Abstract
The rapid growth in forms of technology used within society presents the field of sport and exercise psychology with numerous opportunities and considerations. Nevertheless, there currently exists a scarcity of knowledge or research for Sport Psychology Professionals (SPPs) to draw from when seeking to use technology and media in their service delivery. This article presents a commentary on the perceived opportunities and considerations drawing primarily from the online counseling literature and we offer recommendations for good practice for SPPs utilizing technology and media in service delivery.

Keywords: Sport Psychology Professionals, Online service delivery, Computer-mediated communication, Technology.

Opportunities and considerations of new media and technology in sport psychology service delivery

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The rapid growth and expansion in technological advancements (e.g., video conferencing, mobile applications, social media) has recently received scholarly attention in the field of sport and exercise psychology (Bird & Harris, 2019; Cotterill & Symes, 2014; Cottrell et al, 2019). This growing interest and upsurge in the use of technology in the provision of sport psychology, has been further accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, these advancements in technology have benefitted the profession by offering Sport Psychology Professionals (SPPs) new and innovative ways of working with clients. For example, SPPs have a range of online platforms (e.g., Skype, Zoom, Facetime, Google Hangouts, Cisco WebEx, Microsoft Teams) to utilize when working with individuals online. Further, some of these online platforms also offer additional functions (e.g., breakout rooms, screenshare), which enable practitioners to work more creatively with teams online.

Traditionally, SPPs have employed conventional face-to-face consultancy methods when delivering the provision of sport psychology (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). While these approaches continue to have substantial merit, the current landscape in which SPPs operate in continues to evolve (Sly et al., 2020). Therefore, SPPs are required to consider new ways of working to ensure effective sport psychology service delivery. Given the atypical conditions of the professional environment (e.g., time, location, long working hours), one way in which the provision of sport psychology has evolved to meet these demands, is through the emergence of working in geographically dispersed teams. Geographically dispersed teams are defined as groups that are separated by time and/or distance and must undertake work that includes technology, teamwork and communications (Sessa et al., 1999). This definition aligns with the current landscape in which SPPs operate in, given that it is not uncommon for SPPs to work with clients across different time zones and locations.
In addition to the influence of the professional environment in which SPPs operate in, clients seeking to use the services of SPPs have also been influenced by technological advancements. For example, clients may now own numerous electronic devices (personal computers, tablets, cellular/mobile telephones), that allow them to interact with SPPs in a variety of capacities (e.g., e-mail, phone call, video conferencing; cf. Blind Manuscript). In light of this, SPPs are challenged to respond to these new forms of communication while being mindful of the impact of these changes to their effectiveness and manage the expectations and needs of their clients as part of a continued development and evolution of their practice (Cottrell et. al, 2019; Quartiroli et al. 2019). Indeed, these technological advancements offer a number of opportunities and considerations for SPPs operating in the field. The aim of this article is two-fold. First, we aim to highlight the opportunities and considerations of using technology in online service delivery regarding the working alliance, accessibility, anonymity and disinhibition, time delays, absence of verbal and nonverbal cues, and technological issues. Second, we aim to provide good practice recommendations for SPPs seeking to use technological-based consultancy approaches.

**Opportunities and Considerations**

While traditional face-to-face consultancy methods continue to be a popular method of sport psychology service delivery, technology offers new ways for SPPs to work with clients. Despite the growing interest into the role media and technology play in the provision of sports psychology (Bird & Harris, 2019; Cottrell et al., 2019), there remains a paucity of research available to inform SPPs practice. Nevertheless, there exists a body of online counseling literature (Richards & Viganó, 2013; Harris & Birnbaum, 2015) that may provide a useful resource for SPPs to draw from when attempting to develop effective online services.

