

VALIDATION OF ONLINE EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY TO REDUCE
DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND STRESS SYMPTOMS

NURSYUHADA BINTI SULAIMAN

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Philosophy

School of Biomedical Engineering and Health Sciences
Faculty of Engineering
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

MARCH 2022

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my late father, who taught me that the best kind of knowledge to have is that which is learned for its own sake. It is also dedicated to my mother, who taught me that even the largest task can be accomplished if it is done one step at a time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the process of preparing this thesis, I was in contact with many people, researchers, academicians, and practitioners in equine field. They have contributed for a better understanding and thoughts. In particular, I want to express my sincere appreciation to my main thesis supervisor, Dr Nurwina Akmal binti Anuar for her invaluable advice, continuous support, encouragement, critics and friendship. My deepest thanks for her also as giving me constant information and invaluable supervision during my hardest time to writing. I am also very thankful to my co-supervisor Dr Wan Mohd Azam bin Wan Mohd Yunus for his guidance, advices and motivation. Without their continued support and interest, this thesis would not have been the same as presented here.

I am also indebted to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) for funding my master study. Nadi Equestrian UTM Skudai also deserve special thanks for their permission to run my data collection activities at their place.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow postgraduate friend, Nur Nadia Asyikin, Nursahida, and Nurshafitrah, for all the help they had given and the outpouring of support over the years of my study. My sincere appreciation also extends to my family and my loved ones who have provided assistance at various occasions, without them I would not have made it through to finish my research study.

ABSTRACT

Traditional equine-assisted therapy has provided service face-to-face due to its experiential approach with horses. However, in order to conduct traditional equine-assisted therapy it gave implication on high costs of therapy and effect of allergies on patients to animal. Hence, the online therapy has great promises on reduce risk of allergies and costs of delivering mental health care like depression, anxiety and stress. This study aims to design an online equine-assisted therapy and evaluate its effect in reducing depression, anxiety and stress symptoms. This study also underpinned theory of functional equivalence through an imagery technique to deliver the online equine-assisted therapy treatment and examined the feasibility of online equine-assisted therapy. Research support the claim that imagery produced same neural action as well as actual physical approaches and treats the mental health problem. The ADDIE Model was applied in designing the online equine-assisted therapy. In order to evaluate the online equine-assisted therapy in reducing the symptoms, traditional equine-assisted therapy and relaxation therapy were compared based on the participant's DASS-21 score and System Usability Scale (SUS) questionnaire. A sample of fifty participants aged ranging 18 to 54 years old were recruited voluntarily and undergoes all the treatments. The Friedman Test and Wilcoxon Signed Test was selected to analyze the differences within and between groups, respectively. It was found that depression ($p = 0.373$) and anxiety ($p = 0.150$) symptoms were no significantly difference among the three treatments. Therefore, compare to the reduction of stress ($p = 0.015$) symptoms, there are significant different among the three treatments. However, a statistically non-significant result in Wilcoxon Signed Test between online and traditional treatments was found in reducing depression, anxiety and stress. The mean score result for feasibility shows that the online equine-assisted therapy can be accepted and categorized as grade B with good rating. In conclusion, this study shows potential of online equine-assisted therapy in mental health care as it has same effect as traditional equine-assisted therapy. This study suggests to further investigate the effectiveness of online equine therapy in future using the pre and post research method.

