

Barriers to School Counseling Service Utilization Among High School Students in the Digital Era: Evidence from Vietnam

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ABSTRACT:

Despite the growing institutionalization of school counseling services in secondary education, utilization rates among adolescents remain persistently low, particularly in developing and transitional educational contexts. Existing research has primarily focused on individual help-seeking behaviors, while limited attention has been given to the interplay between psychological barriers and institutional conditions that shape students' access to counseling services. This study investigates the psychological and organizational factors influencing high school students' utilization of school counseling services in a semi-urban area of Vietnam.

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed to integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence. Quantitative data were collected from 470 high school students using a structured questionnaire assessing perceived barriers to counseling access. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers and 12 school administrators responsible for student support services. Quantitative and qualitative datasets were analyzed independently and subsequently integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of counseling access barriers.

The findings reveal that students' reluctance to seek counseling is primarily associated with perceived stigma, concerns regarding confidentiality, limited trust in counseling effectiveness, and discomfort with self-disclosure. Importantly, the qualitative findings indicate that these barriers are reinforced by institutional factors, including insufficient counseling personnel, fragmented support systems, unclear referral mechanisms, and limited coordination among school stakeholders. The results further demonstrate a disconnect between increasing awareness of adolescent mental health needs and the organizational capacity of schools to provide accessible and responsive counseling services. While digital technologies and emerging AI-supported interventions may enhance service delivery, their effectiveness appears contingent upon the existence of supportive interpersonal relationships and well-coordinated institutional structures.

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This study advances the literature on adolescent help-seeking and school counseling by demonstrating that access barriers are shaped not only by individual psychological factors but also by the broader educational environment. The findings underscore the need for integrated school-based mental health strategies that strengthen trust, confidentiality, and institutional collaboration to improve counseling utilization among adolescents in rapidly changing educational contexts.

Keywords: school counseling; psychological barriers; help-seeking behavior; adolescent mental health; mixed-methods research.

1. Introduction

In recent years, adolescent mental health has become an increasingly visible concern within educational systems, not only in large urban centers but also in semi-urban regions such as Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. Based on field observations across several high schools in Cao Lanh Ward, many students appear to experience academic pressure, developmental transitions, and social adjustment difficulties; however, relatively few of them actively seek support from school counseling services when facing psychological distress.

Although counseling services have been formally introduced in schools, a persistent gap remains between service availability and actual utilization. In many cases, students are aware of counseling facilities but still hesitate to engage with them. This suggests that the issue is not merely organizational or technical, but also deeply related to how students perceive psychological help within the school environment and broader cultural context. In Vietnam, particularly in semi-urban areas, school counseling systems are still in a developing stage. Schools often face limited specialized personnel, heavy teaching workloads, and uneven access to supporting infrastructure. At the same time, most existing studies have focused on students' mental health status or the development of counseling models, while fewer have examined why students avoid or delay seeking psychological support from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

The relevance of this issue is further heightened by ongoing digital transformation in education. While digital tools and artificial intelligence–

based applications are increasingly promoted as potential solutions to improve accessibility and anonymity in counseling services, their actual influence on students' help-seeking behavior in resource-constrained school contexts remains uncertain.

Against this background, this study investigates psychological barriers to accessing school counseling services in Cao Lanh Ward, Dong Thap Province. Data were collected from 470 students, 12 teachers involved in student support, and 12 school administrators across four public high schools. By integrating multiple perspectives, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of both individual-level psychological barriers and institutional conditions shaping help-seeking behavior. Grounded in developmental psychology and help-seeking behavior theory, the study examines how factors such as stigma, perceived self-efficacy, fear of disclosure, and trust in counseling services interact with school-level organizational practices and communication structures. The objective is to identify key barriers, explore how they are experienced across stakeholders, and propose context-sensitive strategies to improve access to counseling services in semi-urban educational settings.

