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Qualitative Article

Developing Cross-Cultural, Online Group, and Digital Counseling Competencies through Experiential Learning in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

Preenapa Choorat[1], and Sittiporn Kramanon[2*]

Abstract

Background/ problem: Rapid digital transformation and cultural complexity demand that counselor education evolve to foster integrated competencies for online, multicultural, and technologically mediated practice. This is critical in Thailand's southern border provinces, where online counseling serves communities with distinct traditions amid limited access to mental health services. Despite this urgency, little is known about how counseling students cultivate cross-cultural, digital, and group counseling skills through real-world engagement.

Objective/ purpose: This study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of graduate students in counseling psychology regarding the development of cross-cultural, online group, and digital counseling competencies through experiential learning during an online practicum.

Design and Methodology: This qualitative phenomenological study involved 12 second-year graduate students, purposively selected to participate in online group counseling and supervision in Thailand's southern provinces. Data was collected one month after the practicum through semi-structured group interviews and online reflective surveys. Qualitative experts reviewed instruments, and data were analyzed using content analysis.

Findings: Counselor identity development was a relational and transformative process rather than a linear acquisition of skills. Three themes emerged: (1) cross-cultural competence as a lived experience; (2) humanistic values as foundational to online group counseling; and (3) digital counseling competency as an emotionally attuned and ethically grounded practice.

Conclusion and Implications: The study highlights the value of integrating virtual practicum, culturally responsive training, and digital ethics in counselor education and supervision. Embedding these elements can guide training programs, strengthen supervision, and inform policy to prepare future practitioners better to serve diverse populations with competence and integrity.

Author Affiliation

[1] Education Faculty, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand.

[2] Behavioral Science Research Institute, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand.

*Corresponding author e-mail: sittipornk@g.swu.ac.th
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2688-3492

The rapid digital transformation, accelerated by COVID-19, highlights the urgent need for counselors to develop digital competencies (Akgül & Ergin, 2022; Manis et al., 2025). However, existing training frameworks often remain fragmented, failing to meaningfully integrate digital literacy with culturally responsive practice (Fleuridas & Krafcik, 2019). As a result, many graduates are underprepared to serve diverse populations in digitally mediated counseling environments.

This gap is particularly evident in culturally complex and politically sensitive regions such as Thailand's southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, where the population is predominantly Malay-Muslim and shaped by deeply rooted religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions (Hayimasae, 2023; Liow, 2016). In these communities, cross-cultural understanding often emerges informally through everyday interactions steeped in a blend of Thai, Chinese, and Islamic influences

(Tepsing et al., 2021). Despite the increasing reliance on online tools for both education and mental health service delivery, little is known about how counseling students in such contexts develop the integrated competencies needed to navigate cultural sensitivity, digital communication, and group facilitation simultaneously, especially in real-time online counseling settings (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014; Sacco-Bene et al., 2022). To date, no experiential studies in Thailand have specifically examined how counseling students develop counseling competencies within multicultural contexts, revealing a significant gap in both practice and behavioral science research (Boonraksa & Tuicomepee, 2019; Choompunuch et al., 2024).

This study addresses that gap by exploring how graduate students in counseling psychology develop cross-cultural, digital, and online group counseling competencies through experiential learning. Conducted in a real-world digital counseling context, where students led online group sessions with undergraduate participants from Thailand's southern provinces. By examining their lived experiences through engagement with cultural differences and technological tools in practice, and not just in theory, this study contributes to the field of behavioral science by offering an empirically grounded, integrative model for counselor education. It aims to illuminate how students embody these interwoven competencies through hands-on practice, critical reflection, and relational presence within the context of digitally mediated, multicultural group counseling.

Literature Review

This study explores the development of counseling competencies among Thai graduate students in counseling psychology through experiential learning in virtual practicum settings. The review focuses on four key domains: cross-cultural counseling competency, online group counseling competency, digital counseling competency, and experiential learning theory.

Cross-Cultural Counseling Competency

The cross-cultural counseling competency (CCCC) model highlights three dimensions of multicultural competence: cultural self-awareness, knowledge of diverse worldviews, and culturally responsive strategies (Sue et al., 1992). Empirical studies reinforce the importance of ongoing reflective engagement as an ethical imperative (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2008). Recent Thai studies have validated multicultural counseling competence scales (Boonraksa & Tuicomepee, 2019) and explored multicultural competence among pre-service teachers (Choompunuch et al., 2024). These findings affirm the significance of culturally grounded practice in counselor training.

Online Group Counseling Competency

Online group counseling competency comprises three interconnected domains: theoretical understanding, ethical and attitudinal grounding, and facilitation skills in digital environments (Johnson & Kaslow, 2014). Prior studies show that culturally complex online settings challenge students to integrate humanistic values with group processes (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014; Sakunpong et al., 2024), underscoring the relational and ethical demands of virtual counseling.