ABSTRAK

Terapi bantuan kuda tradisional telah menyediakan perkhidmatan secara fizikal melalui pendekatan pengalaman dengan kuda. Walaubagaimanapun, untuk menjalankan terapi bantuan kuda, ia menyebabkan implikasi kos yang tinggi selain memberi kesan alergi pesakit terhadap haiwan. Justeru, terapi dalam talian dapat mengurangkan risiko alahan dan kos bagi merawat kesihatan mental seperti kemurungan, kebimbangan dan tekanan. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mereka bentuk terapi bantuan kuda dalam talian dan menilai kesan terapi dalam mengurangkan gejala kemurungan, kebimbangan dan tekanan. Kajian ini juga menyokong teori kesetaraan fungsi melalui teknik imejan untuk menyampaikan rawatan terapi bantuan kuda dalam talian dan mengkaji kebolehlaksanaan terapi bantuan kuda dalam talian. Berdasarkan hasil kajian yang lepas, imejan menghasilkan tindakbalas saraf sama seperti pendekatan fizikal yang sebenar dan dapat merawat masalah kesihatan mental. Terapi bantuan kuda direka bentuk melalui model ADDIE. Kajian ini juga menilai perbezaan antara terapi bantuan kuda dalam talian, terapi bantuan kuda tradisional dan terapi relaksasi berdasarkan skor keputusan DASS-21 responden dan soal selidik System Usability Scale (SUS). Seramai lima puluh orang responden dalam lingkungan umur 18 hingga 54 tahun telah diambil secara sukarela dan menjalani semua jenis rawatan. Ujian Friedman dan Ujian Wilcoxon Signed telah dipilih untuk menganalisis perbezaan simptom dalam dan antara jenis rawatan. Menurut hasil kajian, didapati bahawa simptom kemurungan ($p = 0.373$) dan kebimbangan ($p = 0.150$) tidak mempunyai perbezaan yang signifikan antara tiga jenis rawatan. Manakala, jika dibandingkan dengan pengurangan simptom tekanan ($p = 0.015$), terdapat perbezaan yang ketara antara tiga jenis rawatan. Walau bagaimanapun, keputusan yang tidak signifikan secara statistik dalam Ujian Wilcoxon Signed antara rawatan dalam talian dan tradisional didapati dalam mengurangkan kemurungan, kebimbangan dan tekanan. Keputusan skor min untuk kebolehlaksanaan menunjukkan bahawa terapi bantuan kuda dalam talian boleh diterima dan dikategorikan sebagai gred B dengan penarafan yang baik. Kesimpulannya, kajian ini menunjukkan potensi terapi bantuan kuda dalam talian dalam penjagaan kesihatan mental kerana ia mempunyai kesan yang sama seperti terapi bantuan kuda tradisional. Kajian akan datang boleh diperluaskan kepada penyelidikan

berkaitan keberkesanan terapi kuda dalam talian pada masa hadapan dengan menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan pra dan pasca.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UTM	-	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
DASS	-	Depression Anxiety Stress Scale
SUS	-	System Usability Scale
COVID-19	-	Coronavirus Disease
M	-	Mean
SD	-	Standard Deviation
N	-	Number
<i>p</i>	-	P Value
IQR	-	interquartile range

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis opens with the background of the study and further describes the current issues related to self-help intervention in online therapy, gaps on equine-assisted therapy and theory of functional equivalence in imagery techniques. This is followed by research objectives, research questions, hypothesis of the study, scope of study, significance of study, conceptual framework and operational definitions used in the study. The chapter also concludes with the organization of study.

1.2 Research Background

Anxiety, depression, and stress affect many individuals at some point of lives. People suffering from depression, anxiety, and stress would not be open to the society and would remain quiet about their aggravation. Symptom of depression, anxiety and stress could be worst if not curable. It is also related to the brain and emotion significantly. They are also having direct symptoms caused by the chemical changes in the brain. They would showed sign of mood swings, introverted personality, overreacted in some situations and isolate themselves (Horwitz, 2010). Anxiety could be said as feeling of fear or nervousness. It can evoke particular response in the body, for example, fast heartbeat, sweating, and hard to breath. Hence, depression is more than just a low mood. It is a serious condition involved on both physical and psychological. Similarly, stress is the body's way reacting to any kind of demand or threat. When danger is sensed whether real or imagined, the body defenses begin to

work rapidly, automatically known as the fight and flight response or “stress response”.