2. Theoretical Framework

School counseling has increasingly become an important component of school-based support systems, particularly in relation to adolescent mental health and psychosocial development. The World Health Organization defines mental health not simply as the absence of illness, but as a state that enables individuals to cope with

everyday stressors, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. In the school context, counseling services are expected to serve preventive, developmental, and supportive functions, especially as students navigate academic pressure, peer relationships, and identity-related challenges during adolescence. This developmental period, as described by Erik Erikson, is marked by heightened emotional sensitivity and ongoing identity formation, which makes students particularly vulnerable to psychological distress (Erikson, 1968). Empirical findings from both international and Vietnamese studies suggest that although high school students frequently report stress, anxiety, and emotional difficulties, their actual use of formal counseling services remains limited. National evidence (UNICEF Vietnam, 2021) consistently points to a persistent mismatch between students' psychological needs and their engagement with available support services, indicating that the issue extends beyond service provision to deeper questions of access and utilization.

To understand this discrepancy, it is necessary to look closely at help-seeking behavior as a process shaped by multiple interacting factors. The help-seeking model proposed by Debra Rickwood conceptualizes this process as involving several stages, including recognizing a problem, deciding whether to seek help, and ultimately engaging with available support. At each stage, different psychological barriers may interfere with students' decisions. Among adolescents, internal factors such as fear of stigma, feelings of embarrassment, and low perceived self-efficacy are often particularly influential, leading many students to hesitate in disclosing personal or emotional difficulties. These individual concerns are further shaped by social relationships, including peer perceptions and family expectations, which can discourage open discussion of mental health issues in contexts where such problems are still stigmatized. The empirical research Sabrin et al (2024) has shown that concerns about social judgment and confidentiality significantly reduce willingness to seek counseling. Similarly, Hei et al. (2022)

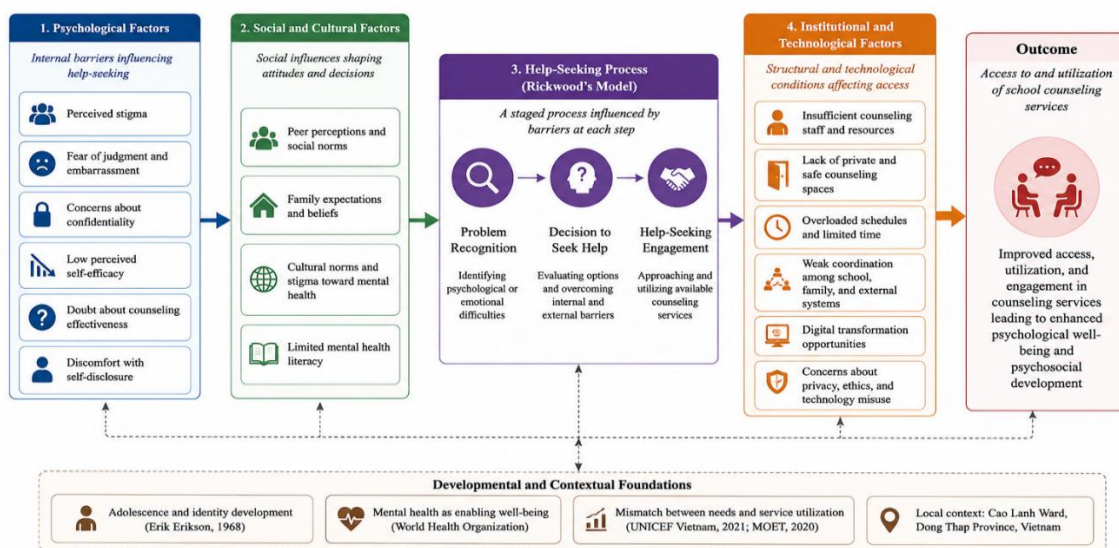
highlight the influence of cultural norms and stigma on adolescents' attitudes toward help-seeking. In Vietnam, findings from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2020) further indicate that many students either lack sufficient understanding of counseling services or question their effectiveness, which often results in a preference for self-reliance rather than formal psychological support. Taken together, these findings suggest that psychological barriers are not isolated individual traits but are deeply embedded within broader socio-cultural contexts.

