

## ONLINE TRAINING FOR PSYCHOTHERAPISTS IN ASIAN CONTEXTS: ADVANTAGES, CHALLENGES, AND EFFECTIVE FEATURES

Yu Takizawa<sup>a</sup>, Judith Murray<sup>b</sup>, Matthew Bambling<sup>c</sup>, Yuki Matsumoto<sup>d</sup>, Yuma Ishimoto<sup>e</sup>,  
Takahiro Yamane<sup>f</sup>, Sisira Edirippulige<sup>g</sup>

<sup>abcg</sup>University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

<sup>d</sup>Tokushima Bunri University, Tokushima, Japan

<sup>e</sup>Tottori University, Tottori, Japan

<sup>f</sup>Kobe University, Hyogo, Japan

Corresponding Email: [yu.takizawa@uqconnect.edu.au](mailto:yu.takizawa@uqconnect.edu.au)

### Abstract

Online education and training are an integral part of mainstream education and training for psychotherapists. There already exist a number of international studies examining the effectiveness, advantages, and challenges of online education for psychotherapists in the western context. However, with regard to Asian context, these studies remain limited. Thus, this present study investigated the cultural advantages, challenges, and effective features of online education among Japanese psychotherapists. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, wherein thematic analysis identified sets of themes related to the abovementioned factors of online education for Japanese psychotherapists. As per our findings, online education is suitable for Japanese psychotherapists as many of them have busy schedules, making it hard to attend face-to-face classes. Particularly, they value geographical flexibility, time and cost savings, and self-paced learning. Additionally, it should be highlighted that, compared with face-to-face education, the contents of online education should be carefully designed to actively enhance the quality of interaction and connection, stimulate interest, and promote engagement in tasks among Japanese psychotherapists.

**Keywords:** Asia, Japanese, learning, online education, psychotherapy

### 1. Introduction

Online education and training for psychotherapists have become an integral part of global education and training due to the cost and scaling advantages for educational providers (Snow et al., 2018). Online education involves synchronous and asynchronous learning or a combination of both. Synchronous online learning occurs in real time and involves various technologies, such as video conferencing, live chatting, and live-streamed lectures (Sheperis et al., 2020). In contrast, asynchronous online learning involves self-guided learning modules, pre-recorded video contents, virtual libraries, lecture notes, online discussion boards, or social media platforms (Haddock et al., 2020).

#### 1.1. Effective Features Of Online Psychotherapy Education

International studies support the effectiveness of online education for teaching clinical knowledge and skills related to a variety of psychotherapy approaches, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (Chu et al., 2017), functional analytic therapy (Maitland et al., 2016), and dialectical behavior

therapy (Dimeff et al., 2015). The consensus from such studies is that online psychotherapy education can be more or less effective than face-to-face education dependent on the technology, instructor, and learner characteristics (Snow et al., 2018). The reliability, quality, and medium richness of technology influence the learning experience. Therefore, the platform for online education should remain reliable to avoid technological issues (Selim, 2007). Qualities of the technological interface, such as ease of use and esthetics, influence the experience in online education (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Thus, an effective online education should enable medium-rich communication with various didactical elements, such as text, audio, and video messages (Haddock et al., 2020). Furthermore, indirect communication via text-based messaging is useful to make learners feel comfortable in disclosing opinions (Watson, 2012).

Attitude toward technology and teaching style are instructor characteristics that influence learning experience. Learners are likely to experience more positive outcomes when the instructor maintains a positive attitude toward online technologies (Selim, 2007). In an online learning environment, learners frequently lose a sense of connection due to the lack of classroom environment in which to interact with the instructor in person (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Such sense of connection is highly correlated with overall learning performance (Kuo et al., 2013). Therefore, the instructor should exhibit interactive teaching styles, thus encouraging interaction between the learners and instructor (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Moreover, the effectiveness of online education is influenced by learner characteristics, such as prior experience with online education, computer experience, technology literacy, and self-discipline (Snow et al., 2018). The risk of attrition from online education is increased by the absence of learner variables, such as satisfaction with online learning, sense of belonging to the learning community, and peer and family support (Selim, 2007). In this regard, many international studies identified the advantages of online education for psychotherapists.