Depression and anxiety symptoms keep on rising in pandemic situations among Malaysian populations (Marzo et al., 2021). Stress also has been found in high level on university students because current situations has changed dramatically and they cannot attend physical classes (Sundarassen et al., 2020). The student need to face challenges in online classes in terms of poor internet connection. It is particularly shocking to see that some students took 6-8 hours of daily routine lessons on their mobile phone, contributing to unmanageable stress and health concerns (Sundarassen et al., 2020). When individuals had diagnoses having a depression, anxiety, and stress, they could be effectively treated by using medications (Cuijpers et al., 2014). However, after completing the treatment course by taken medication routine, it would cause to high probability of recurrence (Frazier et al., 2016) and some studies has found other psychological therapies are available (Shinohara et al., 2013). Of these, equine-assisted therapy is the most widely researched and equine assisted therapy is recognized in psychological and physical treatment for depression, anxiety, and stress in terms of unprejudiced from the animal (Ernst, 2012).

Equine-assisted therapy is growing popularity due to its experiential therapy. Several studies have shown equine-assisted therapy can benefit for all people ages. The contribution of horse in therapy can be used in variety of psychological issue including, overcome anxiety, release the depressed feeling (Todd, 2020), develop trust, improve self-confidence (Burgon, 2011) and stress reduction (Earles et al., 2015). However, in some point of animal therapy, safety is the biggest concern. In order to minimize the risk and maximize the benefit of animal therapy like horses, new intervention is created with combine of theory equine-assisted therapy and functional equivalence in imagery techniques. Imagery techniques can be thought of as a form guided meditation. Compare to other form of meditation, imagery could be one of the applicable effect to assist people discover ways to detach themselves from their moments to moments fixation on the contents of minds with various of sensation and

thoughts streaming through mind. The practice of imagery techniques could help the reduction of depression, anxiety and stress symptoms. Hence, intervention using imagery as suggested as effective tools for relief of depression, anxiety (Apóstolo & Kolcaba, 2009), and stress symptoms (Lee et al., 2018).

The idea of combining equine-assisted therapy and functional equivalence theory in imagery techniques were based on the theory achieved by imagery-focused approaches (Blackwell, 2021). Previous study in guided imagery and visualization shown positive effect in treating depression (Weßlau & Steil, 2014). Additionally, there also reported that one week daily guided imagery could reduce depressive symptoms and less anxiety among people with cancer. Self-help online therapy was found to be vary in psychological therapy in terms of cost-effective, reduce time burden with visiting clinic and stigma (Bennett et al., 2019). Delivering the therapy using online could address an effective treatment to people with symptoms. However, it is large degree unclear how online self-help therapy intervention in equine assisted therapy should be applied.

Hence, this study offers an online equine-assisted therapy for people who seek treatment early symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. The online equine-assisted therapy is a self-help intervention (Anderson, Annet, Bischoff, & Boulanger, 2010) that used the combination of imagery techniques (McEwan, Elander, & Gilbert, 2018) and equine-assisted therapy as a tool (McConnell, 2010) to deliver the treatment. Anderson et al. (2010) claimed this method has been found to effective in online based on previous studies and for this study used the content of equine-assisted therapy in grounded activity that have been proved effective in physically and psychologically based on several studies (Chakales, Locklear, & Wharton, 2020) and has also has been proved its effect in reducing the depressive, anxious and stressed symptoms.

1.3 Problem Statement

Number of people have diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and stress continue to growth rapidly. Approximately, 2.3 million people in Malaysia have been reported to diagnose with mental illness (Mukhtar & PS Oei, 2011). According to the National Health Morbidity Survey from 2017, one out of every five teens suffers from depression, while two out of every five suffer from anxiety. Thus, current pandemic situation in 2021, the statistics increased of those who suffer from mental health problem. The major barrier for people not seek for early treatment is caused by cost. Some are unable to afford for the early treatment. The high cost of therapy is also the reason that contributes to the late treatment. Lazar (2014) reported that the expense of healthcare was rising, and many individuals were unable to afford treatment.

