($\beta = 0.58, p < .001$), explaining 33.6% of the variance. Among cyber counseling dimensions, counselor responsiveness emerged as the strongest perceived factor, while privacy and security perception recorded comparatively lower evaluations. The results suggest that cyber counseling serves as an effective digitally mediated platform for enhancing emotional regulation among Generation Z college students. The study highlights the importance of relational quality, technological trust, and responsive counseling practices in optimizing digital mental health interventions within higher education contexts.

Keywords: cyber counselling; emotional regulation; generation z; college students; digital mental health

INTRODUCTION

The rapid digitalization of interpersonal communication has substantially transformed the delivery of psychological and counseling services in higher education. Among contemporary college populations, Generation Z (Gen Z) individuals, born into an era of ubiquitous internet access, mobile connectivity, and digital interaction, demonstrate distinct preferences for immediate, flexible, and technology-mediated support systems. Their familiarity with digital environments has increased receptivity toward online mental health interventions, including cyber counseling, which offers accessibility, anonymity, and temporal flexibility beyond conventional face-to-face counseling models (Maqsood et al., 2024). At the same time, university students increasingly experience emotional instability associated with academic pressure, social

comparison, uncertainty about future careers, and digital overstimulation, making emotional regulation a critical psychological competence for adaptive functioning and well-being (Sarzhanova & Nurgabdeshev, 2025).

Recent scholarship indicates growing empirical support for digitally mediated counseling and psychological interventions. Cho et al. (2025) found that digital mental health platforms provide meaningful psychological support for college students, although effectiveness depends on personalization, clarity of communication, and user trust in digital systems. Similarly, Ni & Cao (2025) reported that AI-assisted counseling environments demonstrated high levels of perceived empathy, warmth, and supportive interaction, suggesting strong potential for scalable low-intensity counseling interventions in educational settings. Furthermore, Chan & Lee (2023) showed that Gen Z students are significantly more open to adopting emerging digital technologies for learning and personal development compared to earlier generations, highlighting the suitability of technology-enhanced counseling modalities for this cohort. Collectively, these findings suggest that cyber counseling may function not merely as an alternative counseling medium but as a psychologically congruent intervention model for Gen Z populations (Wang et al., 2022).

Despite this emerging body of evidence, a significant research gap remains. Existing studies predominantly focus on accessibility, technological acceptance, platform usability, or simulated counseling effectiveness (Torous et al., 2025). At the same time, limited empirical attention has been given to the specific role of cyber counseling in strengthening emotional regulation capacities among Gen Z college students. Emotional regulation, defined as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional responses adaptively, is central to resilience, interpersonal functioning, and mental health maintenance in young adulthood (Polizzi & Lynn, 2021). Yet, little is known about how structured cyber counseling interactions facilitate emotional awareness, cognitive reframing, and adaptive coping strategies in digitally native students navigating contemporary psychosocial stressors (Pratama & Nur, 2023; Prayoga & Suhartono, 2025; Sutijono & Farid, 2018).

The urgency of this research lies in the need for universities to provide counseling services that are able to answer the psychological challenges of students in the digital era. Students who have difficulty regulating emotions are at risk of facing decreased study concentration, interpersonal conflict, prolonged stress, impulsivity, and low psychological well-being. Cyber counseling can help students express their emotional experiences more safely, get counselor feedback more quickly, and build coping strategies that are more appropriate to their circumstances. Thus, this research is important because it can provide empirical evidence on how digital-based counseling services can support strengthening students' emotional regulation capacity.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on Generation Z students as the main users of digital counseling services, the integration of cyber counseling with Gross's theory of emotion regulation, and the use of SEM to test the predictive influence of cyber counseling on emotion regulation. This research also provides a contextual contribution