### **1.2. Advantages of Online Education for Psychotherapists**

The key advantage of online education for psychotherapists is the geographical flexibility for attendance, which provides easy accessibility to education than face-to-face education (Sheperis et al., 2020). Learners can now participate in online education from the most suitable, convenient, and comfortable environment for learning, thus saving energy, time, and costs for traveling to physical educational venues (Bennett-Levy et al., 2012). Another key advantage is the autonomous, self-paced learning among psychotherapists (Watson, 2012). The structure and content of online courses are typically conducive to self-paced learning, which then enables them to work at their desired pace in developing a deeper understanding of learning contents (Snow et al., 2018). Although online education has unique benefits for psychotherapists, international studies identified the challenges of online education.

### **1.3. Challenges of Online Education for Psychotherapists**

The major challenge lies on the adaptation to technologies. Learners are required to be literate in using the Internet and computer (Mythilli, 2019). As such, the lack of literacy in technologies can lead to ineffective learning and dissatisfaction among learners. The lack of face-to-face interaction can also act as barriers in establishing connection with other learners and the instructor (van Deurzen et al., 2006). To overcome this, psychotherapists are required to adopt new methods of communication through online tools, such as emojis, to effectively interact with other learners and instructor (Snow et al., 2018). Self-discipline is another key challenge for online education. Learners are required to increase self-discipline for the effective management of tasks due to the increased self-learning nature of online education. Without self-discipline, psychotherapists experience delays in the progress of learning and drop out (Snow et al., 2018). Instructors that actively encourage online interactions are crucial for improving engagement among learners who struggle with self-discipline (Kebritchi et al., 2017). The limitation of this research in online

psychotherapy education is that studies examining the effectiveness, advantages, and challenges of online psychotherapy education are limited to the western context as online education for psychotherapists is still emerging in Japan and other Asian countries.

#### **1.4. Current State of Online Education and Training For Psychotherapists in Japan**

Major Japanese psychotherapist associations, such as the Japanese Society of Certified Clinical Psychologists, offered online professional development training in response to the COVID-19 breakout in 2020. The delay was partially caused by the conservative attitude toward online education among major Japanese accreditation bodies for psychotherapist qualification. The Foundation of the Japanese Certification Board for Clinical Psychologists (FJCBCP) accredited the attendance to online professional development workshops for accumulating professional development points required for the renewal of professional registration due to the COVID-19 outbreak, but only in 2020 (FJCBCP, 2020). For 2021, the FJCBCP intends to discontinue the accreditation of online education for the accumulation of professional development points. The conservative attitude toward online education among major accreditation bodies of psychotherapist qualification would be partly attributed to the lack of studies in Japan that demonstrate the cultural effectiveness, advantages, and challenges of online psychotherapist education for the learning of clinical skills and knowledge. Although research on the abovementioned factors in the western context is abundant, these findings do not necessarily apply to online education for Japanese psychotherapists due to socio-cultural differences.

#### **1.5. Cultural Differences between Japanese and Western Psychotherapists**

Adult Japanese learners tend to adopt a less autonomous learning style compared with adults from the west. Since childhood, Japanese adults are reinforced to become passive learners who strictly comply with guidance provided by teachers (Zakari et al., 2017). Moreover, Japanese adults tend to share collectivistic culture and value group harmony and cooperation with others compared with western adults (Ogihara, 2017). Due to such characteristics, Japanese psychotherapists may experience more difficulties with the self-learning nature of online education, which requires autonomy and self-discipline. In addition, Japanese psychotherapists may seek close emotional ties with the instructor and other learners and may perceive the absence of face-to-face interaction as more challenging than western psychotherapists.