Digital Counseling Competency

The digital counseling competency framework outlines four domains: communication and content creation, platform proficiency, pedagogical design, and ethical responsibility (Spante et al., 2018). Research emphasizes the need for digital literacy to be embedded with ethical sensitivity (Julius et al., 2020), particularly in multicultural and resource-limited contexts (Utami et al., 2024; Wibowo et al., 2024). Studies on digital storytelling and virtual exchanges also demonstrate the role of digital tools in fostering empathy, cultural awareness, and professional competencies (Machwate et al., 2021; Yıldız & Uslu, 2024).

Experiential Learning Theory

The experiential learning theory of Kolb (1984) conceptualizes learning as a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This model provides the foundation for explaining how counselor trainees transform real-life interactions into knowledge and practice (Kolb, 1984). This framework has been applied to counselor education to explain how experiential engagement fosters reflective growth and identity development (Campbell & Babb, 2023).

Experiential Learning and Counseling Competency Development in Multicultural and Digitally Mediated Contexts

Experiential learning provides the foundation for developing counseling competencies across domains. Prior research indicates that cultural humility and ethical responsiveness are cultivated through lived encounters rather than abstract discussions (Donley, 2018). Likewise, digital storytelling and virtual exchange programs have been shown to enhance empathy, critical thinking, and digital fluency (Machwate et al., 2021; Wibowo et al., 2024; Yıldız & Uslu, 2024).

Practical experiential activities, such as peer-reviewed presentations and interactive group tasks, have been recognized as effective in bridging theory with practice. In the Thai Context, these approaches align with national educational goals under the Thailand 4.0 vision by reinforcing technical proficiency, creativity, adaptability, and relational intelligence (Utami et al., 2024).

Despite these insights, no study has specifically explored how cross-cultural, online group, and digital counseling competencies develop simultaneously through experiential practice in multicultural and digitally mediated settings. This gap is particularly evident in Southern Thailand, representing a critical opportunity for advancing both counseling practice and behavioral science research.
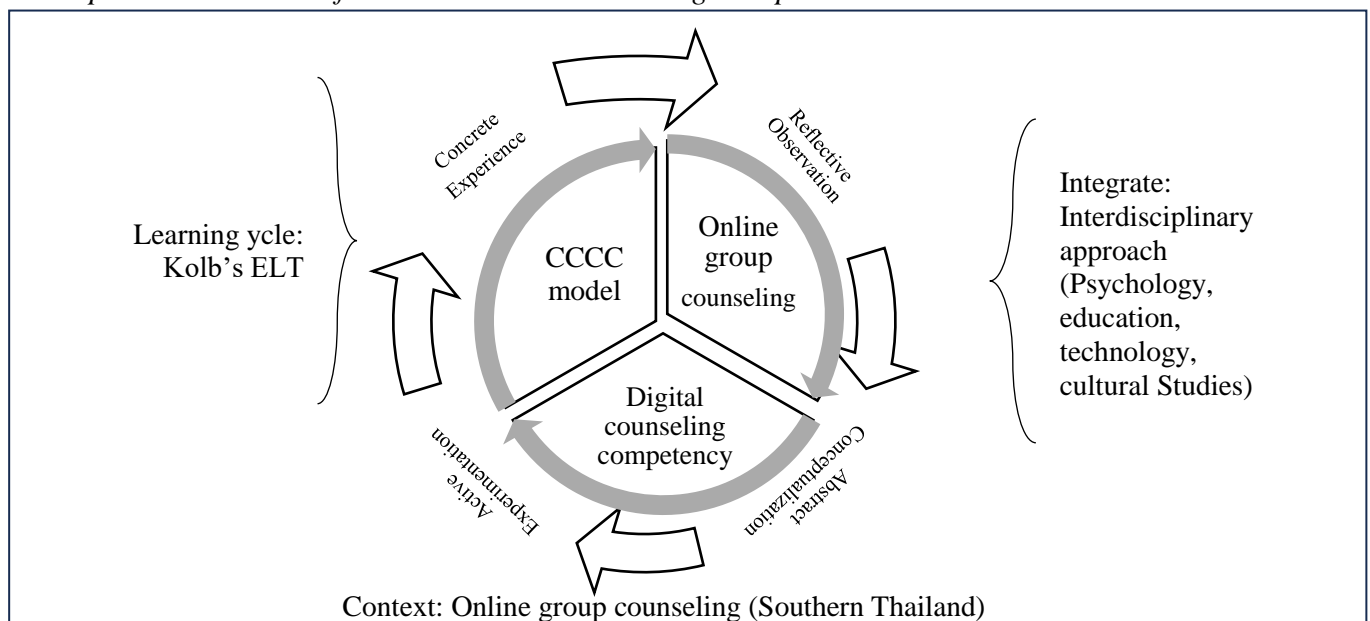
Research Questions

This study addressed the three research questions: (1) How do graduate students in counseling psychology develop cross-cultural counseling competency through experiential learning during their practicum? (2) How do graduate students develop online group counseling competency in digitally mediated practicum settings? (3) How do graduate students develop digital counseling competency while facilitating online group sessions with culturally diverse clients?