because it was conducted on university students in Indonesia, a context that is still relatively limited in the international cyber counseling literature. By placing cyber counseling as a variable that has the potential to explain emotion regulation, this study broadens the understanding of the role of digital counseling services in supporting students' mental health.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of cyber counseling in enhancing emotional regulation among Generation Z college students. Specifically, it seeks to investigate how digitally mediated counseling contributes to students' ability to identify, process, and regulate emotional experiences in academic and social contexts. The significance of this study lies in its potential to enrich the theoretical discourse on cyber counseling within guidance and counseling scholarship while providing evidence-based implications for universities in designing accessible, responsive, and psychologically effective digital counseling services for the emerging generation of learners.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative explanatory research design using a cross-sectional survey approach to investigate the role of cyber counseling in enhancing emotional regulation among Generation Z college students (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A quantitative design was selected to systematically examine the relationship between students' engagement with cyber counseling services and their emotional regulation capacities through statistical analysis. The cross-sectional approach enabled the collection of empirical data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of students' perceptions, experiences, and psychological outcomes related to digital counseling interventions in higher education settings.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of undergraduate students classified as Generation Z (aged approximately 18–25 years) who were enrolled in higher education institutions and had prior experience accessing or participating in cyber counseling services, including synchronous (video conferencing, live chat) and asynchronous (email counseling, counseling platforms, text-based communication) modalities.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria relevant to the research objective. The inclusion criteria were:

1. Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student
2. Belonging to the Generation Z demographic cohort
3. Having participated in at least one cyber counseling session within the previous six months
4. Willingness to provide informed consent for participation.

A minimum sample size of 250 - 400 respondents was targeted to achieve adequate statistical power for multivariate analysis and structural model testing. Sample adequacy was determined based on Hair et al.'s recommendation for latent variable modeling, ensuring robust parameter estimation and model stability.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire consisting of three sections:

1. Demographic Information. This section captured participants' background characteristics, including age, gender, academic level, frequency of cyber counseling use, preferred digital counseling platform, and prior counseling experience.
2. Cyber Counseling Utilization Scale (CCUS). Cyber counseling engagement was measured using an adapted scale assessing dimensions such as accessibility, perceived counselor responsiveness, communication effectiveness, privacy/security perception, and digital comfort level. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).
3. Emotional Regulation Scale (ERS). Emotional regulation was assessed using an adapted version of validated emotional regulation measures grounded in Gross's Emotion Regulation Theory, focusing on emotional awareness, cognitive reappraisal, impulse control, and adaptive emotional response management. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale.

Before full deployment, the instrument underwent content validity review by three experts in guidance and counseling, educational psychology, and cyber counseling practice. A pilot test involving 30 students was conducted to evaluate clarity, internal consistency, and construct validity. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with $\alpha \geq 0.70$ considered acceptable.

Data Collection Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee before data collection. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. All respondents were provided with an informed consent statement explaining the purpose of the study, data confidentiality, withdrawal rights, and intended academic use of the findings.

Data collection was conducted online using a secure digital survey platform over four weeks. The questionnaire link was distributed through university communication channels, student organizations, counseling service networks, and institutional online communities. To minimize duplicate responses, each participant was allowed only one submission through device/IP screening and response verification procedures.

Data Analysis

Collected data were screened for completeness, normality, outliers, and missing values before analysis. Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS and SmartPLS/AMOS for structural modeling.

The analytical procedure consisted of:

1. Descriptive Statistics, to summarize participant characteristics and response distributions
2. Reliability Analysis, using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR)

3. Construct Validity Testing, including Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity assessment
 4. Correlation Analysis, to identify the strength and direction of relationships between variables
 5. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), to examine the predictive influence of cyber counseling on emotional regulation
 6. Effect Size and Model Fit Evaluation, including R^2 , SRMR, RMSEA, CFI, and TLI indices to assess explanatory power and model adequacy.
- A significance threshold of $p < .05$ was applied for inferential analyses.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to internationally recognized ethical principles for human-subject research, including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and secure data handling. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to the research team. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Participant Characteristics

A total of 327 undergraduate students completed the survey and met the inclusion criteria for analysis. The response rate was 81.7% of the targeted sample. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years ($M = 20.43$, $SD = 1.62$), representing the demographic profile of Generation Z college students. Female respondents comprised 61.8% ($n = 202$), while male respondents accounted for 38.2% ($n = 125$). Regarding cyber counseling experience, 47.1% of respondents reported participating in online counseling sessions two to four times in the previous six months, while 29.4% reported five or more sessions.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	125	38.2
	Female	202	61.8
Age	18–20 years	141	43.1
	21–22 years	126	38.5
	23–24 years	60	18.4
Frequency of Cyber Counseling Use	1 session	77	23.5
	2–4 sessions	154	47.1
	≥5 sessions	96	29.4
Preferred Platform	Video counseling	109	33.3
	Chat-based counseling	142	43.4