Differences in lifestyles may influence perception toward online education. Japanese psychotherapists tend to work long hours and experience more difficulties in taking paid leaves compared with western psychotherapists (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019). Similar to the USA and the UK, most psychotherapists in Japan are female (around 75 %)(Japanese Society of Certified Clinical Psychologists, 2020). Japanese females tend to bear more responsibility for housework and children compared with Japanese males, unlike in western countries where housework and responsibility for children are more equally divided (Iwai, 2017). Thus, easy accessibility of online education may be especially appealing for Japanese psychotherapists.

To design and implement effective online education for the professional development of Japanese psychotherapists, understanding the culturally effective features of online education and specific advantages and challenges of online education for Japanese psychotherapists is important. However, studies examining the effective features, advantages, and challenges of online education among Japanese psychotherapists remain lacking.

## **2. Objectives of The Study**

Studies investigating the culturally effective features, advantages, and challenges of online education among Japanese psychotherapists are lacking despite the increased need for online

psychotherapist education. Thus, this present study aims to fill the research gap by investigating the perceived advantages and challenges of online psychotherapist education and the effective features of online education in promoting the learning of clinical knowledge and skills among Japanese psychotherapists.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

In total, 25 Japanese psychotherapists with various professional backgrounds and demographics were recruited using the snowballing technique to canvas a breadth of opinions (Table 1). Three groups were recruited, namely, (a) those from the contact list of the primary researcher, (b) those introduced by other psychotherapists, and (c) attendees of Japanese psychology conferences.

Table 1: Demographics of Interviewees

Variables(s)	N	Percentage
Gender		
Male	10	40 %
Female	15	60 %
Age (years)		
20–29	4	16 %
30–39	7	28 %
40–49	5	20 %
50–59	4	16 %
60–69	5	20 %
Profession		
Clinical psychologist	13	52 %
Industrial counselor	3	12 %
School teacher	3	12 %
Certified counselor	3	12 %
Clinical developmental psychologist	1	4 %
Psychologist	1	4 %
Nurse	1	4 %

#### 3.2. Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Queensland. Emails containing an information sheet regarding the objectives of the study and conditions for participation were sent to potential interviewees, who were then scheduled for an interview after agreeing to participate via return email. On the scheduled date, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews for 30–40 min after the interviewees signed a consent form. Interviews were conducted at pre-arranged locations conducive for interviews, such as the university room. Qualitative data were collected using a semi-structured interview format. The interview questions were developed to explore the perception of Japanese psychotherapists regarding the effective features, advantages, and challenges of online training for Japanese psychotherapists. The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated from Japanese into English by the primary researcher, who is a bilingual with experience in translating between Japanese and English. A co-author who is experienced in translating Japanese and English verified the accuracy of the transcription. Any disagreement was revised until consensus was achieved.

### 3.3. Data Analysis Methods

This present study employed thematic analysis, which complies with the guideline proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The primary researcher coded interview data after familiarization with the entire interview data. A set of candidate themes was identified for each interview topic by sorting different codes into potential themes and collating all extracts of relevant coded data within the identified themes. Subsequently, a set of candidate themes was refined by reading all collated extracts for each theme, analyzing coherent patterns, and verifying the validity of individual themes to reflect the meanings evident in the data set. Finally, after obtaining a satisfactory set of candidate themes for each interview topic, the researcher named each theme. The co-authors verified the appropriateness of the identified themes. Any disagreement was resolved until consensus was achieved.

### 4. Results

Ten (male: 4 and female: 6; age range: 20–40 years except for one aged 60 years) out of the 25 interviewees had prior experience in online education and training. Thematic analysis indicated a set of themes for each research topic (Table 2).