Online counseling has been defined as “the delivery of therapeutic interventions in cyberspace where the communication between a trained professional counsellor and client(s) is facilitated using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, provided as a stand-alone service or as an adjunct to other therapeutic interventions” (Richards & Viganó, 2012, p.
This form of service provision is unfortunately often used interchangeably with e-therapy, e-counseling or cybertherapy, which results in conceptual confusion on how it is defined. While a range of CMC technologies are available, these can be broadly categorized as being either asynchronous or synchronous. Asynchronous communication (e.g., emails) means that the client’s and practitioners communication do not occur simultaneously (Barak & Grohol, 2011) whereas, synchronous communication (e.g., video conferencing) means that the sessions occur in real time (Elleven & Allen, 2004). Additionally, these types of communication modalities can either be conducted singularly or in conjunction with one another. To illustrate, a practitioner may conduct a video-based consultation with a client (synchronous) and then follow-up after the session with an email (asynchronous). As such, asynchronous and synchronous communication both present opportunities and considerations for practitioners when using CMC technologies.

In drawing on the most prominent of these opportunities and considerations, we pay specific attention to: working alliance; accessibility; anonymity and disinhibition; time delays; absence of verbal and nonverbal cues; and, technological issues. 

**Working Alliance**

The working alliance is a term used synonymously with the therapeutic relationship or client-practitioner relationship, and refers to a negotiated, collaborative feature of the helping relationship (Bordin, 1979). It is recognized by researchers (Orlinsky et al., 2004), that the working alliance is an integral component in the successful outcome of any intervention. As such, an absence of the working alliance or a failure to develop one, is likely to undermine the effectiveness of an intervention (Gelso & Hayes, 1998). Although, a plethora of research exists examining the role the working alliance plays in traditional face-to-face counseling (Orlinsky et al., 2004), the extant literature on the working alliance in online service delivery remains scarce. Consequently, this presents a significant challenge for practitioners in cultivating equally meaning relationships with clients when employing CMC technologies and ultimately promoting effective service delivery (Richards & Viganó, 2013).
In an early review of the literature regarding the working alliance in online counseling, Mallen et al. (2005) reported equivocal findings when comparing the strength of the working alliance in face-to-face counseling and online counseling. Since the review of literature, a growing body of research (Leibert et al., 2006; Buffini & Gordon, 2015) has been conducted, which has revealed more positive findings to support the notion that developing a working alliance in online service delivery is feasible. For instance, Leibert et al. (2006) found the working alliance to be a predictor of client satisfaction in e-therapy. Nevertheless, the strength of the working alliance and client satisfaction were reported higher in face-to-face counseling than clients who received e-therapy. Similarly, Buffini and Gordon (2015) reported a significant positive relationship between the strength of the working alliance and client satisfaction when using synchronous instant messaging services for crisis interventions. Further, when comparing these findings to previous research conducted in offline settings, participants scored significantly lower on both working alliance and client satisfaction ratings.

More recently, qualitative researchers (Barrazzone et al., 2012; Cipolletta et al., 2018) have attempted to explore the relational features underpinning the working alliance in online service delivery. Barrazzone and colleagues (2012) conducted a qualitative inquiry into whether relational features in establishing, developing and maintaining a working alliance, could be translated into a computerized CBT program. These findings can be interpreted to indicate that relational features in establishing (e.g., empathy, warmth, unconditional acceptance), developing (e.g., feedback, developing a secure base) and maintaining (e.g., flexibility, responsiveness) were emulated in a computerized CBT program.

In sum, while the body of literature regarding the working alliance in online service delivery is in its infancy, some important considerations can be drawn to inform SPPs practice. Most notably, it is possible that the relational imperatives critical to establishing, developing and maintaining a working alliance within face-to-face counseling can be achieved via online service delivery settings yet, it is important for practitioners to be cognizant of the limitations of
developing an online working alliance. Put simply, it is still possible for SPPs to foster a working alliance online with their client in order to facilitate behavior change.