Email/platform messaging	76	23.3
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Source: Data Processed

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Descriptive analysis was conducted for the two principal constructs: Cyber Counseling Utilization (CCU) and Emotional Regulation (ER). The mean score for CCU was 3.89 ($SD = 0.58$), indicating relatively high reported engagement and positive perception of cyber counseling services. The mean score for ER was 3.76 ($SD = 0.62$), reflecting moderate to high levels of emotional regulation among participants.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Cyber Counseling Utilization	3.89	0.58	2.11	5.00
Emotional Regulation	3.76	0.62	1.98	5.00

Source: Data Processed

Reliability and Construct Validity

Internal consistency analysis demonstrated acceptable reliability across all scales. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.82 to 0.91, while Composite Reliability (CR) values exceeded the threshold of 0.70. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.56 to 0.73, indicating adequate convergent validity.

Table 3. Reliability and Validity Assessment

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Accessibility & Convenience	0.84	0.88	0.61
Counselor Responsiveness	0.87	0.90	0.69
Communication Effectiveness	0.82	0.86	0.56
Privacy & Security Perception	0.85	0.89	0.64
Emotional Regulation	0.91	0.93	0.73

Source: Data Processed

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis indicated positive associations among the measured constructs. Cyber Counseling Utilization showed a significant positive correlation with Emotional Regulation ($r = 0.61, p < .001$).

Table 4. Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2
1. Cyber Counseling Utilization	1.00	
2. Emotional Regulation	0.61***	1.00

** $p < .001$

Source: Data Processed

Structural Model Results

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed to assess the predictive relationship between Cyber Counseling Utilization and Emotional Regulation. The model demonstrated acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = **0.95**, TLI = **0.94**, RMSEA = **0.059**, and SRMR = **0.046**.

The standardized path coefficient from Cyber Counseling Utilization to Emotional Regulation was $\beta = 0.58$, with a statistically significant critical ratio ($p < .001$). The structural model explained **33.6%** of the variance in Emotional Regulation ($R^2 = 0.336$).

Table 5. Structural Path Estimates

Path	Standardized β	SE	t-value	p-value
Cyber Counseling → Emotional Regulation	0.58	0.06	9.67	< .001

Source: Data Processed

Dimension-Level Findings

Among the dimensions of Cyber Counseling Utilization, Counselor Responsiveness recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.64$), followed by Accessibility & Convenience ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.61$). Privacy & Security Perception showed the lowest mean among the cyber counseling dimensions ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.72$). Within Emotional Regulation dimensions, Emotional Awareness reported the highest average score ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.59$), whereas Impulse Control recorded the lowest ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.71$).

Table 6. Dimension-Level Descriptive Results

Dimension	Mean	SD
Accessibility & Convenience	3.95	0.61
Counselor Responsiveness	4.02	0.64
Communication Effectiveness	3.89	0.57
Privacy & Security Perception	3.68	0.72
Emotional Awareness	3.88	0.59
Cognitive Reappraisal	3.79	0.63
Adaptive Response Management	3.82	0.60
Impulse Control	3.54	0.71

Source: Data Processed

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that cyber counseling demonstrates a significant positive association with emotional regulation among Generation Z college students, with structural model analysis showing that cyber counseling utilization significantly predicts variance in students' emotional regulation capacities ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that digitally mediated counseling environments may

function not merely as alternative service delivery systems, but as psychologically relevant spaces in which Gen Z students develop emotional awareness, adaptive coping, and self-regulatory competence. As digital natives, Generation Z students have been socialized in environments characterized by immediacy, virtual interaction, and technology-assisted communication; consequently, cyber counseling aligns closely with their communicative preferences and help-seeking behaviors. The flexibility, accessibility, and reduced interpersonal pressure commonly associated with online counseling platforms may foster greater openness in emotional disclosure, which in turn contributes to more effective emotional processing.