In addition to these psychological and social dimensions, institutional and technological conditions also play a decisive role in shaping access to school counseling services. Studies in educational management (Anna et al., 2022; Sabrina et al., 2024) have identified recurring structural limitations such as insufficient counseling staff, lack of private spaces for consultation, overloaded school schedules, and weak coordination among schools, families, and external support systems. In Vietnam, reports from UNICEF Vietnam (2021, 2023) and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) indicate that although school counseling has been formally introduced, its implementation remains uneven, particularly in semi-urban and resource-limited settings. At the same time, ongoing digital transformation in education introduces new possibilities as well as new challenges. Organizations such as OECD (2020) and UNESCO (2021) emphasize that digital technologies can improve access to educational and psychological services by increasing flexibility, personalization, and reach. Emerging AI-based applications, including chatbots, early detection tools, and data-driven monitoring systems, are often presented as potential solutions to reduce stigma-related barriers and improve accessibility. However, these developments also raise important concerns regarding privacy, ethical use, and the risk of reducing counseling to overly technical processes. In contexts such as Cao Lanh Ward, Dong Thap Province, where digital infrastructure and professional capacity are still developing,

such technologies need to be considered cautiously and integrated in ways that remain sensitive to local school realities. Overall, the literature suggests that barriers to accessing counseling services are multi-layered and arise from the interaction between psychological dispositions, social norms, institutional constraints, and technological conditions, highlighting the need for approaches that are both integrated and contextually grounded (Nga et al., 2022).

Consequently, barriers to accessing counseling services cannot be understood through an isolated lens; rather, they arise from a multi-layered interaction among individual psychological dispositions, socio-cultural norms, institutional constraints, and emerging technological conditions. To conceptualize these interconnected dynamics within a localized context, a comprehensive theoretical framework is developed and illustrated in Figure 1

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Multilevel Determinants of High School Students' Access to School Counseling Services



Note. The framework integrates individual, social-cultural, institutional, and technological factors that interact across the help-seeking process (Rickwood's model) to shape high school students' access to and utilization of school counseling services.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and study setting

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to comprehensively investigate psychological barriers influencing high school students' access to school counseling services. The convergent design was selected to enable the simultaneous collection and independent analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, followed by an integrated interpretation phase to enhance methodological triangulation and strengthen the validity of findings.

The study was conducted in four public high schools located in Cao Lanh ward, Dong Thap Province, Vietnam, including Cao Lanh High School, Thien Ho Duong High School, Do Cong

Tuong High School, and Tran Quoc Toan High School. These schools represent a typical semi-urban educational context in the Mekong Delta region, characterized by moderate socioeconomic conditions, developing school counseling structures, and ongoing implementation of digital transformation initiatives in education. This context was considered appropriate for examining both structural and psychological barriers to counseling access in a developing educational environment.

3.2. Participants and sampling

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design to explore psychological barriers affecting high school students' access to school counseling services. Quantitative and qualitative data were

collected during the same period, analyzed separately, and then compared and integrated during interpretation. This design was chosen because the research problem required both measurable patterns (from students) and contextual explanations (from teachers and administrators), which could not be adequately captured by a single method alone. The study was conducted in four public high schools in Cao Lanh ward, Dong Thap Province, Vietnam: Cao Lanh High School, Thien Ho Duong High School, Do Cong Tuong High School, and Tran Quoc Toan High School. These schools were selected because they reflect a typical semi-urban school context in the Mekong Delta, where counseling services are formally available but still developing in practice. In addition, schools in this area are currently undergoing gradual digital transformation in teaching and student management, although the level of implementation varies across institutions. This uneven development provided a relevant context for examining both psychological and institutional barriers to counseling access.

3.3. Instruments and data collection procedure

A total of 494 participants were involved in the study, including three groups: 470 students from Grades 10 to 12, 12 teachers involved in student support or counseling-related activities, and 12 school administrators (principals and vice-principals in charge of student affairs and counseling coordination). For students, a stratified convenience sampling approach was used. The aim was to ensure that different grade levels and gender groups were reasonably represented within each school, while still remaining feasible given school schedules and administrative constraints. Although probability sampling would have been ideal, access limitations and time restrictions made a fully random design difficult to implement in practice.