**Accessibility**

One of the most frequently cited advantages of using technology in online service delivery is the increased accessibility for both clients and practitioners. Given the unique context in which SPPs operate in (e.g., clientele, atypical working settings), technology provides greater access to working with clients online and can help reduce barriers that are often associated with traditional face-to-face counseling services (e.g., geographical constraints, limited hours, mobility challenges) (Barnett, 2005). As a result, technology provides clients in remote or underserviced areas greater flexibility and accessibility in engaging in the provision of psychological support (Riemer-Reiss, 2000). In addition, clients seeking to engage in face-to-face counseling services may feel stigmatized by the service delivery process and experience feelings of shame (Rochlen et al., 2004). Online service delivery lends itself as a viable alternative that may be more accessible to such individuals, as it has the potential to reduce the stigma attached with seeking help (Rochlen et al., 2004) and can also enhance positive help seeking attitudes (Chang, 2005).

While the use of online service delivery opens up new opportunities through increased accessibility, the use of technology may also pose accessibility challenges to both clients and practitioners. Individuals who do not have access to technology or possess the requisite skills and knowledge to effectively utilize such services, may perceive online service delivery as inaccessible (Riemer-Reiss, 2000; Elleven & Allen, 2004). Indeed, limited technological literacy is a challenge to online service delivery therefore, practitioners must take precautions not to alienate and/or isolate the client’s technological literacy ability (Elleven & Allen, 2004).

Interestingly, the increased accessibility afforded through using technology in online service delivery may also pose ethical concerns regarding communication boundaries, as SPPs may be perceived by client’s as being accessible at all times. The potential risk of blurred communication boundaries is an important consideration for SPPs when using technology in the online service.
delivery process, which emphasizes the importance for SPPs to manage client’s expectations on availability by negotiating and establishing a set of clear boundaries at the outset of consultancy.

**Anonymity and Disinhibition**

It is often reported in the online counseling literature (Richards & Viganò, 2013; Harris & Birnbaum, 2015) that clients enjoy the natural sense of anonymity provided by the online environment. Traditionally, clients who sought online service delivery were able to engage with such services without disclosing identifiable information (Harris & Birnbaum, 2015). Nevertheless, the changes to professional guidelines and ethical standards has meant that the process of how clients are recruited, identified and assessed have changed (Richards & Viganò, 2013). In particular, these changes to professional guidelines and ethical standards have arisen to consider the risks associated when working with children and young people online. For example, assessing whether the client is Gillick competent or to ensure a required level of confidentiality is achieved by knowing who else is in the room or nearby during consultancy.

Although changes to the professional guidelines and ethical standards of online service delivery have removed a full sense of anonymity for clients, it is still possible for clients to experience, to some extent, a natural sense of anonymity. In particular, perceptions of anonymity when engaging in online service delivery have been suggested to facilitate psychological safety, disinhibition and increased self-disclosure (Suler, 2010). While traditional counseling services often have social stigmas attached (e.g., gender, physical appearance) when seeking professional support (Efstathiou, 2009), the perceived anonymity offered through online service delivery has the potential to reduce such stigmas and the associated anxieties. In turn, this may result in increased disinhibition and accelerate the rate at which clients disclose information due to the lack of nonverbal cues available (Rochlen et al., 2004).

In sum, online service delivery may increase feelings of safety, diminish a client’s sense of vulnerability and play a facilitative role in disclosure, and assisting the working alliance (cf. Harris & Birnbaum, 2015). Therefore, SPPs should carefully integrate technology in the service
delivery process to create environments that are psychologically safe and provide a sense of perceived anonymity, which will increase disinhibition and result in more effective practice.

