

# The Motivation and Objective Factors of Web Psychological Counselors' Free Services: A Case Study of www.Psy525.cn

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## Abstract

Providing netizens with free psychological guidance and counseling, of which an important link is to improve web psychological counselors' motivation for free services, is an integral part of establishing China's web service system for mental health. Based on the case study of China's largest free psychological counseling website—www.psy525.cn, this study found that objective factors such as age, professional background, grade of practice qualification, authentication of practice qualification, and service providers' group affiliation could have remarkable influences on web psychological counselors' behavior and performance that reflect their motivation for free services indirectly.

**Keywords:** web psychological counseling, service motivation, www.psy525.cn

## 1. Introduction

In China, free mental health web services are of large audience. Netizens hope web mental health services are free, or at least partly free, of charge (Shao & Liu, 2004). And in terms of the modes of web mental health services, the intensity of netizens' needs decreases successively in "online text counseling", "email counseling", "online phonetic counseling" and "online video counseling". From this, it can easily be seen that Chinese netizens prefer to counsel on the website through text-based communication. In fact, most of counselors have chosen to communicate with clients through text (Che, 2011). Meanwhile, through actual observation, it can be found that the online text counseling is the psychological counseling mode that has the largest sphere of influence in China, and with the service object of the broad masses of mental sub-health, the online text counseling is quite welcome in netizens. Taking time, cost, manpower, etc., into full consideration, online free counseling services are usually conducted through online asynchronous text communication, which has obvious disadvantages—such as lacking real-time interaction between counselors and clients, time lags between counseling message and its feedback. And lower counseling quality—and two prominent advantages: one is lower service cost, and the other is a wide spectrum of services. Because online counseling services are usually free of charge and there is uncertainty in both the practitioners themselves and their professionalism (Shen & Shi, 2009), the quality of those counseling services could not be guaranteed and the practitioners' service motivation could be affected by many factors.

The indicators used to measure web counselors' service motivation could be divided into two main systems: subjective attitude, which could be examined through self-report inventories, and objective behavior, which could be analyzed statistically by actual counseling activity indicators. Since web counseling activities are conducted on the Internet, and a considerable number of those activities could be tracked and recorded by websites. This study placed an emphasis on examining objective behavior indicators that could be directly observed and objective factors that could possibly have influences on web psychological counselors' motivation for free services, so as to clarify those objective factors that are conducive to promote effectively the development and improvement of free online counseling, and provide references for website management and for netizens in the choice of web counselors.

## 2. Object and Method

### 2.1 Study Object

Given that netizens, in need of psychological counseling services, often turn to search engines for help, this study referred to retrieved results from major search engines in the choice of study object. After searching Baidu and Google repeatedly by keywords as “psychological counseling” and “psychological problem” in different periods of time, it could be found that the “www.psy525.cn” was ranking first in common websites (non-promotional websites) for most of the time. And according to Alexa ranking, among China’s mental health service websites, the “www.psy525.cn” was found to rank first in both daily reach (about 7200) and daily PV (about 7920) (2015). Moreover, 32.84% of the website visits were directly from the links on Baidu, which reflected that choosing the object of this case study through search engines was reasonable to some extent.

The “www.psy525.cn” is a third-party information service providing an information platform for psychological counselors and their clients. Its status in the field of psychological counseling service is similar to Taobao and Amazon in the field of e-commerce. The free service of online message counseling provided on the website, which is also one of its biggest attractions to netizens, is the service behavior that could be observed directly by this study. Up to September 20, 2015, the “www.psy525.cn”, with cumulatively 16263 registered psychological counselors, 1157252 members, and 3836 psychology services, has become the largest psychological service website in China. On the website, all the registered psychological counselors have been validated through the real-name system and submitted photos of their certificate for identity verification.

### 2.2 Study Method

With the unstructured and non-participant observation and participant observation, this study traced the free counseling services provided on the “www.psy525.cn”, so as to collect data. And then the data was analyzed statistically by SPSS20.0.