Teachers and administrators were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in counseling activities or student welfare management. Their perspectives were considered

essential for understanding how counseling services operate at the institutional level.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary. They were also assured that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Informed consent was obtained before data collection began.

3.4. Data analysis and ethical considerations

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distributions, percentages, mean scores (M), and standard deviations (SD). These analyses were used to identify the prevalence and intensity of psychological barriers across the student sample.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of data familiarization, initial coding, category development, and theme generation. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns related to individual, social, and institutional barriers affecting counseling access.

To enhance methodological rigor, findings from quantitative and qualitative datasets were integrated using a triangulation approach, enabling cross-validation of results and deeper interpretation of convergent and divergent patterns across stakeholder groups. The study strictly adhered to established ethical principles in educational and psychological research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality was ensured throughout the research process. All data were anonymized and used exclusively for academic research purposes.

4. Results: Core Psychological Barriers to Counseling Utilization

The integrated analysis identified five interrelated psychological barriers that shape students' utilization of school counseling services. These barriers operate as a multidimensional system in which individual perceptions, social influences, and institutional conditions interact to influence help-seeking behavior. Together, they help explain the persistent gap between counseling

availability and actual service utilization among high school students.

4. 1 Perceived stigma and fear of social labeling

The most dominant barrier concerns perceived stigma associated with seeking psychological support. Many students expressed concern that accessing counseling services could lead to negative judgments from peers, teachers, or even family members. Being labeled as “weak,” “unstable,” or “problematic” emerged as a recurring fear. This perception is closely linked to a school culture that tends to emphasize resilience, academic effort, and emotional self-control. In such a context, acknowledging psychological difficulties is often seen as a sign of personal limitation rather than a normal part of adolescent development. As a result, stigma functions as a powerful social filter that discourages early help-seeking and contributes to silence around mental health concerns.

4. 2 Concerns about confidentiality and information security

Another major barrier is students’ uncertainty regarding confidentiality within school counseling services. Many students were not fully confident that personal information shared during counseling sessions would remain strictly private. Some worried that sensitive information might indirectly reach teachers or parents, even unintentionally. This hesitation reflects not only individual anxiety but also a broader lack of transparency in how confidentiality is communicated and practiced within the school setting. When trust in information security is weak, willingness to engage with counseling services is significantly reduced.

4. 3 Low help-seeking self-efficacy and limited psychological readiness

A further barrier relates to students’ limited confidence in their ability to recognize psychological distress and take appropriate help-seeking actions. Several students reported uncertainty about whether their difficulties were “serious enough” to justify seeking counseling. Others found it difficult to express personal or

emotional problems in words or to initiate contact with support services. These patterns suggest limited psychological readiness and insufficient help-seeking self-efficacy, which are particularly important during adolescence when emotional regulation and coping skills are still developing

4. 4 Limited awareness and ambiguous understanding of counseling services

The study also found that students’ understanding of school counseling services remains partial and fragmented. Although most students were aware that counseling services exist within their schools, many did not clearly understand what these services actually involve, how they operate, or what benefits they may offer. This lack of clarity reduces the perceived usefulness of counseling and weakens students’ motivation to seek support. In addition, limited visibility of counseling activities within schools further contributes to this informational gap.

4.5 Perceived limited effectiveness and weak service credibility

Finally, students’ perceptions of the effectiveness and credibility of counseling services play an important role in shaping help-seeking behavior. While some students reported positive experiences, these cases are not widely shared or visible within the student community. As a result, positive outcomes do not strongly influence collective perceptions. At the same time, inconsistencies in service delivery across schools and limited professionalization of counseling practices contribute to a cautious or skeptical attitude toward the usefulness of counseling services, particularly among students who are not in crisis situations.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that psychological barriers play a decisive role in limiting high school students’ access to school counseling services, particularly in semi-urban contexts such as Cao Lanh ward, Dong Thap Province. These barriers are not isolated phenomena but are embedded within a complex

interaction of individual, social, institutional, and technological factors.