Table 2: Themes identified for interview topics

Interview topics	Themes identified	Illustrative quotes
Advantages of online education	Geographical flexibility	<i>Professional development workshops are only held in large cities. It is not easy for psychotherapists who live in regional areas to attend face-to-face workshops.</i>
	Time and cost savings	<i>Traveling to a face-to-face workshop can be expensive and take much time, especially if people are living in regional cities and need to bring along children. However, online education saves these costs and time for traveling to the workshop venue.</i>
	Self-paced learning	<i>Self-learning is useful. Japanese psychotherapists are very busy and need to flexibly accommodate learning into a busy lifestyle and the pace of face-to-face education is not suitable for everyone. Some Japanese people prefer fast-paced learning but others prefer learning at a slower pace.</i>
Challenges of online education	Unfamiliarity	<i>Younger psychotherapist already have some experience in online education during university. But, the most older ones do not have experience and many of them feel unfamiliar. Many of them are only accustomed to face-to-face education</i>
	Adaptation to new technologies	<i>Online workshop is more suitable for young people who are more familiar with new technologies. Elderly Japanese psychotherapists are usually not good at learning new technologies, and this would be a barrier for them to benefit from the online workshop.</i>



	A lack of face-to-face interaction	<i>It is more difficult to keep concentration for online workshop than face-to-face workshops as stimulation that comes from face-to-face interaction is not present. While the online workshop can involve active interactions, it may still be not as stimulating</i>
	Self-discipline	<i>The self-learning online modules are useful but the learners can easily postpone the dates of working on the online modules, and they may end up postponing until they end up not completing the online modules.</i>
Effective features of online education	Interactive content	<i>It would be difficult for Japanese psychotherapists to maintain concentration without having interactive material, such as discussing opinions with instructors and other learners during the online streaming.</i>
	Follow-up support	<i>It is not easy to apply knowledge and skills into practice through a one-time workshop. follow-up support plays a very important role in facilitating the application of the learned knowledge into practice.</i>
	Practical take-home material	<i>"Take-home materials from previous online workshop was particularly useful. Practical take-home materials are very important for applying the learned knowledge and skills into practice.</i>
	Short lectures and self-learning modules	<i>If Japanese psychotherapists are given a long self-learning module, they need to stop and restart because they cannot make a large mass of time every day. They can complete a small module during daily commuting.</i>
	Smartphone apps	<i>Japanese psychotherapists are becoming more familiar with smart devices than computer especially among younger generations. Older Japanese psychotherapists are also more familiarized with smartphones. It will be useful if psychotherapists can learn through smart devices.</i>

#### 4.1. Advantages of Online Education

Three major themes regarding the advantages of online education were identified, namely, *geographical flexibility, cost and time savings, and self-paced learning*. In terms of geographical flexibility, 15 interviewees reported that online learning is of key advantage particularly for those who practice in the regional areas in Japan as most face-to-face workshops for psychotherapists are organized in large cities. Furthermore, two interviewees shared that this is also favorable for psychotherapists with toddlers who often have difficulty in leaving home. On the other hand, 10 interviewees highlighted that online education is more cost- and time-efficient in terms of attending workshops, particularly benefiting those working full-time and female psychotherapists

who are often bombarded with work at home. Six interviewees reported that many Japanese psychotherapists value the flexibility of self-paced learning, especially those living in urban areas, who can only find time for learning during their daily commute to their workplace on trains and buses. Lastly, two interviewees reported that self-paced learning can improve the accuracy of understanding the learning content because it can be reviewed and relearned.

#### **4.2. Challenges of Online Education**

In terms of challenges, four major themes were observed, namely, *unfamiliarity*, *adaptation to new technologies*, *lack of face-to-face interaction*, and *self-discipline*. Fifteen interviewees reported that although the opportunities for online workshops are increasing, the majority of Japanese psychotherapists remain in the familiarization process with online education formats. Three interviewees cited that discussing opinions with other attendees online may become more difficult due to unfamiliarity with the format. Eight interviewees stated that adapting to new technologies can be a challenge, especially for elderly Japanese psychotherapists as online education requires certain levels of computer and Internet literacy, whereas younger Japanese psychotherapists are already digital natives. Ten interviewees reported that communicating with the instructor and other learners online is challenging for Japanese psychotherapists as they are mainly used to communicating via face-to-face interactions. Five interviewees emphasized that online education can be less stimulating for Japanese psychotherapists without face-to-face interaction, thus leading to boredom, dissatisfaction, and difficulties in concentration. Six interviewees commented that self-discipline is another key challenge to online education. In other words, although respondents welcome online workshop modules, the flexibility of online self-learning modules suggests that learning can easily be postponed, thus increasing the risk of incompleteness.