**Time Delays**

An important distinction made between CMC technologies is whether they can be categorized as asynchronous or synchronous. Synchronous communication allows clients and practitioners to communicate in real time (e.g., video conferencing), while asynchronous communication does not occur in real time and has a natural time delay built into the service delivery process (e.g., emails). Any communication time delay has the potential to lead to anxiety being experienced by either the client or practitioner following a perceived or unexplained delay in response (Richards & Viganó, 2013). Further, the ambiguity that can be experienced when a response is delayed can cause a blank screen, whereby one projects their own expectations, emotions and anxieties (Suler, 2004). While therapeutic interventions delivered through asynchronous communication will differ considerably to those delivered through traditional approaches, the time delay may mean that what can be achieved in one face-to-face session could potentially take several days or weeks in asynchronous online service delivery (Barnett, 2005).

Nevertheless, the use of asynchronous communication may serve as an adaptive function especially, given the atypical working environment that SPPs operate in. For example, asynchronous communication may be important when consulting with clients competing in different time zones or employed as an alternative to synchronous communication to promote professional quality of life when experiencing ‘compassion fatigue’ (Quartiroli et al., 2019).

Asynchronous communication also has the potential to facilitate the development of a zone of reflection, whereby clients and practitioners have the opportunity to take their time to engage in deeper reflection before responding to messages (Richards & Viganó, 2013). As such, this level of reflection might enable clients to process experiences, emotions, reduce impulsivity and enhance self-awareness and self-expression (Hanley, 2009).

**Absence of Verbal and Nonverbal Cues**
It is well-recognized by consumers of sport psychology (e.g., athletes, coaches, parents, gatekeepers) that interpersonal skills are desirable characteristics of SPPs (Thelwell et al., 2018; Woolway & Harwood, 2019; Woolway & Harwood, 2020). In particular, verbal (e.g., tone, speech) and nonverbal cues (e.g., body language) are of critical importance to practitioners in gaining an understanding and insight into the client’s thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Harris & Birnbaum, 2015). Unlike traditional face-to-face counseling that typically offers able-bodied observations of verbal and nonverbal cues, practitioners are less able to observe such cues in online service delivery. This absence of verbal and nonverbal cues poses communication challenges for both the client and practitioner which may mean that information could be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Consequently, this may negatively affect the working alliance and reduce the effectiveness of service delivery (Harris & Birnbaum, 2015; Bird & Harris, 2019).

While the absence of verbal and nonverbal cues is recognized as a limitation of online service delivery, scholars (e.g., Suler, 2004; Hanley, 2009) argue that the absence of such cues could benefit the service delivery process. To elaborate, clients have often reported that the absence of nonverbal cues can help alleviate any concerns they hold, with regards to the practitioner’s reactions when disclosing personal information (Richards & Viganó, 2013). In turn, individuals who are sensitive to the physical presence of others and social cues indicating disapproval or judgement, would be ideally suited for online service delivery given the role it plays in facilitating feelings of psychological safety and disinhibition (Leibert et al., 2006). Moreover, due to the lack of verbal cues present in online service delivery, clients may experience greater feelings of empowerment and autonomy over what they disclose to practitioners, especially if it is sensitive information (Hanley, 2009).

In sum, given the perceived relative importance of SPPs having strong interpersonal skills (Wooley & Harwood, 2020), it is even more pertinent that practitioners pay careful attention to the interpersonal skills they employ when consulting online, in an attempt to mitigate the potential challenges of an absence of verbal and/or non-verbal cues when working online.
Technological Issues

The use of technology in online service delivery has many associated benefits (e.g., accessibility, disinhibition, reflection) however, it is not without its limitations. In fact, technology has been identified as being a barrier to effective service delivery (Haberstroh et al., 2007). Practitioners who use technology in the provision of online service delivery may experience internet connection issues or computer-related problems (Riemer-Reiss, 2000). Subsequently, interference from technological issues may lead to both clients and practitioners experiencing frustration, which could potentially thwart the working alliance (Haberstroh et al., 2007; Haberstroh et al., 2008). If these technological issues persist or are unresolved this may isolate a client for a prolonged period of time or in extreme cases, lead to the termination of an intervention (Baker & Ray, 2011). Therefore, in the event of any technological issues, practitioners must have the basic technological competences to troubleshoot any software or hardware issues and provide alternative means of service delivery (Riemer-Reiss, 2000).