At the individual level, fear of stigma, reluctance to disclose personal issues, and low help-seeking self-efficacy emerged as the most prominent barriers. These findings are consistent with the help-seeking framework proposed by Debra Rickwood, which emphasizes that psychological readiness is a prerequisite for accessing support services (Rickwood et al., 2005). The persistence of these barriers suggests that students' perceptions of counseling remain shaped more by social stigma and misconceptions than by informed understanding or positive prior experiences.

At the social level, peer influence and family expectations continue to reinforce avoidance behaviors. In the Vietnamese cultural context, where emotional restraint and self-reliance are often valued, seeking psychological help may still be interpreted as a sign of weakness. This interpretation is in line with findings by Hei et al (2022), who highlight the role of cultural norms in shaping help-seeking attitudes among adolescents.

From an institutional perspective, the study identifies considerable limitations in the organization and delivery of counseling services, including insufficient trained personnel, lack of private counseling spaces, and inconsistent communication strategies. These constraints reduce both the accessibility and credibility of counseling services, thereby reinforcing students' reluctance to engage. Similar patterns have been documented in earlier studies (Hei et al., 2022; Sabrina et al., 2024), suggesting that institutional capacity remains a key determinant of counseling effectiveness.

Importantly, the findings also point to a gap between the potential and actual use of digital technologies in school counseling. Although students show a preference for anonymous and flexible forms of support, digital tools and AI-based solutions have not yet been systematically integrated into counseling practices in the studied context. This indicates that digital transformation

in education has not yet fully translated into strengthened mental health support systems.

Overall, the results highlight the need for a shift from a service availability perspective toward an accessibility- and engagement-oriented approach, in which psychological, social, and systemic barriers are addressed simultaneously. In this regard, digital and AI-supported innovations should be understood as enabling tools that complement, rather than replace, human-centered counseling practices.

5. Effective Solutions in the Era of Digital Transformation and AI

The findings suggest that barriers to school counseling access arise from the interaction of stigma, limited trust, low help-seeking self-efficacy, and inadequate understanding of counseling services. These challenges are further compounded by structural constraints, including counselors' dual-role responsibilities, limited service time, and uneven digital integration across schools. Consequently, effective interventions should prioritize context-sensitive, scalable strategies that combine trust-building, mental health literacy, and AI-supported counseling systems. Rather than replacing human counselors, digital and AI technologies should be leveraged to enhance accessibility, confidentiality, service efficiency, and early identification of student needs within a sustainable hybrid counseling model.

Solution 1: Institutionalizing continuous, digitally mediated psychoeducation

The data suggest that students still have a rather vague understanding of what school counseling actually does, and in some cases are not fully aware that support services exist beyond disciplinary or academic functions. At the same time, teachers consistently described feeling overloaded with teaching hours and administrative tasks, which leaves little space for additional structured programs focused solely on psychoeducation.

In practice, this means that counseling-related communication is often integrated informally into whatever time is available rather than

delivered as a planned program. A more realistic approach, therefore, is to work with existing school routines rather than adding new layers of activity. Short discussions during homeroom periods, brief messages in morning meetings, or occasional class-time reminders tend to be more feasible than separate campaigns. Some schools also share short mental health content through familiar channels like Zalo groups or Facebook pages, although this depends heavily on individual initiative and is not yet systematized.

What emerges from the field is a kind of uneven implementation rather than a lack of intention. Teachers may introduce psychoeducation when they can, but continuity is fragile. Over time, these activities tend to compete with exam pressure, administrative demands, and other school priorities.

Solution 2: Operationalizing data-informed planning and early identification

Findings suggest that many students tend to cope on their own for quite a long time, and only seek help when difficulties have already become more visible or disruptive. From the teacher interviews, it was also quite clear that signs of distress are often noticed in day-to-day interactions—such as changes in attendance, participation, or academic performance—but these observations are rarely recorded in any systematic way. In most cases, teachers simply do not have the time or structural support to document and follow up consistently.

Given this reality, introducing a new or complex data system is unlikely to be realistic in the current school context. A more workable direction is to rely on what schools are already doing: attendance logs, grade tracking, and informal teacher notes. These sources already exist, even if they are not currently used for counseling purposes.

