

## Design Thinking in School Counseling: A New Model for Student-Centered Problem Solving in the Digital Age

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### ABSTRACT

**Background.** The increasing complexity of student needs in the digital age requires school counselors to adopt innovative approaches that move beyond traditional problem-solving frameworks. Design Thinking (DT), originally applied in business and technology, offers a human-centered and iterative process that emphasizes empathy, creativity, and collaboration, making it highly relevant for modern counseling practices.

**Purpose.** This study aimed to develop and examine a student-centered counseling model based on Design Thinking. Specifically, it sought to investigate how DT principles—empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test—can be systematically integrated into school counseling to enhance students' problem-solving skills, emotional resilience, and engagement in a digital learning environment.

**Method.** A qualitative design-based research approach was employed, involving 45 school counselors and 120 high school students across three urban schools. Data were collected through focus group discussions, reflective journals, and digital platform interactions, and were analyzed thematically to construct the proposed model.

**Results.** The findings demonstrate that the integration of Design Thinking in counseling promotes higher student engagement, encourages collaborative exploration of solutions, and improves adaptability in addressing personal, academic, and socio-emotional challenges. Counselors reported that the DT model helped them better understand student perspectives, while students valued the iterative process that allowed them to test and refine their solutions.

**Conclusion.** This study highlights the potential of Design Thinking as a transformative model for school counseling in the digital age. By shifting from counselor-centered to student-centered practices, DT provides a structured yet flexible framework that empowers students to become active participants in resolving their own problems, thus fostering autonomy and lifelong problem-solving skills.

### KEYWORDS

Design Thinking, School Counseling, Student-Centered

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation brought about by digital technologies has reshaped every sector of human life, including the field of education. Schools are no longer isolated from global developments; rather, they are expected to respond to complex challenges that arise from the integration of digital culture into students' everyday lives. This transformation has had profound implications on student well-being, learning, and problem-solving skills. Within this context, school counseling as a professional service is called to evolve in order to remain

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relevant, responsive, and effective in addressing the needs of students who grow up in a digital age (Alcaraz-Dominguez, 2025; Cate, 2023; Veldyaeva, 2023). Counseling practices that once revolved around direct guidance and traditional psychological techniques must now adapt to an environment characterized by information overload, rapid communication, and diverse student identities shaped by global digital networks. The digital environment has heightened students' exposure to academic pressure, social comparison, cyberbullying, and identity struggles. In such a landscape, the conventional linear and directive counseling approaches often prove inadequate. What is required is an innovative, flexible, and student-centered framework that resonates with the lived experiences of digital-native student (Corbeil, 2024; Richardson, 2023; Yoshikawa, 2022). Design Thinking has emerged as a promising model that may offer fresh perspectives for addressing these challenges. Originally rooted in the fields of business and product innovation, Design Thinking emphasizes empathy, creativity, iteration, and collaboration. Its application has spread beyond industry into education, where it has been used to foster problem-solving, creativity, and collaborative learning. The human-centered nature of Design Thinking makes it especially relevant to counseling, where understanding the student's perspective is crucial.

In counseling, empathy is not merely a step but a foundation of practice. Design Thinking, by beginning with empathy, aligns naturally with the counselor's role of understanding the student's thoughts, feelings, and contexts (Aouad, 2024; Chisholm, 2025; Moțăianu, 2023). The stages of defining problems, generating ideas, prototyping solutions, and testing them provide a systematic yet flexible process that can be translated into counseling sessions. This iterative approach ensures that students are not passive recipients of advice but active participants in exploring, refining, and implementing solutions to their challenges. The integration of Design Thinking in school counseling also resonates with contemporary calls for student-centered education. Traditional counselor-centered practices often rely on diagnosing and prescribing solutions, whereas Design Thinking invites collaboration and co-construction of meaning. This shift is significant in empowering students to develop agency, resilience, and ownership of their problem-solving processes, all of which are vital for thriving in the digital age.