Conceptual Framework

The study integrates four theoretical frameworks: ELT (Kolb, 1984), the CCCC model (Sue et al., 1992), the online group counseling framework (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Johnson & Kaslow, 2014), and the digital counseling competency framework (Spante et al., 2018). As shown in Figure 1, this integrative framework illustrates how counselor trainees acquire practical, ethical, and culturally responsive competencies in digitally mediated environments. It also affirms recent findings that experiential and reflective learning support professional identity development in the digital age (Campbell & Babb, 2023; Julius et al., 2020).

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of Research about Counseling Competencies

Context: Online group counseling (Southern Thailand)

Method

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology as conceptualized by van Manen (2016). This approach seeks to uncover the essence of lived experience by engaging deeply with participants' narratives and interpreting their meaning. Analysis followed key phenomenological steps: immersive reading, identification of meaning units, reflective interpretation, and thematic synthesis. Researcher reflexivity and bracketing were employed to minimize bias and maintain fidelity to the lived realities of the participants.

The study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical guidelines, including the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Setting

This study's setting encompasses three contexts: geographic, online counseling, and supervision. Geographically, the study took place in Thailand's southernmost border provinces, Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, an area characterized by mountainous highlands, coastal plains, and agricultural plantations with a predominantly Malay-Muslim population and a Thai Buddhist minority. Local economies depend on rubber cultivation, fishing, and small-scale farming, while enduring poverty and political unrest limit access to in-person mental health services (Equitable Education Fund, 2021). Islamic values, the Yawi dialect (a local Malay dialect spoken predominantly by Muslim communities in Thailand's southern border provinces), and the five daily prayer rituals shape scheduling and interaction in online counseling (Seedam & Sirisunhirun, 2019).

In the online counseling environment, second-year master's students led six 90 to 120-minute Zoom sessions, adapted from Choorat (2024), with five to six undergraduates using desktops, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Communication was conducted in Thai. For supervision, students received an initial orientation from field supervisors on activity plans, cultural and religious protocols, and basic technology use. They conducted sessions as scheduled, maintained reflective journals, participated in group debrief discussions, and engaged in individual supervision with faculty online and onsite.

Sampling Procedures

This study used purposive sampling to recruit twelve master's students in counseling psychology who facilitated online group counseling in Thailand's southern border provinces. Eligibility included enrollment in a Thai graduate program, at least 12 hours of counseling, and three hours of supervision. Data were collected via videoconference one-month post-practicum. Participants gave informed consent. Exclusion criteria included psychological or language limitations, inability to consent, supervisory roles, or technological limitations or scheduling conflicts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Patton, 2015).

Participants

The participants were 12 graduate students in counseling psychology, all of whom were enrolled in the second year of a master's program. Of these, 11 identified as Buddhist and one as Christian. Notably, no Muslim participants were included despite the multicultural and religious context of Southern Thailand.

To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym (S1 to S12) to reflect their academic status in the program. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 48 years. They included nine females and three males, representing diverse geographical backgrounds (the capital city, tourist areas, industrial zones, suburban communities, small towns, and historic cities).

Their undergraduate degrees spanned counseling psychology, clinical psychology, community psychology, social work, humanities, mass communication, accounting, and dentistry. Occupational diversity was also reflected in the sample. Several participants worked in education as lecturers, academic staff, or student affairs personnel; others were employed in healthcare as staff at health centers or dentists.

Some held private sector positions, such as bank manager and R&D manager, while a few were unemployed at the time of data collection, including full-time homemakers. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics, Educational, and Professional Backgrounds

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Religion	Domicile	Degree	Occupation
S1	Female	43	Buddhist	Capital city	EPG	Music teacher
S2	Male	37	Buddhist	Capital city	HumEng	Health center staff
S3	Male	33	Buddhist	Tourist area	SW	Counselor
S4	Female	29	Buddhist	Capital city	ComPsy	Medical lecturer
S5	Female	29	Christian	Industrial area	SW	Counselor
S6	Male	25	Buddhist	Tourist area	GPsy	University lecturer
S7	Female	25	Buddhist	Capital city	ClinPsy	Student affairs officer
S8	Female	48	Buddhist	Suburban area	ComAcc	Bank manager
S9	Female	23	Buddhist	Small town	CPsy	Unemployed
S10	Female	29	Buddhist	Suburban area	ComPsy	R&D manager
S11	Female	23	Buddhist	Historic city	Dent	Dentist and lecturer
S12	Female	32	Buddhist	Capital city	MCT	Homemaker

Note. S1 to S12 = master's student in counseling psychology; EPG = educational psychology and guidance; HumEng = humanities (English); SW = social work; CPsy = counseling psychology; ComPsy = community psychology; GPsy = general psychology; ClinPsy = clinical psychology; ComAcc = commercial accounting; Dent = dentistry; MCT = mass communication technology.