#### **4.3. Effective features of Online Education**

Four themes were identified under effective online education, namely, *interactive content*, *follow-up support*, *take-home material*, *short lectures and self-learning modules*, and *smartphone apps*. Regarding the features to promote better learning, eight interviewees reported that active interaction between the instructor and other learners plays a key role in stimulating interest and maintaining attention. Four interviewees agreed that active interaction promotes in-depth understanding of learning content. Two interviewees reported that follow-up to online workshops, such as individual and group consultations after 3 months of initial workshop attendance, was particularly useful for supporting the application of knowledge and skills from workshop to practice. Moreover, three interviewees cited that practical take-home materials, such as worksheets, which can be readily used with clients, facilitate the application of knowledge and skills learned from workshop to practice.

In terms of convenience, five interviewees reported that completing a large number of small modules within a short time (i.e., 15 min) during their daily commute to workshops on buses and train is more convenient. The reason is that they are busy and have difficulty in securing a substantial amount of time for online workshops. In addition, the interviewees emphasized that live-streaming and recorded lectures should be delivered within a short time (i.e., <45 min) to effectively maintain the concentration of attendees. Two interviewees reported that when provided with online self-learning modules, working on the contents via smartphone apps is more convenient because this option is becoming increasingly common among Japanese psychotherapists. Two interviewees explained that using smartphones than desktop and laptop computers is easy for the elderly Japanese psychotherapists because they are less complicated.

## 5. Discussions

### 5.1. Advantages of Online Education Versus Face-to-Face Education

The key advantages for using online education among Japanese psychotherapists are geographical flexibility, time and cost savings, and self-paced learning. These factors are related to the accommodation of training into excessively busy lifestyles and the reflection of challenges in securing time for attendance in face-to-face education, which requires fixed times and locations. These findings imply that flexibility is the primary reason for the interest of Japanese psychotherapists in online education. Previous studies found western psychotherapists favor the abovementioned advantages (Snow et al., 2018), which suggests that, regardless of cultural differences, online education has similar advantages for Japanese and western psychotherapists. However, such advantages are especially appealing for Japanese psychotherapists due to the major time and location constraints of attending face-to-face education in relation to longer working hours and difficulty in taking paid leave (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019). In addition, these findings indicate that women dominate the population of Japanese female psychotherapists in Japan. However, they are burdened with more responsibility for taking care of housework and children (Iwai, 2017). Given the above mentioned advantages, online education can be suitable for Japanese female psychotherapists.

### 5.2. Challenges of Online Education for Japanese Psychotherapists

The challenges reported are mainly concerned with the acceptance and adaptation of Japanese psychotherapists to the unique learning environment of online education, such as unfamiliarity, adaptation to new technologies, lack of face-to-face interaction, and self-discipline. Except for unfamiliarity, such challenges were identified as key challenges for online education among western psychotherapists. This finding suggests that, regardless of cultural differences, Japanese and western psychotherapists share similar challenges in using online education. However, unfamiliarity with online education is a critical concern in Japan but is uncommon among western psychotherapists (Snow et al., 2018). This finding may simply reflect that online education is more common among western psychotherapists. As such, self-discipline in online education may be more challenging for Japanese psychotherapists because they are less accustomed to autonomous learning (Zakari et al., 2017).