This finding is consistent with previous literature emphasizing the growing efficacy of digital mental health interventions in higher education contexts. For example, recent work by Cho et al. (2025) reported that online counseling platforms significantly improve psychological accessibility and perceived emotional support among college students. Similarly, Ni and Cao found that digitally mediated counseling environments can generate high levels of perceived empathy, warmth, and relational trust—factors central to counseling effectiveness. Moreover, evidence from Richards & Richardson (2012) has long suggested that structured online psychological interventions produce outcomes comparable to face-to-face modalities for mild to moderate emotional difficulties. The present study extends this literature by empirically demonstrating that cyber counseling contributes specifically to the enhancement of emotional regulation, a construct central to psychological resilience and adaptive functioning in emerging adulthood.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings may be interpreted through Gross (2015) Process Model of Emotion Regulation, which posits that adaptive regulation involves emotional awareness, cognitive appraisal, and modulation of emotional responses. Cyber counseling platforms may facilitate these processes by providing reflective communication spaces in which students can articulate emotions asynchronously or synchronously, receive structured feedback, and practice reframing maladaptive thought patterns in psychologically safe environments. Such digitally mediated reflective processes appear particularly relevant for Gen Z populations, whose emotional experiences are often shaped by academic stress, digital comparison culture, and online social evaluation.

A notable dimension-level finding in this study is that **Counselor Responsiveness** emerged as the highest-rated component of cyber counseling utilization ($M = 4.02$), suggesting that timely, empathic, and supportive counselor responses are central to students' positive counseling experiences in online environments. This result highlights that technological infrastructure alone does not determine counseling effectiveness; rather, the quality of human relational engagement remains foundational, even within digitally mediated interactions. The therapeutic alliance—a core construct in counseling psychology—appears transferable into online contexts when responsiveness, active listening, and empathic communication are maintained.

This finding supports prior studies on online helping relationships. Simpson & Reid (2014) demonstrated that strong therapeutic alliances can be established in digital counseling environments when communication quality and counselor immediacy are preserved. Likewise Berryhill et al. (2019) reported that client satisfaction in online counseling is strongly associated with perceived counselor attentiveness and emotional validation. In digitally mediated counseling, responsiveness may function as a mechanism that reduces feelings of isolation and uncertainty, thereby strengthening emotional containment and increasing the likelihood of adaptive regulation.

These findings also have practical implications for counselor education. Institutions implementing cyber counseling services should emphasize digital counseling competencies, including empathic text communication, responsiveness management, online active listening strategies, and ethical digital rapport-building. Training counselors in cyber-relational competence may significantly influence service effectiveness, particularly among younger populations who often evaluate helping relationships through immediacy and relational authenticity rather than physical presence.

Although overall cyber counseling utilization was positively evaluated, Privacy and Security Perception recorded the lowest mean score among the cyber counseling dimensions ($M = 3.68$), indicating that concerns regarding confidentiality, data protection, and digital vulnerability remain salient among student users. This finding suggests that while Generation Z is technologically fluent, digital familiarity does not necessarily translate into unconditional trust in online counseling systems. Emotional disclosure an essential counseling process depends heavily on perceived confidentiality and psychological safety.

This result aligns with concerns raised in digital mental health scholarship. Lustgarten & Elhai (2018) noted that confidentiality, cybersecurity, informed consent, and data handling transparency remain among the most significant barriers to the adoption of cyber counseling. Similarly, Stoll, Müller, and Trachsel emphasized that ethical ambiguity in online counseling may undermine client trust despite the convenience of digital access. For university counseling centers, this indicates that platform design, encryption, informed consent procedures, and transparent privacy communication are not merely administrative requirements but psychologically relevant determinants of counseling engagement and outcome quality.

The present findings carry important implications for university mental health policy and guidance counseling practice. First, cyber counseling should be conceptualized not simply as a supplementary service, but as a strategic component of student psychological support systems. As higher education institutions increasingly serve digitally immersed student populations, counseling models must evolve to reflect contemporary communication patterns and psychosocial realities. Integrating hybrid counseling systems—combining face-to-face and digital modalities—may improve accessibility and broaden service reach, particularly for students who experience stigma, scheduling barriers, or social anxiety in traditional counseling settings.