Most participants (11 of 12) reported similar counseling experiences, each completing around 12 hours of practice, except S9, who had 30 hours. Only S1 and S3 had a prior connection to Thailand's southern provinces, through short-term work and personal relationships, respectively, while others had none. Regarding technological background, most had limited exposure to digital tools without formal training. S12 was the only participant with professional experience in digital technology, suggesting a potentially more advanced integration of digital tools into their counseling practice.

Interview Questions and Tools

The semi-structured group interview was organized into four sequential segments to gather comprehensive insights into students' experiences facilitating online counseling groups. The first segment addressed demographic and contextual factors, allowing participants to describe how they managed logistical elements such as scheduling and group composition. The second segment focused on counseling competencies, prompting reflection on the group leader's role in digital settings, the emotional and personal impacts of facilitation, and the skills employed to foster group engagement. The third segment explored cultural and spiritual awareness, inviting participants to explain how they incorporated respect for diverse religious practices and managed cultural differences. The final segment assessed digital counseling competency, including the use of videoconferencing tools, troubleshooting strategies, and adaptations to ensure the practicality of sessions.

Participants completed a structured online survey following the interview to reinforce key themes. They described how they adapted approaches to support clients of different faiths, identified helpful digital features, addressed technical issues, and reflected on their development as online facilitators. They also evaluated which component, orientation, supervision, or practice, most contributed to their growth.

Several strategies were used to ensure trustworthiness. First, qualitative research experts reviewed the interview protocol to validate content relevance. Second, a pilot interview was conducted to refine questions based on preliminary feedback. Third, instrument development and revisions were done collaboratively with interviewers to ensure alignment with field realities and consistency throughout the data collection process. Lastly, member checking was conducted by sharing synthesized theme summaries

with participants to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the findings. In addition, to enhance trustworthiness, triangulation procedures were employed. Data were cross-validated through multiple sources, including reflective journals, supervisor feedback, and observation notes from online group sessions.

Data Analysis

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit twelve master's students in counseling psychology who had directly facilitated online group counseling sessions with undergraduate clients in Thailand's southern border provinces. Eligibility, verified by both a faculty supervisor and a field mentor, required participants to be enrolled in a Thai counseling psychology graduate program, to have completed at least 12 hours of online group counseling in Yala, Pattani, or Narathiwat, and to have received a minimum of three hours of clinical supervision based on an experiential learning model.

Data collection began one month after the practicum concluded and was conducted via videoconference. All participants provided written informed consent and committed to full engagement in each study phase. First, the transcripts were read multiple times for immersion and holistic understanding. Then, significant statements and meaning units were extracted from participants' narratives. These units were interpreted reflectively to identify underlying experiential structures. These elements were clustered through thematic reflection into essential themes that expressed the shared meanings across participants. This process emphasized researcher reflexivity and bracketing to minimize preconceptions and maintain a focus on participants lived meanings. The final step involved synthesizing the themes into descriptive narratives that illuminate the essence of the phenomena under investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Patton, 2015; van Manen, 2016).

Data Rigor

This study employed member checking to enhance the credibility of its findings. This process entailed having key informants and their supervisors review the study's findings.

Results

The lived experiences of counseling psychology graduate students revealed a relational, transformative process of developing professional competencies in cross-cultural counseling, online group counseling, and digital practice. Guided by the experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and supported by the cross-cultural counseling competency model and digital counseling competency framework, growth emerged through cultural immersion, ethical reflection, and adaptive use of technology.

Three core themes were identified: (1) cross-cultural counseling as lived experience, grounded in self-awareness and relational trust; (2) humanistic values in online group counseling, reflecting the integration of empathy and presence in virtual settings; and (3) digital counseling competency, emphasizing ethical, emotional, and pedagogical dimensions of technology use. These findings demonstrate that experiential learning fosters skills and reflective and culturally responsive counseling identity.

Theme 1: Cross-Cultural Counseling Competency as Lived Experience

Participants did not perceive cultural competency as a technical achievement but as a gradual, relational transformation arising through direct engagement with diversity. Interactions with Muslim clients in southern Thailand prompted deeper self-awareness, empathy, and cultural responsiveness.

Sub-theme 1.1: Awareness of Self about the Cultural Other

Participants described turning inward to examine their cultural assumptions and identities. Through dialogue with clients from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, they discovered how their positioning shaped their presence and practice. "I participated in the group with an awareness of our shared humanity…

This collective belief formed a strong foundation that allowed me to lead with confidence." (S2), "Cultural differences do not cause concern for me… I focus on understanding and appreciating each person's uniqueness." (S5).