However, even this simplified approach faces practical limits. Teachers in semi-urban schools are often managing large classes and heavy workloads, so monitoring tends to depend on memory and immediate classroom impressions rather than continuous tracking. As a result, identification of at-risk students can vary

significantly between teachers and between classes.

There is also a more subtle issue of interpretation. What one teacher considers a warning sign may not be viewed the same way by another, especially when time for deeper student interaction is limited. This makes early identification necessarily imperfect in practice. The trade-off, therefore, is not just between “simple and complex systems,” but between what is realistically observable in daily school life and what would be ideal for early intervention.

Solution 3: Building hybrid professional capacity with practice-oriented competencies

In most schools in this study, the shortage of trained counselors means that counseling-related work is largely carried by teachers alongside their normal teaching duties. In this context, a fully specialized counseling model is not yet realistic.

A more feasible approach is to gradually build basic counseling-related competencies among teachers, focusing on practical skills such as active listening, emotional validation, and early recognition of distress signals. These are already partly used in daily interactions but often without confidence or consistency when situations become more complex.

Short, practice-based training sessions using real school cases and role-play are more workable than lengthy formal courses, as they can fit into existing school schedules. Informal peer exchange among teachers also appears to be an important, though under-structured, form of support.

Overall, capacity development in this context is less about building a separate counseling system and more about strengthening what teachers are already doing in their everyday practice.

Solution 4: Structuring school–family–community coordination via digital interfaces

The findings show that stigma and concerns about confidentiality are strongly influenced by peers and family expectations. In many

Vietnamese contexts, psychological difficulties are still interpreted in moral or disciplinary terms, which discourages help-seeking.

Given limited school capacity, intensive parent engagement programs are often not feasible. More realistic approaches include brief updates and periodic parent meetings to maintain basic awareness without adding workload.

However, limited parental understanding of counseling can lead to misinterpretation of its purpose, sometimes viewing it as disciplinary monitoring. This may reduce trust and increase student reluctance to seek help.

Therefore, schools need to balance clear communication with strict confidentiality, especially in closely connected communities where privacy concerns are heightened.

Solution 5: Integrating AI-supported and digital counseling tools with robust ethical safeguards

Digital tools can help reduce some of the main barriers in school counseling, particularly stigma, concerns about confidentiality, and difficulties in access. However, in semi-urban Vietnamese schools where resources and staff capacity are limited, these tools cannot be introduced in a large or complex way. In practice, they need to fit

into what schools are already doing rather than replace existing counseling work.

More realistic uses include simple anonymous support channels (such as chat-based guidance or self-help materials), basic online appointment booking, and secure ways for students to send feedback or concerns. Some schools may also use basic screening tools to identify students at risk, but these should only serve as initial signals, not final judgments.

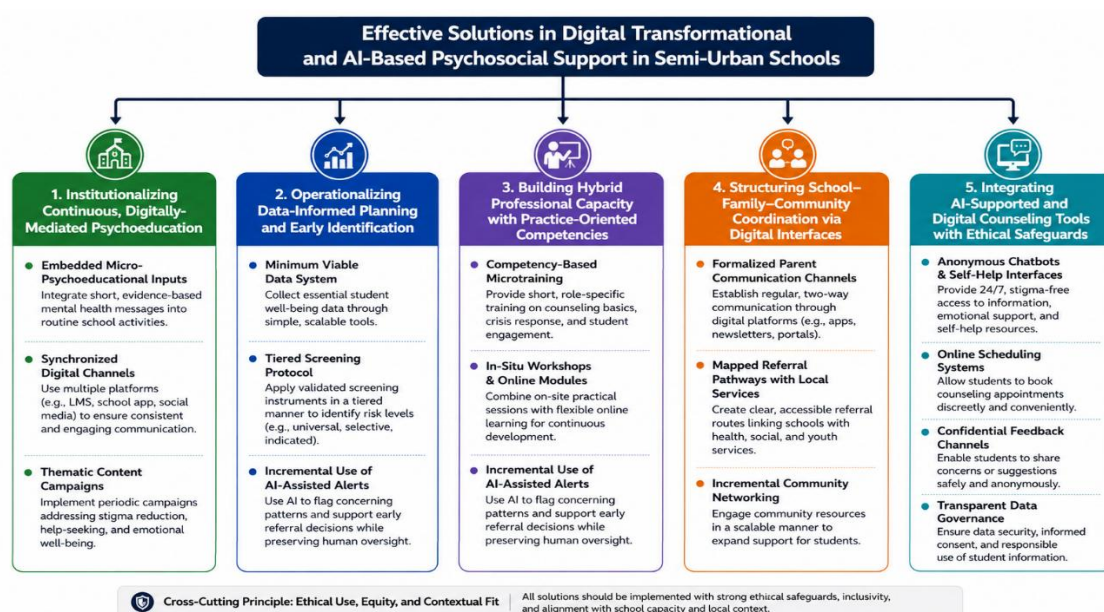
AI-based features, where used, need to remain clearly supportive. Decisions about diagnosis or intervention should stay with trained staff to avoid misinterpretation and to ensure they fit the school context.