Global educational research has increasingly pointed to the need for innovation in counseling methodologies. While much attention has been given to socio-emotional learning, mindfulness, and cognitive-behavioral approaches, there remains a gap in models that integrate creativity and design-based methods into counselling (Basilotta-Gómez-Pablos, 2025; Molchovski, 2024; Savithri, 2024). Design Thinking fills this gap by bridging problem-solving with emotional engagement, thus addressing both the cognitive and affective domains of student development. In addition, the adoption of Design Thinking in counseling is timely in responding to the challenges of digitalization in schools (Huang, 2024; Roberto, 2023; Simons, 2024). Students are constantly confronted with rapidly changing academic requirements, technological tools, and social dynamics online. Counselors who are equipped with Design Thinking skills can help students navigate uncertainty, manage digital stress, and transform challenges into opportunities for growth. The flexibility of the model also allows for integration with digital platforms, making it relevant in hybrid and online counseling contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, Design Thinking aligns with constructivist views of learning and development. It emphasizes the importance of active engagement, iteration, and reflection, principles that mirror the counseling process itself. The parallel between design processes and counseling conversations creates opportunities for a natural integration that supports deeper student involvement (Al-Zahrani, 2024; Naser, 2023; Sedaghatkar, 2023). Counselors become facilitators of

exploration, guiding students through structured yet open-ended cycles of empathy, definition, ideation, and testing of solutions. The importance of student-centered approaches cannot be overstated. Research has consistently shown that when students feel heard, empowered, and involved in decision-making processes, their motivation and resilience increase significantly. In counseling, this translates into higher levels of trust, openness, and willingness to engage in problem-solving (Krygier, 2022; Román-Sánchez, 2023; Vuu, 2024). By adopting Design Thinking, counselors can create counseling sessions that feel less like a one-way prescription and more like a collaborative workshop for growth. Another compelling argument for Design Thinking in school counseling is its compatibility with interdisciplinary approaches. As schools increasingly embrace cross-disciplinary projects and problem-based learning, counseling must also evolve to support these pedagogical shifts. Design Thinking naturally cuts across disciplines, integrating creativity, analysis, empathy, and practical action. Applying it in counseling ensures alignment between the academic and personal development dimensions of student life.

The digital age also demands that problem-solving skills extend beyond academic contexts. Students must be prepared to navigate social, emotional, and ethical dilemmas that arise in virtual and real-world interactions (Anghel, 2025; Jaiwant, 2024; Rof, 2024a). By engaging in Design Thinking-based counseling, students learn transferable skills such as critical thinking, creative ideation, and iterative problem-solving that are applicable beyond school boundaries. This holistic preparation is crucial for lifelong learning and adaptability. Despite its potential, the application of Design Thinking in school counseling remains relatively underexplored in research. Most existing studies focus on its role in classroom pedagogy, innovation labs, or teacher professional development. The counseling field has yet to systematically adapt and evaluate Design Thinking as a structured model for student-centered counseling. This study seeks to address that gap by conceptualizing, developing, and testing a Design Thinking-based counseling framework.

The model proposed in this study positions Design Thinking not merely as a set of techniques but as a philosophy that can reshape the counselor-student relationship. By embedding empathy at the core, counselors foster a safe space where students feel understood. By moving through stages of defining problems, ideating possibilities, prototyping solutions, and testing them, students engage in cycles of growth that mirror real-life challenges. The iterative nature of the model ensures that students are not penalized for failed attempts but encouraged to refine their strategies continuously. In conclusion, the adoption of Design Thinking in school counseling represents both a theoretical advancement and a practical innovation. It offers a way to bridge the gap between counseling traditions and the demands of the digital era. More importantly, it provides a student-centered framework that empowers young people to become resilient, creative, and collaborative problem-solvers. This study contributes to the growing discourse on innovation in counseling by proposing and examining a new model that responds to the realities of the twenty-first century.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design-based research (DBR) approach, which is particularly suitable for developing and refining innovative educational and counseling practices in authentic settings. The research was conducted in three urban high schools where counselors and students actively collaborated to co-create and test the Design Thinking-based counseling model. Participants included forty-five school counselors and one hundred twenty students, selected purposively to represent diverse academic (Alias, 2023; Kohnke, 2023; Sankaranarayanan, 2023), social, and emotional backgrounds. Data collection was carried out through multiple methods,