Sub-theme 1.2: Internalizing Cultural Worlds

Rather than remaining observers, participants immersed themselves in the local culture, engaging with its language, rituals, and local customs. This experiential openness reshaped their worldviews and relationships. "I have acquired a comprehensive understanding of the language spoken within the group… This immersive experience feels akin to a cultural shift." (S4), "I am steadfastly committed to attentively listening and learning the Yawi language… Members expressed contentment with exchanging cultural insights." (S9), Cultural adjustments were made with intention and care. "Scheduled breaks would be seamlessly integrated… ensuring everyone had the opportunity to partake in their religious practices." (S11), "Using local expressions like 'bae' and 'de' created a feeling of familiarity and closeness." (S10)

Sub-theme 1.3: Trust-Building as Intersubjective Experience

Participants emphasized that trust emerged through mutual presence and emotional vulnerability, not from scripted interventions. "Engaging in active listening… without bias… remains unwavering, regardless of any disparities in religious beliefs." (S9), "I transparently discuss the challenges we have faced… not merely highlighting our strengths but also acknowledging our weaknesses." (S1)

Theme 2: Humanistic Values as the Core of Online Group Counseling Competency

Participants identified empathy, unconditional positive regard, and respect for human potential as foundational to their identity as online counselors. These values were not abstract but lived and embodied in the digital space.

Sub-theme 2.1: Embodying Humanistic Attitudes in Virtual Space

Digital contexts, though limited in physical cues, heightened participants' intentionality in relational presence. "A profound perspective on humanity emerged… a belief in the potential for all individuals to flourish, regardless of religion." (S7), "There is a perspective on group members that emphasizes the fundamental humanity of each individual…" (S8)

Sub-theme 2.2: Integrating Theory into Practice

Students applied research models (Rogers, 1951; Trotzer, 2006) with increasing clarity and purpose. Rather than diluting theory, online settings demanded structure, reflection, and adaptation. "I now emphasize a consistent review of objectives and methods… systematic guidance enables members to progress gradually." (S4), "The design map for group activities is intricately detailed. Clear instructions are provided…" (S1), "I have operationalized theoretical concepts… integrating Trotzer's ideas within Rogers' conceptual framework." (S6).

Sub-theme 2.3: Interpersonal Skill Development in Digital Contexts

Participants refined their verbal presence by using humanistic techniques to maintain connections in a screen-mediated environment. "The utilization of person-centered therapy techniques serves to facilitate the opening up of group members and fosters trust." (S11), "Reflecting feelings and assessing both external and internal resources aims to enhance members' awareness of their strengths." (S7), "By centering their approach on empathy, attentive listening, and open-hearted engagement, counselors cultivate trust." (S12), "I offer words of encouragement and inquire if any fellow group members would like to offer support." (S9). These narratives reveal that humanistic values were not hindered but rather amplified by the digital medium.

Theme 3: Digital Counseling Competency as an Embodied and Ethical Practice

Digital tools were initially perceived as obstacles but gradually became part of participants' therapeutic identity. Technology was experienced not as neutral but as a relational space, requiring ethical sensitivity and creative engagement.

Sub-theme 3.1: Digital Media for Communication and Learning

Visual Media and Emotional Presence. Visual tools such as emojis and imagery have become powerful means of emotional expression and connection. "Using emojis on Zoom… became a common practice that helped facilitate connection with service recipients." (S6), "I replaced emotion cards with images, which increased participation and made the activities more engaging." (S10).

Multimedia for Shared Emotional Experience. Participants utilized music and video to enhance emotional resonance and group bonding. "Sharing video screens or playing clips contributes to the success of counseling group activities." (S7), "YouTube music helped members express emotions and connect with their identities." (S6).

Interactive Presentations for Cognitive Engagement. Digital storytelling and design enriched both attention and comprehension. "I utilize technology to create presentations that captivate attention and enrich knowledge." (S9), "I generated diverse picture slides… to sustain interest and enhance knowledge acquisition." (S12).