According to McDonald, Eccles, Fallahkhair and Critchley (2020) stated that psychotherapy treatment is a positively expensive service, so it will take about 6-20 hours in sessions and cause limited access to those who can afford the treatment. The reason people do not afford the high cost of therapy is because of living in low income (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). It has been proved that living on low-income households leads to having poor health and increased mental health problems (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). Studies from Wadsworth and Achenbach (2005) reported that children with high economic status parents have low rates of mental health need compared with children with low economic status parents. It is important to note that the family income and child well-being health were related. However, many children, teenagers, and adolescents experienced the symptoms of poor mental, but does not seek help and result in mental ill-health (Patel, Flisher, Nikapota, & Malhotra, 2008). With current cuts in the healthcare budget, it would be preferable to cut expenses while maintaining or improving the quality of care.

Kirschner, Goetzl, and Curtin (2020) reported that the stigmatization of mental health could have occurred among the young and adolescent generations. Stigmatization refers to negative beliefs that make individuals fear, avoid, reject and discriminate towards people with mental health problems (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). The previous study by Knaak, Mantler, and Szeto (2017) reported that stigma caused a delay in diagnosis and treatment, and resulted in poor treatment prognosis in the worst condition. Another study from Van Brakel (2006) claimed that stigma has indirect but strongly negative implications for public health efforts to fight the disease. Thus, an individual with mental health problems would be experience isolation and had employment discrimination than people without mental health problems.

Some research has found individuals who feel embarrassed to meet the professional could be a barrier in mental health settings (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010). Depressed, anxious, and stressed people may believe that others will view and respond negatively to them if they seek help, resulting in isolating themselves and feeling shame. Such stigmatizations' view gave an impact on the meet with professionals and help-seeking because individuals do not want to show their weakness to other people (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). Lack of resilience to face to face with psychologists limited to move and the high cost of treatment may cause untreated depression problems have been found the main reason that many of them still untreated lack knowledge and do not have a way where to get professional care (Auerbach, Mortier, Bruffaerts, et al. 2018).

There is various treatment could be used to help decrease depression, anxiety and stress. Interestingly, research suggests include imagery technique in online therapy could give the state of mind and body most conducive to healing (Nguyen & Brymer, 2018). Guided imagery is one of the relaxation techniques and can be facilitated by a variety of health professional or learned via self-help, as well as aid in the reduction of depression, anxiety and stress (Apóstolo & Kolcaba, 2009). Guided imagery has been slowly acknowledged in the world of therapy, however, the fundamental of guided imagery technique could help people acquire a state of psychological and

physical ease through muscular relaxation and positive mental images as well as release the burden feelings that provoked by symptoms (Apóstolo & Kolcaba, 2009). In guided imagery technique, positive images and positive affective experience can prevent the rumination spiral of depression, anxiety, and stress (Jyoti, 2021). The common denominator in imagery is using thought and its effect on body functions. Previous research suggests that guided imagery have powerful psychological strategy that enhance a person's coping skill (Omar-Fauzee et al., 2009). Hence, this present study introduced the method of online self-help therapy in imagery techniques to minimize the cost of therapy by decreasing the number of face-to-face sessions and offer people a better quality of life in reducing the early symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.

Although online therapy has been found to work for some, other studies show that it is often not the best solution. Online therapy programs have relied on self-help principles and deliver structured therapy content, it is also including intervention that is supported electronically (Barak et al., 2009). Previous study in online counselling, there was found that they had experiencing difficulty on interaction and restricted capacity to receive response from the client (Wong et al., 2018). Thus, this study was using self-help intervention followed by people independently and no access with therapist. Providing a prevention program online allows for a cost effective way to deliver a treatment. This type of therapy could give benefit for people in terms of prevention in mental health problem. Based on previous studies, there was found that, resources for counselling centre are limited and a lack of resources to meet increasing service demands (Levin et al., 2016). It is also found that Asians are commonly not as comfortable and acknowledged with online therapy intervention compared to the Westerns (Haroz et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018). However, this study would have suggested a variety of solution are likely needed to convey the challenge of mental health problem.