## 3. Analysis and Discussion

### 3.1 The Constitution of Web Psychological Counselor

By means of online observation and counselors’ information provided by the manager of the “www.psy525.cn”, this study found that psychological counselors who had registered on the website could cover 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan), but the enrollment varied sharply. According to counselors’ last log-in time, the systematic sampling and actual provincial sampling were carried out, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Enrollment, sample numbers and missing number of psychological counselors in each province on www.psy525.cn (measurement unit: person)

| Province    | Enrollment | Quasi samples | Actual samples | Missing |
|-------------|------------|---------------|----------------|---------|
| Beijing     | 1126       | 65            | 50             | 15      |
| Tianjin     | 184        | 22            | 19             | 3       |
| Hebei       | 974        | 55            | 44             | 11      |
| Shanxi      | 472        | 22            | 19             | 3       |
| Neimenggu   | 283        | 25            | 22             | 3       |
| Liaoning    | 915        | 64            | 45             | 19      |
| Jilin       | 239        | 30            | 23             | 7       |
| Helongjiang | 452        | 23            | 20             | 3       |
| Shanghai    | 772        | 39            | 32             | 7       |
| Jiangsu     | 942        | 44            | 36             | 8       |
| Zhejiang    | 699        | 34            | 28             | 6       |
| Shandong    | 1908       | 55            | 45             | 10      |
| Anhui       | 510        | 28            | 22             | 6       |
| Fujian      | 482        | 26            | 19             | 7       |
| Jiangxi     | 464        | 24            | 21             | 3       |
| Sichuan     | 513        | 28            | 21             | 7       |
| Chongqing   | 390        | 20            | 16             | 4       |
| Yunnan      | 215        | 26            | 21             | 5       |
| Guizhou     | 137        | 20            | 17             | 3       |

|           |       |     |     |     |
|-----------|-------|-----|-----|-----|
| Guangdong | 1191  | 52  | 40  | 12  |
| Guangxi   | 258   | 28  | 23  | 5   |
| Hainan    | 98    | 20  | 18  | 2   |
| Hubei     | 665   | 32  | 27  | 5   |
| Hunan     | 543   | 27  | 21  | 6   |
| Henan     | 916   | 42  | 34  | 8   |
| Shaanxi   | 448   | 23  | 19  | 4   |
| Gansu     | 169   | 20  | 17  | 3   |
| Qinghai   | 30    | 20  | 15  | 4   |
| Ningxia   | 31    | 20  | 14  | 6   |
| Xinjiang  | 230   | 20  | 16  | 4   |
| Xizang    | 7     | 7   | 4   | 3   |
| Total     | 16263 | 961 | 768 | 192 |

*Note.* The “missing number” refers to psychological counselors only registered on the website but didn’t activate their accounts. For their data information is incomplete, so this study abandons them as invalid data.

This study also systematically reviewed and sorted out the data about the sex, age, qualification authentication, highest academic qualification, and other indicators (registration information) of the 768 samples. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Basic constitution of psychological service providers on www.psy525.cn (N=768)

| Attribute                         |                                 | Number of<br>people (person) | Proportion<br>(%) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Sex                               | Male                            | 280                          | 36.5              |
|                                   | Female                          | 488                          | 63.5              |
| Age                               | 20-29                           | 198                          | 26.0              |
|                                   | 30-39                           | 312                          | 40.9              |
|                                   | 40-49                           | 216                          | 28.3              |
|                                   | 50-59                           | 36                           | 4.7               |
|                                   | 60 and above                    | 1                            | 0.1               |
|                                   |                                 |                              |                   |
| Institution personnel             | Yes                             | 400                          | 52.1              |
|                                   | No                              | 368                          | 47.9              |
| Qualification authentication      | Yes                             | 329                          | 42.8              |
|                                   | No                              | 439                          | 57.2              |
| Professional certification        | Second-level counselors         | 473                          | 61.6              |
|                                   | Third-level counselors          | 238                          | 31.0              |
|                                   | Doctor of psychology            | 3                            | 0.4               |
|                                   | Master of psychology            | 27                           | 3.5               |
|                                   | Bachelor of psychology          | 27                           | 3.5               |
|                                   |                                 |                              |                   |
| Highest academic qualification    | Doctor                          | 11                           | 1.4               |
|                                   | Master                          | 165                          | 21.5              |
|                                   | Bachelor                        | 471                          | 61.5              |
|                                   | College degree                  | 114                          | 14.8              |
| Professional education background | Unknown                         | 7                            | 0.9               |
|                                   | Psychology (including pedagogy) | 231                          | 30.1              |
|                                   |                                 |                              |                   |

|                 |     |      |
|-----------------|-----|------|
| Medical science | 47  | 6.1  |
| Others          | 12  | 1.6  |
| Unknown         | 477 | 62.1 |

Among the actual samples, female counselors are twice as many as male counselors, in accordance with other findings in China; most counselors are young and middle-aged: 20-49 groups account for 95.2%; 52.1% of counselors belong to service entities or virtual service agencies, while other 47.9% provide psychological counseling services in the name of the self-employed; 42.8% of counselors have submitted their counselor certificates, highest academic qualification certificates, working certificate, or other materials to the website for verification, while there are still 57.2% registered counselors who have not been verified by the website are able to provide counseling services as well; whether verified or not, 92.6% of counselors claim that they have gotten the second-level or third-level counselor qualification, and the other 7.4% claim that they are psychology students at school; and in terms of professional education background, 30.1% of counselors have a education background of psychology or pedagogy, 6.1% medical science, and up to 62.1% counselors' professional education backgrounds are unknown.