At the same time, issues like data privacy, consent, and responsibility cannot be treated as formalities. Schools need clear but simple rules about who can access information and how it is used.

Overall, a gradual approach seems more realistic—starting small, testing what actually works in practice, and expanding only when there is clear trust and stability in the system.

These integrated solutions are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Integrated Framework of Solutions for School Counseling in the Era of Digital Transformation



Synthesis.

Taken together, these findings suggest that improving access to school counseling requires a shift from viewing counseling as a merely available service toward establishing it as a trusted, student-centered, and proactively utilized support system. The evidence indicates that sustainable improvement is driven not by isolated interventions but by the integration of multiple reinforcing mechanisms, including the normalization of help-seeking behaviors through effective school communication, the systematic use of student well-being data for early identification and intervention, the strengthening of counseling-related competencies among teachers, and the development of collaborative support networks linking schools, families, and community stakeholders.

Within the context of digital transformation, technology should be understood as an enabling rather than a determining factor. Digital tools can expand accessibility, confidentiality, and responsiveness; however, their effectiveness depends on thoughtful integration into existing counseling structures, ethical safeguards, and users' readiness to engage with them. In semi-urban educational settings, where resources and specialized personnel may be limited, the success of counseling initiatives is shaped less by technological sophistication than by organizational coherence, institutional capacity, and sustained leadership commitment.

Consequently, a comprehensive counseling framework that combines human support, data-informed decision-making, intersectoral collaboration, and context-sensitive digital innovation offers the most promising pathway for reducing psychological barriers and fostering equitable access to counseling services. Such an approach not only enhances service utilization but also contributes to the creation of a supportive school climate in which students feel safe, respected, and empowered to seek help when needed.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that high school students' access to school counseling services is

determined by a multidimensional interplay between psychological dispositions and institutional conditions. At the individual level, help-seeking behavior is constrained by perceived stigma, concerns regarding confidentiality, low trust in counseling effectiveness, and discomfort with emotional self-disclosure. These factors collectively function as internal barriers that suppress counseling utilization even when psychological needs are present.

At the institutional level, these psychological constraints are further reinforced by structural and organizational limitations within schools, including insufficient counseling resources, fragmented service delivery systems, and weak interprofessional coordination among teachers, counselors, and school leadership. The findings indicate that such systemic constraints not only reduce service availability but also indirectly shape students' perceptions of legitimacy, safety, and usefulness of counseling support.

Importantly, the study challenges the assumption that digital transformation or AI-enabled counseling tools alone can substantially improve access to school mental health services. While technological solutions may expand reach and efficiency, their effectiveness remains contingent upon the quality of interpersonal trust, ethical assurance of confidentiality, and institutional readiness to integrate such tools within coherent support systems. In this sense, counseling access should be conceptualized as an embedded socio-organizational phenomenon rather than an isolated individual help-seeking decision.

Overall, the study underscores that sustainable improvement in school counseling utilization requires a dual-focus strategy: strengthening students' psychological readiness to seek help while simultaneously enhancing institutional capacity, professional coordination, and trust-building mechanisms within the school environment. This integrated perspective is essential for developing responsive, credible, and sustainable school-based mental health support systems for adolescents.

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