Research has found and still is finding animal-based therapy that treats the mental health problem using equine other than an animal (Dawson, 2014). Equine-assisted therapy and equine activity intervention involving the horse has been used as a therapeutic tool to help people improve their depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms (Todd, 2020) nevertheless, there was a lack of theoretical framework on equine-assisted therapy studies (Geist, 2011). Boyd (2013) noted the psychological problems like depression, anxiety and stress can be expressed in horse-human interaction. The expenditure on equine therapy continues to rise and people cannot afford it (Simmons, 2011). There is strong evidence of animal-human interaction for the treatment (Mueller, Gee, & Bures, 2018), however, there are limited resources to go to equine therapy physically (White-Lewis, 2020). It was found there is still limited evidence of animal-human interaction therapy introduced as online therapy.

This present study is a largely new intervention on online equine-assisted therapy using functional equivalence imagery techniques to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. However, the difference between traditional therapy (physical equine-assisted therapy) and online therapy was noted, nevertheless replacing the clinical treatment was not the focus of this study, but instead, emphasized the new intervention of online equine-assisted therapy using imagery techniques have the same effects as experiential physical horse approaches.

1.4 Research Objectives

Followings are the objectives proposed for this study:

- a) To design online equine-assisted therapy to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms.
- b) To compare between online equine-assisted therapy, traditional equine-assisted therapy and relaxation therapy.

- c) To evaluate the feasibility of online equine-assisted therapy.

1.5 Research Question

To achieve the above research objectives, the following research questions (RQ) are used.

Objective 1: To design online equine-assisted therapy to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms.

RQ1. What are the components needed to develop online equine-assisted therapy to reduce the symptoms?

Objective 2: To compare between online equine-assisted therapy and traditional equine-assisted therapy.

RQ2. Is there any difference comparing between traditional therapy and online therapy?

Objective 3: To evaluate the feasibility of online equine-assisted therapy.

RQ3. How would the user have perceived and experienced with virtual equine activities?

1.6 Hypothesis

The following are the hypothesis of this research:

1. Alternative hypothesis (Ha): There is significant difference in depression, anxiety, and stress between online therapy, traditional therapy and relaxation therapy.
2. Null hypothesis (Ho): There is no significant difference in depression, anxiety, and stress between online therapy, traditional therapy and relaxation therapy.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

A major concept of this study is focused on design and determine the differences between online and traditional equine-assisted therapy. The online equine assisted therapy would be designed using an instructional model called ADDIE. The conceptual paradigm shows the process of difference of online therapy, traditional equine-assisted therapy and relaxation therapy in regard to reducing depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. The participants were given a posttest experiment in traditional and online equine-assisted therapy, hence the relaxation therapy would be reacting as control group. The participants were received three different treatments which in traditional and online therapy. From the result of design and test the effect between online and traditional therapy, this study was able to determine the effect of traditional equine-assisted therapy that has same effect as online therapy.

