

Original Research Article

School Counseling Competence of Social Work Students in the Digital Transformation Context: Evidence from Hung Vuong University

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the accelerating digital transformation in education, school counseling services are encountering increasing demands for enhanced professional competencies among practitioners. This study aims to examine the current state of school counseling competencies among undergraduate students majoring in Social Work at Hung Vuong University within the context of digital transformation. A quantitative research design was employed, using a questionnaire-based survey administered to a sample of 90 Social Work students. The measurement instrument comprised 22 observed items across five competency domains: (1) professional awareness and disciplinary knowledge; (2) school counseling skills; (3) professional ethics and professional attitudes; (4) digital technology competence; and (5) self-assessment and professional development competence. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha for reliability testing, independent-samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation analysis. The findings reveal that students' overall school counseling competence was at a moderately high level ($M = 3.40/5$). Stronger performance was observed in the domain of professional ethics and attitudes, whereas notable limitations were identified in school counseling skills, self-assessment and professional development competence, and digital technology competence. The competency domains demonstrated moderate to relatively strong positive correlations. These results underscore the necessity of integrated and competency-based training approaches to strengthen school counseling competencies among Social Work students in response to the demands of digital transformation in education.

Keywords: School Counseling, Social Work Education, Professional Competence, Digital Transformation, Undergraduate Students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation is profoundly reshaping educational systems worldwide, affecting not only teaching and learning modalities but also the delivery of psychological and social support services for students. Within digital learning environments, students are increasingly exposed to emerging psychological challenges, including academic pressure associated with online learning, cyberbullying, technology dependence, and risks to psychological safety in cyberspace. These developments have intensified the demands placed on the professional competencies of school counseling practitioners.

Undergraduate students majoring in Social Work constitute a potential workforce for school counseling services in general education settings. However, evidence from current training practices suggests that students' school counseling competencies—particularly those required in digitally transformed educational contexts—remain insufficiently developed. Accordingly, there is a need to systematically examine the current status of school counseling competencies among Social Work students in order to provide empirical evidence for curriculum refinement and the development of appropriate competency-based training interventions.

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2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Participants and Sample

The study sample consisted of 90 undergraduate students majoring in Social Work at Hung Vuong University, including first-year and second-year students.

2.2. Instruments and Data Analysis

A self-developed questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale was employed as the primary research instrument. The questionnaire comprised 22 observed items representing five domains of school counseling competence in the context of digital transformation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha for reliability testing, independent-samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation analysis.

The questionnaire was developed through a synthesis of prior research on school counseling competence and professional competence (Epstein & Hundert, 2002; Lambie *et al.*, 2021), and with reference to national policy requirements for school counseling and school social work in digitally transformed educational settings as stipulated by the Ministry of Education and Training. The content of the instrument was reviewed and refined through expert consultation with specialists in school psychology and social work.

The development of the school counseling competency scale was grounded in a competency-based framework that conceptualizes competence as a multidimensional construct integrating knowledge, skills, attitudes, and professional development capacity. Based on this framework, five component competency domains were identified, and 22 corresponding self-assessment items were constructed using a five-point Likert scale. The items were reviewed to ensure clarity and relevance to Social Work students and the current educational context. Following administration in the main survey, the reliability of both the subscales and the overall scale was examined using Cronbach's Alpha. The results indicated that all scales met acceptable reliability criteria and were suitable for subsequent statistical analyses.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Theoretical Foundations and the School Counseling Competency Model in the Context of Digital Transformation

3.1.1. Competency-Based Approach in Professional Education

The concept of competence/competency has been approached from multiple perspectives in educational research and the behavioral sciences. According to McClelland (1973), competence is not solely determined by academic knowledge or intelligence quotient, but rather by a constellation of psychological and behavioral characteristics that enable individuals to perform tasks effectively in real-world contexts. This perspective laid the foundation for competency-based education, which emphasizes the application of knowledge in professional practice.

Expanding upon this view, Epstein and Hundert (2002) conceptualize professional competence as the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and judgment, manifested through appropriate professional behaviors in specific situations. From this standpoint, competence is not a single attribute but a multidimensional construct that can only be adequately assessed by simultaneously examining its constituent components.

In the education of applied social sciences—particularly Social Work and school counseling—the competency-based approach has gained increasing relevance, as professional practice requires a flexible integration of theoretical understanding, practical skills, ethical standards, and the capacity for professional self-reflection.

3.1.2. School Counseling Competence from a Social Work Perspective

School counseling is an interdisciplinary field of practice that integrates psychology, education, and social work. Contemporary competency models of school counseling emphasize that practitioners' competence extends beyond direct psychological support skills for students to include contextual understanding of educational settings, ethical responsibility, and the ability to collaborate with relevant stakeholders.