### 3.2 Difference Tests for Web Psychological Counselors' Service Motivation

#### 3.2.1 The Definition of Service Motivation and Assignment

It is proposed that the work initiative of medical staff could be inferred from their work load, working hours, work efficiency and work conscientiousness (Li, Liu, & Zhu, 2012), i.e., to evaluate service providers' work motivation through observable objective behavior indicators. On the website, web counselors' last login time (corresponding to working hours), the number of counseling cases (corresponding to work load), and counseling response rates (corresponding to work efficiency) are objective indicators that could be used directly to evaluate counselors' service motivation. However, this study found that some counselors have logged on the website recently, but have not done a single case of free counseling; some counselors have done more than one hundred counseling cases, but have not logged on the website for more than half a year; still some counselors have received and responded only one counseling case, but have a response rate of 100%. Therefore, web counselors' service motivation cannot be evaluated by only one or two of the three indicators. This study assigned a value to each of the three indicators and summed them up, then used the total point as the indicator for the motivation of web psychological counselors' online counseling.

Based on the characteristics of web psychological services, the values were assigned by following rules (the 8 intensity gradations of motivation were represented by 0-7 points respectively, and the higher the score, the higher intensity gradation):

The assignment for the last login time goes like this: 7 is the assigned value for those counselors who have logged the website within 24 hours; 6 for within 1-3 days; 5 for within 4-7 days; 4 for within 8-30 days; 3 for within 31-90 days; 2 for within 91-180 days; 1 for within 181-360 days; and 0 for those counselors who have not logged on for more than 360 days.

The assignment for counseling case number goes like this (referring to the median and the overall frequency): 7 is the assigned value for those counselors who have done 501 cases and above; 6 for 101-500 cases; 5 for 31-100 cases; 4 for 16-30 cases; 3 for 6-15 cases; 2 for 2-5 cases; 1 for one case; and 0 for those counselors who have not done any cases. Among the 768 counselors, there are 468 counselors who have done online free counseling cases, but the number of cases each counselor has responded ranges from 1 to 15414, with the mean case number 2.27 and the median case number 17. Given the tremendous difference in counselors' case numbers, this study regards the median as the reference standard for counselors' online work load and motivation, so as to avoid the interference of extreme values.

The assignment for counseling response rate goes like this: 7 is the assigned value for the response rate of 100%; 6 for 98%-99%; 5 for 90%-97%; 4 for 80%-89%; 3 for 60%-79%; 2 for 40%-59%; 1 for the response rate below 40%; and 0 for those counselors who have not responded to their clients. Since online message counseling is asynchronous and without time limit, it is easy for counselors to get high response rate. So when assigning the response rate, this study has subdivided the higher-rate part, which is in accordance with the phenomena observed.

The frequency and proportion of the three indicators after assignment are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Index statistics of last login time interval, counseling case number, and counseling response rate of web psychological counselors (N=768)

| Assignment | Last login time interval |                | Case number |                | Response rate |                |
|------------|--------------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
|            | Frequency                | Proportion (%) | Frequency   | Proportion (%) | Frequency     | Proportion (%) |
| 0          | 65                       | 8.5            | 300         | 39.1           | 301           | 39.2           |
| 1          | 160                      | 20.8           | 73          | 9.5            | 18            | 2.3            |
| 2          | 95                       | 12.4           | 79          | 10.3           | 18            | 2.3            |
| 3          | 62                       | 8.1            | 75          | 9.8            | 30            | 3.9            |
| 4          | 134                      | 17.4           | 58          | 7.6            | 34            | 4.4            |
| 5          | 80                       | 10.4           | 71          | 9.2            | 57            | 7.4            |
| 6          | 58                       | 7.6            | 77          | 10.0           | 53            | 6.9            |
| 7          | 114                      | 14.8           | 35          | 4.6            | 257           | 33.5           |
| Total      | 768                      | 100.0          | 768         | 100.0          | 768           | 100.0          |

From the above table it can be seen that 67.2% of counselors have not logged on the website during the last week, which means they do not care about whether there are counseling messages from netizens during this time; 39.1% of counselors have never done any counseling cases; 33.5% of counselors have responded to all the netizens who have turned to them; and 47.6% of counselors could have a response rate of 90%. It is worth mentioning that the 100% response rate to netizens' counseling problems is the basic requirement for web psychological counseling services, but apparently, most counselors fail to meet that requirement. In general, there are large differences in web psychological counselors' motivation for free web services.