Concluding Remarks

Given the growing use of technology and new media, practitioners have shown an increased interest in the role technology plays in service delivery. Despite this interest, there exists a limited sport psychology-specific knowledge base for professionals to draw from that informs their practice when seeking to use media and technology in the provision of sport psychology. Therefore, this presents scholars with a number of future research opportunities to expand the evidence-base in which practitioners can draw from when consulting online. In particular, future research should aim to explore clients’ and practitioners’ perceptions of the utility, ease of use, and effectiveness of technology in the online service delivery process. Additionally, researchers should also seek to understand on how best to measure the effectiveness of using technology and media in the provision of sport psychology.

In this commentary we have attempted to draw to the readers’ attention to several key opportunities and considerations relating to the use of technology in online psychological
support. Namely, working alliance, accessibility, anonymity and disinhibition, time delays, absence of verbal and nonverbal cues and, technological issues. As such, these opportunities and considerations for using technology in online service delivery could act as a solid foundation in which SPPs can draw on to inform their practice.

In conjunction with these opportunities and considerations, it must also be recognized that online service delivery presents a range of ethical and legal implications that SPPs need to be aware of and navigate. For example, SPPs need to consider confidentiality, competency, online security, licensing and Gillick competence to name a few (Bird & Harris, 2019; Cottrell et al., 2018; Harris & Birnbaum, 2015). Another key consideration that we acknowledge having influence on the utility of working online, are the varying levels in which SPPs operate at, notably one-to-one, dyadic, team and systemic levels (Sly et al., 2020). Therefore, in the next section we offer some good practice recommendations for online service delivery at the individual (e.g., athletes, coaches) and dyadic (e.g., athlete-coach, athlete-parent) level, which we recognize may be less impactful at a systemic level.

**Recommendations of good practice**

- We recommend that practitioners undertake formal training in online service delivery to develop core competencies and knowledge that are necessary when using technology in the provision of sport psychology.
- The client’s technological literacy ability, knowledge and confidence in using CMC technologies should be assessed before introducing into the service delivery process.
- When working with children or young people, practitioners must assess whether the client is Gillick competent before any consultancy can take place.
- Practitioners must also gauge whether using technology in the provision of sport psychology will either aid or hinder the establishment, development and maintenance of the working alliance.
• Expectations regarding response times to messages (e.g., emails) should be clarified with the client at the start of the consultancy process, in order to guard against any anxieties that may arise from a delayed response.

• We recommend practitioners use noise cancelling headphones, to ensure confidentiality and eliminate any potential distractions that may occur outside the consulting room.

• Practitioners should carefully consider the background displayed when consulting online and where possible, use neutral backgrounds to avoid showing personal space which may result in discomfort being experienced by the client and/or practitioner.

• In the event of a crisis situation, practitioners should have a list of emergency contact details to hand, so they are able to coordinate emergency support in a timely manner.

• We also recommended that practitioners have a contingency plan for alternative service delivery approaches that mitigate against the potential negative consequences that may arise from any technological issues encountered.

• Webcams or in-built laptop cameras should be placed at eye level to avoid any perceived power imbalances by the client (e.g., practitioner looking down on client).

• Video chat-based software’s (e.g., Zoom) often include a screenshare feature that is useful in making sessions interactive and offers a creative alternative to a whiteboard.

• Due to the potential absence or reduction of verbal and non-verbal cues available, practitioners should pay close attention to the cues available, in an attempt to understand the client’s thoughts, feeling and emotions.

• Practitioners using technology are encouraged to adopt a flexible approach that allows them to alternate between technological and traditionally consultancy approaches, in order to meet the needs and expectations of the client.

• Given the labor intensive nature of online service delivery, we recommend practitioners engage in self-care by taking regular breaks (Quartirolı et al., 2019).
References


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