Lambie *et al.*, (2021) argue that school counseling competence should be assessed through core competency domains such as professional knowledge, counseling skills, professional ethics, and professional development competence. In the Vietnamese context, these requirements are also reflected in legal and policy documents governing school counseling and school social work, which emphasize the role of counseling professionals in supporting students' holistic psychosocial development.

For undergraduate students majoring in Social Work, school counseling competence is considered a developing professional competence, strongly influenced by the curriculum, learning experiences, and opportunities for professional practice. Therefore, the assessment of students' school counseling competence should adopt a developmental perspective, rather than treating it as a fully formed competence characteristic of experienced practitioners.

3.1.3. School Counseling Competence in the Context of Digital Transformation

Digital transformation in education has substantially altered the organization and practice of school counseling services. In addition to face-to-face counseling, school counseling is increasingly delivered through digital platforms, including online counseling, social media-based support, electronic case management systems, and online psychological assessment tools.

According to the American Psychological Association (2013), the application of digital technologies in psychological counseling requires practitioners to meet stringent standards related to data confidentiality, professional boundaries, and the management of psychological risks in online environments. From a social work perspective, Reamer (2015) similarly highlights that digital environments simultaneously expand access to clients and intensify ethical challenges and professional responsibilities.

Within this context, school counseling competence can no longer be confined to traditional counseling skills alone, but must be expanded to include the ability to apply digital technologies safely, responsibly, and in accordance with professional standards. For students, this represents an emerging requirement that necessitates the integration of professional competence and digital competence within the training process.

3.1.4. Structural Model of School Counseling Competence Adopted in This Study

Based on a synthesis of theoretical approaches to professional competence, school counseling competence, and the demands of digital transformation in education, this study conceptualizes school counseling competence among Social Work students as a multidimensional construct comprising five component competency domains:

- 1) Professional awareness and knowledge, reflecting students' understanding of school counseling, professional roles, target populations, and practice contexts;
- 2) School counseling skills, including skills related to client engagement, active listening, problem exploration, psychological feedback, and student support in specific situations;
- 3) Professional ethics and professional attitudes, encompassing awareness and adherence to ethical standards, professional responsibility, and respect for clients;
- 4) Digital technology competence in counseling, including the ability to use digital tools, manage data, conduct online counseling, maintain digital professional boundaries, and prevent risks in online environments;
- 5) Self-assessment and professional development competence, reflecting the capacity for self-reflection, self-evaluation, and proactive engagement in lifelong learning and professional development.

This model enables a comprehensive examination of students' school counseling competence while maintaining a relative distinction among competency domains, thereby aligning with the study's objectives of assessing current competency levels and informing training orientations in the context of digital transformation.

Adopting a multidimensional approach to school counseling competence not only provides a comprehensive representation of the competency status of Social Work students, but also offers a scientific foundation for the design of integrated training programs and interventions that respond to the evolving demands of school counseling in digitally transformed educational environments.

3.2. Reliability of the Measurement Scales

Table 1: Results of Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis (N = 90)

Competency domain	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Professional awareness and knowledge	4	0.81
School counseling skills	5	0.83
Professional ethics and professional attitudes	4	0.86
Digital technology application in counseling	6	0.84
Self-assessment and professional development	3	0.79
Overall scale	22	0.88

The results indicate that all subscales demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The overall scale exhibited very good reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$), confirming that the measurement instrument was sufficiently reliable for subsequent statistical analyses.

3.3. Levels of School Counseling Competence among Students

Table 2: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations by Competency Domain

Competency domain	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
Professional awareness and knowledge	3.57	0.47
School counseling skills	3.23	0.54
Professional ethics and professional attitudes	3.69	0.43
Digital technology application in counseling	3.35	0.51
Self-assessment and professional development	3.18	0.56
Overall school counseling competence	3.40	0.45

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that students' overall school counseling competence was at a moderate to moderately high level ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.45$). This level suggests that students have developed a relatively solid foundation in professional awareness and professional attitudes; however, their practical school counseling competence has not yet reached a well-established level.

When examined by competency domain, professional ethics and professional attitudes achieved the highest mean score ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.43$). This finding indicates that students demonstrate a relatively clear awareness of professional responsibility, ethical standards, and respectful attitudes toward counseling recipients. This result is consistent with the characteristics of Social Work education, in which professional values and ethics are typically emphasized from introductory coursework onward.

In contrast, school counseling skills ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.54$) and self-assessment and professional development competence ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.56$) yielded lower mean scores compared to the other competency domains. These results reflect notable limitations in students' practical counseling competence, including skills related to client engagement, problem exploration, psychological feedback, as well as their capacity for self-reflection and long-term professional development planning.