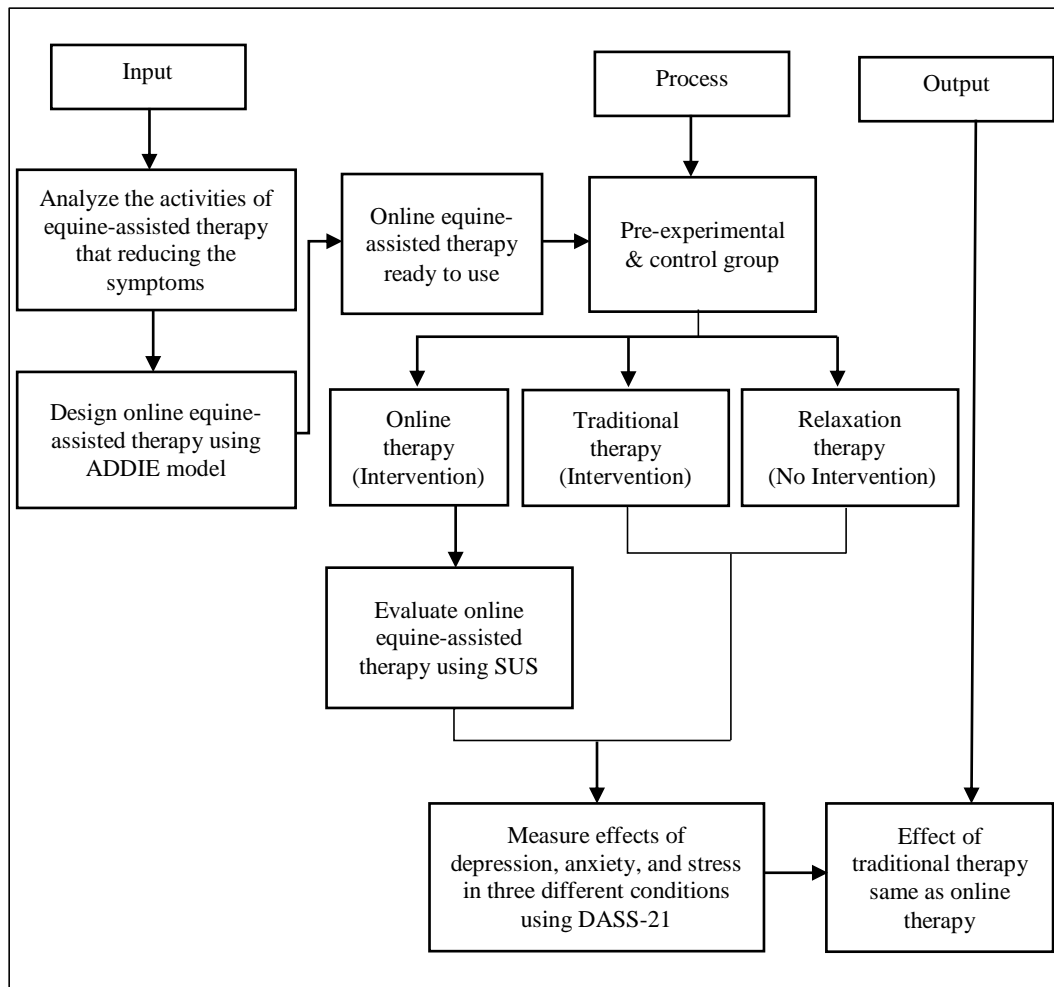


Figure 1.1 Conceptual framework of online equine-assisted therapy.

1.8 Significant of the Study

The outbreak Covid-19 pandemic forced many people to stay-at-home. As social distancing was remaining on our routine live, it is affect various school, universities, even in hospitals. These circumstances make us realize the scenario planning is an urgent to taking care of our mental health. There was various alternative to prevent mental health problem, one of the method is using online medium. This study creates and design the online equine-assisted therapy for people all ages in needs for prevention in mental health problem. The children, a teenager and older can used this medium to treat depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms in cost-effective. Online

equine-assisted therapy is easily accessible and even could be reach to rural and remote area. It is considered to be cheaper mode of therapy in terms of lower of transportation, accommodation and the cost of meeting professional therapy. This new intervention of online equine-assisted therapy required self-help therapy without assist by therapist or professional, hence, the content of the online therapy had been determining by expertise and evidence from previous study in effectiveness of the equine therapy and functional equivalence imagery techniques in reducing depression, anxiety, and stress. This study would be a significant endeavor in engaging people in prevention. The stigma and problem of depression, anxiety, and stress background justify the need for more effective, life-changing approaches to horse activities. It also gives the justification for the study in terms of its contribution to theory and practice in online. Moreover, this study will be helpful to the low-income family in practicing the equine-assisted therapy in their daily lives. And importantly, the online equine-assisted therapy is emphasized to reduce the burden of mental health problems and provide quality life.