Sub-theme 3.2: Developing Technical Proficiency through Experience

Participants shifted from discomfort to confidence through practice and experimentation with Zoom tools. "Learning about breakout rooms presented a challenge… but it provided an opportunity for substantial learning." (S4), "Using the whiteboard during the group's rule-setting process enhanced engagement." (S10). Digital proficiency became intertwined with emotional presence and group facilitation.
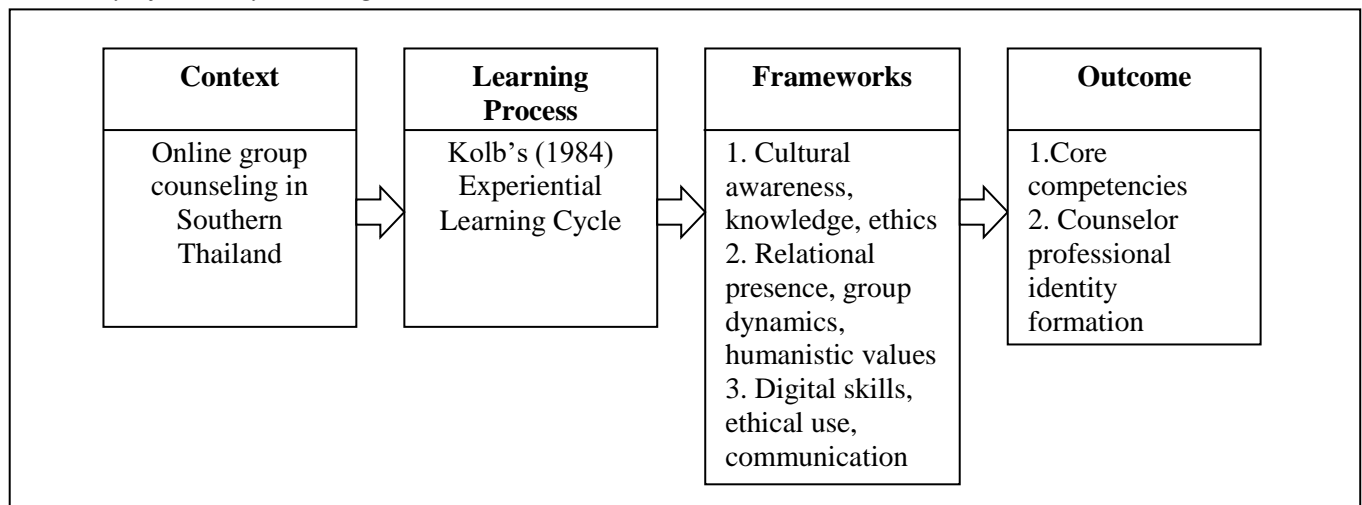
Sub-theme 3.3: Designing Group Processes for Safety and Participation

Participants intentionally designed online sessions to meet both emotional and cognitive needs, thereby creating a sense of psychological safety and trust. "The group leader sounded more understanding than disappointed… Eventually, everyone felt comfortable enough to turn on their cameras." (S2), "When video clips did not hold their attention, I switched to simpler questions or hands-on activities… letting them create their media helped." (S4).

This adaptability reflects an integration of digital literacy with pedagogical and ethical sensitivity.

From the findings, experiential learning facilitated the simultaneous development of three key competencies: cross-cultural counseling, humanistic practice in online group settings, and digital counseling fluency, which evolved in close relation to one another rather than as distinct domains. This synthesis highlights that growth in one area often reinforced development in the others, as cultural sensitivity deepened humanistic engagement, and digital fluency created new opportunities for relational presence and ethical practice. The results, therefore, underscore the importance of viewing professional learning as an integrated and dynamic process.

This integrated growth emphasizes the value of relational presence, cultural responsiveness, and humanistic engagement, with digital tools functioning not as barriers but as resources that enhance meaningful connection. Consistent with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle of action and reflection, the findings emphasize the necessity for counselor training programs, particularly in Southern Thailand where cultural and religious diversity intersects with limited access to mental health services, to incorporate experiential, multicultural, and digital learning cohesively.

Figure 2
Summary of the Key Findings.

Context	Learning Process	Frameworks	Outcome
Online group counseling in Southern Thailand	Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle	1. Cultural awareness, knowledge, ethics 2. Relational presence, group dynamics, humanistic values 3. Digital skills, ethical use, communication	1.Core competencies 2. Counselor professional identity formation

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion of Main Results

This study aimed to investigate how graduate students in counseling psychology come to develop professional competencies in cross-cultural counseling, online group counseling, and digital counseling through experiential learning. Specifically, it examined their experiences as group leaders facilitating online counseling sessions, particularly within the multicultural and religious context of Thailand's southern border provinces.

The study demonstrated how students navigated unfamiliar contexts, adapted to virtual formats, and developed into reflective practitioners. Three interrelated competencies emerged, shaped by the demands of the practicum and the development of professional identity.

Experiential Learning as a Transformative Process

The findings strongly support Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, highlighting how students moved through the stages of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. However, these stages did not unfold in a strictly linear fashion. Instead, students described a recursive, often non-linear process in which emotional engagement and group facilitation challenges drove learning.

Experiential learning extended beyond techniques or protocols; it was relational and reflexive, requiring students to examine their assumptions, tolerate ambiguity, and develop a professional presence that extended beyond classroom instruction.