The disparity between stronger ethical-attitudinal competence and weaker skill-based and professional development competence suggests that current training practices remain more oriented toward the transmission of knowledge and professional norms, while providing insufficient structured opportunities for experiential learning, skills practice, and professional reflection. This pattern is commonly observed among students in the early stages of professional training.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' school counseling competence remains at a moderately high level, with particular weaknesses in counseling skills and professional self-development competence. These results suggest that training programs should shift their emphasis from predominantly knowledge-based instruction toward increased opportunities for practical training, scenario-based simulations, and structured professional reflection. In addition, students should be provided with earlier and more systematic exposure to field-based learning experiences that reflect the practical realities of school counseling contexts.

3.4. Digital Technology Competence in School Counseling

Table 3: Manifestations of Digital Technology Competence in School Counseling

Component competence	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
Use of digital tools for counseling purposes	3.62	0.48
Digital record and data management	3.30	0.53
Application of digital technology in assessment and support	3.33	0.51
Controlled online counseling practice	3.28	0.55
Management of digital professional boundaries	3.09	0.58
Prevention of risks in digital environments	3.16	0.56

The analysis presented in Table 3 indicates that students' digital technology competence in school counseling was at a moderate level, with clear variation across component competencies. Specifically, the use of digital tools for counseling purposes achieved the highest mean score ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.48$). This finding suggests that students have developed an initial level of proficiency in commonly used digital tools, such as online communication platforms, information search tools, electronic forms, and basic applications supporting communication and task management in school counseling.

However, competency areas that are more specialized and professionally sensitive within digital practice yielded lower mean scores, particularly management of digital professional boundaries ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.58$) and prevention of

risks in digital environments ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.56$). These results indicate that students have not yet been adequately equipped with the awareness and skills necessary to protect both clients and themselves within online counseling contexts.

This discrepancy reflects the reality that while students are generally familiar with digital technologies as personal users, they have not fully translated their digital competence into the role of professional counseling practitioners. Key issues such as data confidentiality, regulation of online professional relationships, and the prevention of psychological harm in digital environments remain underdeveloped within current training programs.

These findings point to an urgent need to systematically integrate content related to digital ethics, digital professional boundaries, and online psychological risk management into coursework and practical training activities in school counseling.

The observed pattern—stronger technical use of digital tools alongside weaker competence in digital professional boundaries and risk prevention—suggests that current training remains largely technical in focus, with insufficient attention to digital ethics and professional safety in online counseling practice. Accordingly, school counseling-related courses should incorporate structured content on controlled online counseling, data protection, and psychological risk management in digital environments, which constitutes a critical requirement in the context of educational digital transformation.

3.5. Comparison of School Counseling Competence by Gender and Year of Study

Table 4: Independent-Samples t-Test Results for School Counseling Competence by Gender and Year of Study

Comparison variable	Group	N	Mean (M)	SD	t	p
Gender	Male	33	3.38	0.44	−0.31	0.758
	Female	57	3.41	0.46		
Year of study	First-year	60	3.31	0.43	−2.56	0.012*
	Second-year	30	3.56	0.47		

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

The independent-samples t-test results presented in Table 4 indicate no statistically significant difference in overall school counseling competence between male and female students ($t = -0.31$, $p = 0.758 > 0.05$). The effect size was negligible (Cohen's $d = 0.06$), suggesting that gender has little substantive influence on students' school counseling competence within the study sample.

This finding implies that school counseling competence is shaped primarily by educational processes, learning experiences, and professional practice exposure rather than by gender-related characteristics. From a training perspective, this provides empirical support for the development of unified school counseling training and competency enhancement programs applicable to both male and female students, without the need for gender-based differentiation.

In contrast, the t-test results by year of study reveal a statistically significant difference between first-year and second-year students ($t = -2.56$, $p = 0.012 < 0.05$). Specifically, second-year students demonstrated higher overall school counseling competence than first-year students ($M = 3.56$ vs. 3.31). The effect size reached a moderate level (Cohen's $d = 0.58$), indicating that this difference is not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful.

This finding reflects the cumulative impact of the training process, whereby second-year students have had greater exposure to disciplinary coursework, experiential learning activities, professional practice components, and simulated counseling situations related to school counseling. Through these experiences, students gradually develop practical competence, reflective capacity, and a deeper understanding of professional roles.

Overall, the results indicate that school counseling competence is not influenced by gender, while also confirming that it is a developmental competence that evolves over time through learning and training processes rather than an innate attribute. This constitutes important empirical evidence for the design of training models, capacity-building programs, and intervention strategies aimed at enhancing school counseling competence along a developmental trajectory. The findings further suggest that competency development initiatives should be aligned with students' stage of training and accumulated experience, with greater emphasis placed on advanced years of study when students possess foundational knowledge and are more prepared for professional practice.