1.9 Scope of the Study

The scope of this study was focusing on the use of technology and developing the online therapy related to animal-human intervention to treat depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms by using horse grounded activity. Individuals who had depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms probably did not know they had suffered the symptoms and the intervention of online equine-assisted therapy may help the users who need self-help. The online equine-assisted therapy may visualize the benefits of traditional therapy (physical equine-assisted therapy) and the evidence of the equine activities would be discussed in literature. The online equine-assisted therapy program may be good for conveying ideas, information and learning how to overcome depression, anxiety, and stress in convenient ways. It is thought that the online treatment may improve and provide a good quality of life for the users. Online equine-assisted therapy would be designed for the public without any access to therapist help and only use the internet as a medium to prevent depression, anxiety, and stress

symptoms. This study aimed to determine a better understanding of equine-assisted therapy in the online method to overcome the stigma in mental health settings. The design of online equine-assisted therapy would be based on the functional equivalence theory through the imagery technique following the ADDIE Model and the feasibility of online equine-assisted therapy would be tested in different conditions (i.e.: traditional, online & relaxation) as well to investigate the outcome of the intervention.

1.10 Definition of terms

1.10.1 Equine-Assisted Therapy

Experiential mental health treatment that involves a person in therapy interacting with horse. Equine-assisted therapy modules was designed to make horse accessible for people with disabilities.

1.10.2 Symptoms

A physical or mental feature that thought to indicate a condition of disease, particularly such a feature that is apparent to the patient.

1.10.3 Depression

Depression is a mental disorder marked by continuous sensation of sadness and a lack of interest. It effects how people think, feel, and act, as well as causing emotional and physical issues.

1.10.4 Anxiety

Anxiety is a tense feeling, worried thoughts and bodily changes such as increased blood pressure.

1.10.5 Stress

Stress is the feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to deal with mental or emotional pressure. In medicine, the body's reaction to physical, mental, or emotional pressure. It is also causes of chemical changes in the body such as blood pressure, heart rate, and blood sugar levels.

1.10.6 Imagery

Cognitive generation of sensory input from the five senses, individually or collectively, which is recalled from experience or self-generated in a nonexperience form.

1.10.7 Functional Equivalence

Functional equivalence is the process, when the translator grasps a notion in the source language and discover a technique to express the same concept in the target language in a way that conveys the same meaning and purpose as the original.

1.10.8 Self-help Online Therapy

Self-help online therapy are psychological therapies that can do with own time to help people using internet medium, such as website, and application in smartphone.

1.10.9 ADDIE Model

ADDIE is a learning model used by instructional designers and training developers to create effective learning experiences

1.11 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis shows how online therapy could help individual to reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress underlying functional equivalence in imagery. The organization of this thesis as follows. Chapter 2 introduces online equine therapy in detail. Firstly, describe and built online equine-assisted therapy based on evidence from previous study. Then list out the activity of traditional equine-assisted therapy in grounded which could be as parameter in online equine-assisted therapy program. In the last section in Chapter 2 is focusing on reviewing how functional equivalence imagery techniques could react as tools to deliver in online therapy.

Chapter 3 provides a flow design to build online equine assisted therapy based on ADDIE Model. Through ADDIE Model framework in online equine-assisted therapy, it would easily to manage and create the online module. Hence when online equine-assisted therapy was ready to use, it would be implemented to the participant in the study. The primary of online therapy feature in this study is functional equivalence. We conduct the study in experimental on three different conditions and investigate on how these conditions impact on reducing the symptoms. In Chapter 4, would be explained the findings of the data. The data was collected through validated and established questionnaires.

Chapter 5 highlighted the outcome of the study. We discussed an efficient how online equine-assisted therapy works on the symptoms. We show how our new intervention could be optional in a therapy program based on theoretical functional equivalence. Chapter 6 gives a summary of this thesis as well as discuss on the directions for future work. On the next page, would be contained the full description of all benchmark methodologies in the study.

1.12 Summary

The contextual of this study has been identified and scope of study also indicates how the research was conducted. This study was focused on designing online equine-assisted therapy program effect on depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. Furthermore, this study extends the existing literature on the theory of experiential equine assisted therapy and functional equivalence imagery treating depression, anxiety, and stress in online.

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