Content creators for online education should effectively address the key challenges to effectively facilitate the learning of knowledge and skills and reduce attrition among Japanese psychotherapists. Compared with face-to-face education, the contents and formats of online education should be specifically designed to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous interaction between instructor and learners, ensure the stimulation of interest and enjoyment, and encourage discipline in managing tasks to provide effective opportunities for learning. Unfamiliarity with online education is difficult to overcome without building experience. However, Japanese psychotherapists will gain more opportunities to build experience and familiarization with online education in the future as educational providers are increasing the number of online professional development workshops offered in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (FJCBCP, 2020). In western countries, adapting to technology is addressed by providing technological support before and during online education in order to build familiarity with the technological aspects of online education (Kebritchi et al., 2017). This mode of education for Japanese psychotherapists may provide comprehensive technological support, especially to older Japanese psychotherapists. Western countries compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction by offering highly interactive online education that offers synchronous and asynchronous communication and supports various didactical elements (Snow et al., 2018). Self-discipline among psychotherapists can be addressed by employing proactive instructors that encourage online interaction between instructors and learners to maintain engagement in learning (Mallonee et al., 2018). These solutions may be



applied in relation to online education for Japanese psychotherapists to address the lack of face-to-face interaction and self-discipline.

### **5.3. Effective Features of Online Education**

The range of effective features for online education includes active interactions, take-home material, follow-up support, smartphone apps, and short lectures and self-learning modules. Previous studies highlighted passive learning style among Japanese adult learners (Zakari et al., 2017). However, Japanese psychotherapists continue to recognize the benefits of active interaction with instructors and other learners for stimulating interest, maintaining concentration, and deepening the understanding of the learning content. Practical take-home materials have been useful in facilitating the application of knowledge and skills into practice among Japanese psychotherapists. Short, live-streaming and recorded lectures and self-learning modules provided via smart device apps will be particularly convenient to incorporate education into the busy lifestyle of Japanese psychotherapists. As such, online education for psychotherapists may simultaneously consider the suggested asynchronous and synchronous features of online education to promote the effectiveness and convenience of online education. Previous studies in the western context stated that text-based messaging can render online education for learners comfortable for disclosing opinions and facilitating discussions (Watson, 2012). Japanese psychotherapists tend to be less active in expressing their opinions during open discussions (Zakari et al., 2017). Hence, providing opportunities for interaction via text-based messaging, in addition to voice and video chat, may be useful for facilitating interaction among Japanese psychotherapists. Previous studies found that qualities of the technological interface, such as ease of use, also exert impacts on the effectiveness of online education (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Thus, for short self-learning modules and practical take-home materials, the interface and functionality of the online education app for smart devices should be carefully designed to suit the cultural needs of Japanese psychotherapists.

### **5.4. Limitations**

This present study collected in-depth insights from a limited number of interviewees recruited via convenient sampling. The findings may not be generalizable to Japanese psychotherapists from other cities in particular and other countries in general. The findings may over-represent the clinical psychologists who dominated the sample in this present study. Psychiatrists and social workers were excluded from these interviewees despite the fact that they practice psychotherapy in Japan.

## **6. Conclusion and Future Studies**

Despite cultural differences, the advantages of online education identified among Japanese psychotherapists were mostly consistent with those in the western context, such as geographical flexibility, cost and time savings, and self-paced learning. These advantages appear particularly appealing for Japanese psychotherapists due to the long working hours and heavy family commitment among Japanese female psychotherapists, who dominate the field. The challenges reported were mainly related to the acceptance and adaptation to the unique learning environment of online education, such as unfamiliarity, adaptation to new technologies, lack of face-to-face interaction, and self-discipline. These findings further imply that the contents and formats of online education for Japanese psychotherapists should be carefully designed in a manner that facilitates quality interaction, ensures the stimulation of interest, and promotes discipline in managing tasks. Given the valuable benefits of online education for Japanese psychotherapists, future studies may investigate the effectiveness of online education that integrates effective features for promoting learning and convenience identified in this present study, such as integrative contents with live voice chat and text-based messaging, short self-learning modules via smartphone apps, follow-up support, and practical take-home material.

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