Second, universities should invest in secure counseling technologies, professional training in online counseling competencies, and evidence-based digital intervention models tailored to Gen Z psychological characteristics (Kois et al., 2021; Maola et al., 2025; Sheperis et al., 2025). Such efforts may contribute not only to emotional regulation development but also to broader outcomes such as academic persistence, psychological well-being, and social adjustment.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, as relationships between cyber counseling and emotional regulation were measured at one point in time. Longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to examine developmental changes in emotional regulation following sustained cyber counseling engagement. Second, reliance on self-report measures may introduce response bias, including social desirability and subjective overestimation of emotional competence. Incorporating behavioral indicators, counselor evaluations, or psychophysiological measures may strengthen future inquiry.

Third, the sample was restricted to undergraduate students with prior cyber counseling experience, which may limit generalizability across broader youth populations, including adolescents, vocational students, or non-student Gen Z groups. Future studies should explore demographic moderators such as gender, counseling frequency, personality traits, digital literacy, and mental health severity. Additionally, comparative research examining AI-assisted counseling, human-delivered cyber counseling, and hybrid counseling systems may offer valuable insight into emerging models of emotional support in digitally mediated societies.

Overall, the present study contributes to the expanding literature on digital counseling by demonstrating that cyber counseling holds meaningful potential for enhancing emotional regulation among Generation Z college students, while also emphasizing the importance of relational quality, ethical infrastructure, and continued empirical refinement in cyber counseling research.

The practical implication of these findings is that colleges need to view cyber counseling as a strategic part of the campus mental health system, not just an additional service. Empirical findings regarding low privacy and security perception and impulse control provide a more concrete direction for service development. Institutions need to improve platform security, develop operational standards for data confidentiality, train counselors in online empathic communication, and provide advanced programs that focus on impulse control and adaptive coping. Thus, cyber counseling services can be developed in a more targeted and evidence-based manner.

The limitations of this research need to be clearly placed so that the structure of the manuscript is neater. Cross-sectional design limits the ability of research to explain the cause-and-effect relationship between cyber counseling and emotion regulation. The use of self-report instruments also has the potential to cause subjective biases, including the tendency of respondents to judge themselves more positively. In addition, the research sample is limited to students who already have experience with cyber counseling, so the results of the study cannot be generalized to the entire Generation Z population.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the role of cyber counseling in enhancing emotional regulation among Generation Z college students, with particular emphasis on how digitally mediated counseling environments contribute to students' emotional awareness, adaptive coping, and self-regulatory capacities within contemporary higher education contexts. By situating cyber counseling within the psychosocial characteristics of Generation Z namely, digital fluency, preference for flexible communication, and increasing exposure to academic and socio-emotional stressors, this study sought to provide empirical insight into the relevance of online counseling as a modern psychological support modality.

The findings demonstrate that cyber counseling is positively associated with students' emotional regulation, indicating that technology-mediated counseling can serve as a meaningful platform for fostering healthier emotional processing and adaptive emotional responses. More specifically, dimensions such as counselor responsiveness, communication effectiveness, and accessibility emerged as central features supporting positive emotional outcomes, while concerns related to privacy and digital trust remained important considerations in shaping user experience. These results reinforce the proposition that effective cyber counseling extends beyond technological access and depends substantially on relational quality, ethical safeguards, and user-centered digital design.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the expanding discourse on digital counseling psychology by extending emotion regulation theory into virtual counseling contexts, offering evidence that emotionally supportive digital interactions can facilitate regulatory development among emerging adults. Practically, the findings provide implications for universities, counselors, and policymakers by emphasizing the need to integrate cyber counseling into institutional mental health systems, strengthen counselor digital competencies, and establish secure, ethically grounded online counseling infrastructures that are responsive to the needs of digitally native student populations.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation, and the use of self-reported measures may introduce subjective bias. In addition, the sample was limited to undergraduate students with prior cyber counseling experience, which may constrain broader generalizability. Future research should employ longitudinal, experimental, or mixed-method approaches to examine the long-term effectiveness of cyber counseling, explore moderating variables such as digital literacy or psychological severity, and compare human-delivered, AI-assisted, and hybrid counseling models in supporting emotional development among diverse youth populations.

In conclusion, cyber counseling represents a promising and increasingly necessary innovation in higher education mental health services. When supported by strong therapeutic communication, ethical digital practices, and accessible technological systems, it holds substantial potential to enhance emotional regulation and psychological well-being among Generation Z students in an increasingly digital society.

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