These findings echo the view of Campbell and Babb (2023, p. 78), who framed experiential learning as *signature pedagogy* in counselor education. This approach supports learner self-efficacy and identity formation while complementing curricular content (Campbell & Babb, 2023). In this space, theory, emotion, and self-awareness converge to shape professional identity and skill development (Campbell & Babb, 2023, p. 90).

Cross-Cultural Counseling Competency: A Lived and Embodied Understanding

These findings align with previous work by Donley (2018), who emphasized that cultural competence develops through profound, affective experiences, rather than through rote learning. They also support Ponterotto and Grieger's (2008) call for reflective engagement as an ethical imperative, reinforcing that empathy and cultural responsiveness are inextricably linked to behavioral insight.

Participants' development of cross-cultural counseling competency did not arise from abstract instruction but from immersive, dialogical engagement with cultural differences. Prior research has emphasized that experiential and relational encounters, rather than solely didactic methods, are central to cultivating multicultural competence in counselor education (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Houseknecht & Swank, 2019). In the present study, interactions with clients from southern Thailand, many of whom held distinct religious, linguistic, and social identities, invited students into unfamiliar relational spaces. These moments challenged their cultural knowledge and raised critical questions about presence and listening across differences, echoing findings that show that experiential learning fosters professional identity and intercultural sensitivity (Campbell & Babb, 2023; Falgares et al., 2017).

Students described a "turning inward" that helped them examine biases and values. Such reflective self-awareness resonates with the role of reflexivity in research, where engaging in critical reflection fosters a deeper understanding of self and one's positionality (Walker et al., 2013). This reflective process is widely recognized as central to multicultural counseling competence, as it enables practitioners to critically examine their cultural assumptions and engage more authentically with clients (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Nogueiras et al., 2018). Students noted that cultural differences fostered empathy and strengthened their professional identity, consistent with research on the role of intercultural encounters in promoting empathy and growth (Campbell & Babb, 2023; Falgares et al., 2017).

Rather than viewing cultural responsiveness as a set of fixed strategies, participants described it as a felt way of relating, a shift in perspective cultivated through lived experience. Their engagement went beyond tolerance or accommodation; it reflected an openness to being changed by the encounter. In this way, the findings align with Sullivan-Detheridge et al. (2024), who argue that cultural competence is inseparable from empathy, presence, and the willingness to be impacted by another's world.

Online Group Counseling Competency: Human Connection in Virtual Space

Another central theme was the development of online group counseling competency, particularly through the integration of humanistic values into virtual practice. Students described a gradual shift from relying on theoretical models to embodying core attitudes such as empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard within the unique constraints of digital space.

Without physical presence, participants reported feeling an increased responsibility to create emotional warmth and psychological safety. They drew heavily on person-centered theory and group facilitation models (Trotzer, 2006) to guide their work; however, what stood out was how they effectively translated these principles into action. For instance, students emphasized the importance of active listening, affirming language, and intentional self-disclosure to build trust and group cohesion.

A portrait of counselors learning to "show up" in virtual space emerged, not solely through the application of appropriate techniques, but by cultivating a deep attunement to the group's emotional needs. The findings closely align with those of Meyers-Ellett et al. (2024), who emphasize the relational dimensions of counselor development and the significance of presence, even when mediated by screens. Like the participants in their study, those in the present research developed a nuanced understanding of group dynamics by engaging in and reflecting on the group process (Meyers-Ellett et al., 2024, p. 11).

A portrait of counselors learning to *show up* in virtual space emerged not solely through the application of appropriate techniques, but by cultivating a deep attunement to the group's emotional needs. These findings closely align with those of Meyers-Ellett et al. (2024), who emphasized the relational dimensions of counselor development. Like the participants in their study, those in the present research developed a nuanced understanding of group dynamics by engaging in and reflecting on the group process (Meyers-Ellett et al., 2024).

Students also demonstrated a capacity to adapt theory creatively, designing group activities that reflected the structure of established models and the cultural realities of their group members. In doing so, they deepened their understanding of theory and learned to make it their own.

Digital counseling competency: Integrating Technology with Therapeutic Identity

Participants' growth in digital counseling competency went beyond acquiring technical skills. While many entered the practicum with limited familiarity with online platforms like Zoom, they gradually developed a more integrated relationship with technology, learning to use it functionally and relationally. They described moments of discovery in which tools like breakout rooms, whiteboards, and multimedia became extensions of their therapeutic identity. Through emojis, shared imagery, and music, visual communication was utilized to express emotions, foster engagement, and deepen group connections. These tools served as bridges to presence rather than as distractions. Importantly, students also learned to design sessions with intention, using digital media to deliver content and invite participation, reflection, and emotional resonance. In this sense, they were not only learning how to use technology but also how to humanize it. These insights align with the argument by Spante et al. (2018) that digital counseling competency in higher education must include both technical and interpersonal fluency. Similarly, the findings reflect the call by Julius et al. (2020) for more ethically grounded and creative uses of technology in counseling.