3.6. Correlations among Competency Domains

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Matrix among School Counseling Competency Domains

Competency domain	I	II	III	IV	V
I. Professional awareness and knowledge	1				
II. School counseling skills	0.58**	1			
III. Professional ethics and attitudes	0.46**	0.41**	1		
IV. Digital technology competence	0.52**	0.55**	0.38**	1	
V. Self-assessment and professional development	0.49**	0.61**	0.44**	0.57**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$.

The Pearson correlation analysis presented in Table 5 indicates that all school counseling competency domains were positively and significantly correlated at the $p < 0.01$ level. The correlation coefficients ranged from $r = 0.38$ to $r = 0.61$, reflecting moderate to moderately strong associations among the competency domains.

Professional awareness and knowledge (Domain I) showed moderately strong positive correlations with school counseling skills (Domain II) ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$) and digital technology competence (Domain IV) ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that a solid foundation of disciplinary knowledge plays a critical role in the development and effective implementation of counseling skills, including the application of digital technologies in student support practices.

This domain was also positively correlated with professional ethics and attitudes (Domain III) ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) and self-assessment and professional development competence (Domain V) ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$), reflecting the interrelationship between professional knowledge, ethical awareness, and reflective capacity. Students with stronger conceptual understanding tend to demonstrate more positive professional attitudes and a greater inclination toward self-improvement.

Among the competency domains, school counseling skills (Domain II) exhibited the strongest correlation with self-assessment and professional development competence (Domain V) ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$), representing the highest correlation coefficient in the matrix. This finding highlights the close connection between practical counseling competence and students' capacity for self-reflection, self-regulation, and long-term professional development.

In addition, school counseling skills were moderately correlated with digital technology competence (Domain IV) ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that in the context of digital transformation, counseling skills are increasingly intertwined with the effective and appropriate use of digital technologies.

Professional ethics and attitudes (Domain III) were positively correlated with digital technology competence (Domain IV) ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$) and self-assessment and professional development competence (Domain V) ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$). Although these correlations were moderate in strength, they underscore the importance of ethical orientation and professional attitudes in guiding the responsible use of digital technologies in school counseling practice.

Furthermore, the positive correlation between digital technology competence and self-assessment and professional development ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$) suggests that students who demonstrate stronger digital competence are also more proactive in self-evaluation, learning, and professional capacity building.

Overall, the correlation results confirm that school counseling competence constitutes a multidimensional construct in which the component competencies are interrelated, mutually reinforcing, yet conceptually distinct. The moderate to moderately strong correlations indicate meaningful associations without redundancy among the domains, supporting the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

These findings provide important empirical support for the structural competency model employed in this study and offer a scientific basis for the design of integrated training and intervention programs. Developing school counseling competence requires a comprehensive and systematic approach that simultaneously fosters professional knowledge, practical counseling skills, ethical orientation, digital technology competence, and self-directed professional development.

4. Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite achieving its stated research objectives, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single higher education institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data were collected using student self-report measures, which may be subject to response bias and social desirability effects. Third, the study employed a cross-sectional descriptive design, which does not allow for examination of changes in school counseling competence over time.

Building on the present findings, future studies may expand the scope of investigation to include multiple training institutions in order to enhance the representativeness of the sample. In addition, experimental or quasi-experimental research designs are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of training models and intervention programs aimed at developing school counseling competence among Social Work students, particularly those integrating professional practice with digital technology applications. Furthermore, the use of mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative and qualitative data would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the processes underlying the development of school counseling competence in the context of digital transformation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence on the current status of school counseling competence among undergraduate students majoring in Social Work in the context of digital transformation at Hung Vuong University. The findings indicate that students' overall school counseling competence was at a moderate to moderately high level, with relative strengths in professional ethics and professional attitudes, while notable limitations were observed in school counseling skills, self-assessment and professional development competence, and digital technology competence.

More detailed analyses reveal that although students have begun to use digital tools to support counseling activities, they lack more advanced competencies, particularly in managing digital professional boundaries and preventing psychological risks in online environments. In addition, the results indicate that gender does not significantly influence school counseling competence, whereas year of study has a meaningful effect, underscoring the role of training processes and accumulated learning experiences in the development of students' professional competence.

The positive correlations among competency domains confirm that school counseling competence is a multidimensional construct in which component competencies are closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Based on these findings, the study emphasizes the need to reform training curricula by strengthening professional practice components, integrating digital competence, and fostering self-assessment and professional development capacities among students. Such efforts are essential to meet the evolving demands of school counseling in the context of educational digital transformation.

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