### 3.2.2 Difference Test for Service Motivation of Web Psychological Counselors at Different Age

Excluding 5 obviously invalid age data (three 4-year-old, one 120-year-old, and one 131-year-old), this study divided counselors on the website, aged from 21 to 62, into 6 age groups: below 20, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, aged 60 and above. And the average age is 35.8 (standard deviation equals to 8.22).

The result of the test shows that, in terms of service motivation, counselors aged 40 and above score obviously higher than counselors aged 20-29 ( $p < 0.05$ ) and aged 30-39 ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, the older counselors are more willing to provide netizens with free psychological counseling services, also with higher motivation.

### 3.2.3 Difference Test for Service Motivation of Web Psychological Counselors with Different Professional Certification

The generally recognized grades of psychological counselor's professional certification are the second-level counselor and the third-level counselor. On "www.psy525.cn", there are counselors that have no professional certification but registered as Doctor of psychology, Master of psychology, or Bachelor of psychology, all of whom have been classified as no professional certification in this test. Hence, counselors have been divided into three independent sample groups: the second-level, the third-level, and no professional certification.

By means of nonparametric tests, the result of the K sample median test for the three independent sample groups shows that the service motivation of counselors in the no professional certification group is significantly lower than those in the second-level group ( $p = 0.005 < 0.01$ ) as well as those in the third-level group ( $p = 0.021 < 0.05$ ). Therefore, it can be seen that counselors with professional certification, even the third-level certification, show higher service motivation than those without professional certification, which reveals the importance of professional certification in web mental health services.

### 3.2.4 Difference Test for Service Motivation of Web Psychological Counselors with Different Group Affiliation

Web psychological counselors could be divided into main types: one is those belong to service entities or virtual service agencies, and the other is self-employed. The result of the difference test for web psychological counselors with different group affiliation shows that counselors belonging to service entities or virtual service agencies score significantly higher than the self-employed counselors (the median test,  $p < 0.001$ ; Kolmogorov-Smirnov  $Z = 5.012$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hence, group affiliation is conducive for promoting web counselor's motivation for free services, which reflects that team construction and team motivation of web psychological counselors should attract enough attention.

### 3.2.5 Difference Test for Service Motivation of Web Psychological Counselors with or without Qualification Authentication

For counselors who claim themselves have professional certification, the service websites should re-check and validate their authenticity, which is also an important procedure in guaranteeing the quality of web psychological counseling services. By means of nonparametric tests, this study finds that web psychological counselors who have been validated score significantly higher than counselors without qualification authentication (the median test,  $p < 0.001$ ; Kolmogorov-Smirnov  $Z = 7.224$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, web psychological counselors with qualification authentication are more secure when they provide free services.

### 3.2.6 Difference Test for Service Motivation of Web Psychological Counselors with Different Professional Educational Background

Through non-parametric tests on web psychological counselors with different professional educational background, this study found that counselors with educational background of medical science score significantly higher than counselors with that of psychology, pedagogy, or other professions ( $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, it can be seen that the more rigorous clinical awareness training counselors have, the higher they score. It is possibly because counselors with more rigorous training could be more aware of the profound influences of timely response, which is also a professional ethic that should be upheld by every professional counselor, on their clients' mental health. Even though sometimes counselors may feel unconfident about their answers for clients' questions, but their timely response also could provide clients with some consolation.

### 3.2.7 Difference Tests for Service Motivation of Web Psychological Counselors with Other Indicators

By means of nonparametric tests, this study finds that there is no significant difference in results of difference tests for service motivation of web psychological counselors with such indicators as sex, living area, academic degree, etc.

## 4. Conclusion and Suggestion

On the whole, web psychological counselors' motivation for providing free online services is influenced significantly by factors as age, qualification authentication, professional certification, group affiliation, and professional educational background. And there are tremendous differences in their motivation for free web services: higher motivation is showed and more guaranteed free services are provided by web psychological counselors with older age, group affiliation, medical science background, professional certification of psychological counseling, and qualification authentication by the website.

For netizens in the choice of psychological counselors, it is suggested to look up their register information for references so as to get more guaranteed free services. Meanwhile, it is suggested that all kinds of psychological service websites should reinforce the management, authentication, and training for web psychological counselors, striving to provide netizens with higher quality free counseling services.

There are still some deficiencies in this study: the case study of one psychological service website is inadequate to reflect the complete picture of web service system. It can only indicate that on psychological service websites of this kind, some objective factors could have influences on web psychological counselors' motivation for free services. And future studies should place more emphasis on exploring subjective factors which are influential for web psychological counselors' motivation for free services.

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