Ethical Ambiguity and the Limits of Experience

While experiential learning offered powerful growth opportunities, participants also encountered its limitations, particularly in situations involving ethical ambiguity. Some students expressed uncertainty when navigating dilemmas related to confidentiality, cultural norms, and role clarity in digital spaces. Participants sometimes felt unequipped to make sound decisions without adequate supervision or structured ethical guidance. These challenges suggest that experiential learning, while essential, must be supported by intentional pedagogy that fosters critical thinking, ethical reflection, and value clarification. As Donley (2018) and Julius et al. (2020) emphasized, ethical competence is not an automatic outcome of experience; it must be cultivated through guided inquiry and feedback.

Humanistic Experiential Learning and the Emergence of the Reflective Practitioner

From a behavioral science perspective, the findings support embedding experiential, multicultural, and digital learning in training, supervision, and curricula. Such integration prepares students not only with technical competencies but also with the reflective and relational capacities needed for professional identity formation. Perhaps the most significant insight from this study is that humanistic experiential learning, when situated in culturally rich, digitally mediated counseling contexts, has the potential to foster not only skill acquisition but also the formation of a reflective professional identity. Participants did not merely learn how to counsel; they learned how to be counselors. This process was shaped by moments of vulnerability, connection, and sustained self-inquiry. Students reflected on their actions, feelings, and values with openness and humility. Through these reflections, they came to understand counseling as a relational art that requires attunement, humility, and an ongoing willingness to learn and grow. These findings resonate with phenomenological perspectives that view learning as co-constructed through lived encounters (Lowell & Tagare, 2023). They also affirm the importance of reflexivity as a cornerstone of counselor development (Ide & Beddoe, 2023; Taylor, 2020), particularly in an era where technology, culture, and ethics intersect increasingly complexly.

This study advances the understanding of how counseling students develop core competencies within today's complex, culturally diverse educational contexts (Sakız & Jencius, 2024). It underscores the power of phenomenological inquiry in revealing how lived experiences, identity, and systemic factors shape counselor development, particularly among marginalized groups (Peterson & Brooks, 2024). This highlights the importance of culturally grounded, experiential learning, alongside the growing shift toward digitally integrated models in higher education (Alenezi, 2023). Ultimately, professional growth emerges not only from skill acquisition but also from the process of learning to counsel and understand oneself. This study makes a unique contribution as the first in Thailand to demonstrate how experiential learning can simultaneously cultivate cross-cultural, humanistic online group, and digital counseling competencies. This contribution is particularly significant in the multicultural and religious context of the southern provinces.

Limitations

This study explored the lived experiences of counseling psychology graduate students during an online group counseling practicum. While appropriate for a phenomenological approach, this focus limits the perspective to a single stakeholder group. The exclusion of supervisors and clients reduced contextual depth and restricted interpretive triangulation. The sample included only graduate counseling students and excluded Muslim participants, which limits the study's representativeness and transferability. Although interdisciplinary frameworks enriched conceptual analysis, they introduced epistemological inconsistencies that may have affected thematic clarity. Data were collected shortly after the practicum, capturing early-stage reflections. Without longitudinal follow-up, the long-term development of competencies, such as ethical practice and theoretical integration, remains uncertain. Future research should include Muslim participants, multiple stakeholder perspectives (supervisors and clients), and longitudinal or mixed-method designs to assess the sustainability and broader applicability of competency development.

Implications for Behavioral Science

This study highlights how experiential learning, multicultural sensitivity, and digital counseling competency intersect in shaping counselor identity, particularly in online group counseling contexts. Rather than isolated skill acquisition, counselor development emerges as a reflective, relational process influenced by cultural awareness, ethical engagement, and technological fluency.

The study addresses a theoretical gap by demonstrating how learning unfolds within authentic, digitally mediated encounters. It also underscores the importance of presence, empathy, and reflexivity in diverse settings. These findings suggest that counselor education should integrate virtual practicum experiences, culturally responsive training, and digital ethics to meet evolving professional demands. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of these integrated models, with implications for curriculum design, policy, and accreditation standards in behavioral science.

Conclusion

This study explored how graduate students in counseling psychology develop cross-cultural, online group, and digital counseling competencies through experiential learning in virtual practicum settings. Grounded in Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), the cross-cultural counseling competency (CCCC) model (Sue et al., 1992), and a digital counseling competency framework developed as part of this study, the findings suggest that counselor development encompasses not only technical proficiency but also relational, ethical, and culturally responsive dimensions. These dimensions are shaped through ongoing engagement in digital environments. As the first study of its kind in Thailand, it highlights the potential of integrated experiential learning to foster comprehensive counseling competencies within multicultural and religiously diverse contexts. The findings contribute to the advancement of culturally responsive and digitally adaptive training models in the behavioral sciences.

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