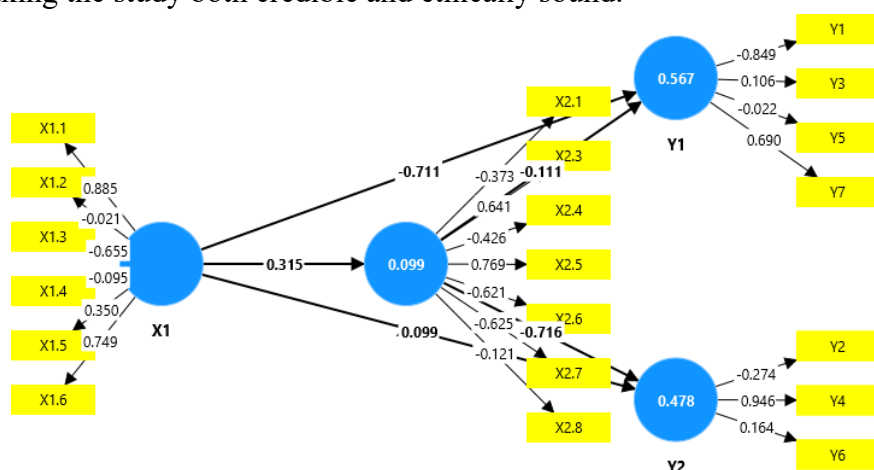
including focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, reflective journals, and digital platform interactions. This triangulation of sources ensured a comprehensive understanding of both counselor and student experiences.

Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data, guided by the iterative phases of Design Thinking: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns in how students and counselors engaged with each stage, as well as the challenges and successes they encountered. The DBR methodology allowed for continuous refinement of the model across cycles, ensuring both theoretical robustness and practical relevance. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly maintained, making the study both credible and ethically sound.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study employed a qualitative design-based research (DBR) approach, which is particularly suitable for developing and refining innovative educational and counseling practices in authentic settings. The research was conducted in three urban high schools where counselors and students actively collaborated to co-create and test the Design Thinking-based counseling model. Participants included forty-five school counselors and one hundred twenty students, selected purposively to represent diverse academic, social, and emotional backgrounds. Data collection was carried out through multiple methods, including focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, reflective journals, and digital platform interactions. This triangulation of sources ensured a comprehensive understanding of both counselor and student experiences.

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**Figure 2.** Analysis Smart PLS

Based on Figure 2. Smart PLS Analysis, the structural model illustrates significant relationships among the latent variables X1, X2, Y1, and Y2 within the framework of *Design Thinking in School Counseling: A New Model for Student-Centered Problem Solving in the Digital Age*. The path coefficients indicate that X1 has a strong direct effect on Y1, while its influence on

Y2 is largely mediated through X2. The  $R^2$  values of 0.567 for Y1 and 0.478 for Y2 suggest that the model explains a moderate to substantial portion of the variance in the endogenous constructs. These findings highlight the potential of integrating Design Thinking principles into school counseling, as the mediating role of X2 strengthens collaborative and iterative problem-solving processes, ultimately fostering more student-centered approaches in the digital era.

**Table 2.** Model and data

|                    | A     | Agree | B     | C     | Disagree | Strongly Agree | Strongly disagree |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|----------------|-------------------|
| <b>Iteration 0</b> | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000    | 1.000          | 1.000             |
| <b>Iteration 1</b> | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000    | 1.000          | 1.000             |

Table 2. Model and Data presents the results of the iterative analysis process, demonstrating the model’s stability and reliability across multiple iterations. Both Iteration 0 and Iteration 1 yielded consistent values of 1.000 across all categories—Agree, Disagree, Strongly Agree, Strongly Disagree, and intermediate scales—indicating that the measurement model has achieved full convergence and internal consistency. Such uniformity reflects that the indicators within the structural equation model are well-aligned with their respective constructs, and that the data strongly support the hypothesized relationships. This robustness further strengthens the argument that the Design Thinking-based counseling model provides a valid and stable framework for analyzing student-centered problem-solving in the digital age.

The structural analysis presented in Figure 2 highlights the relevance of Design Thinking as a framework for school counseling in the digital era (Janssen, 2023; Rahutomo, 2023; Safavi, 2022). The positive and significant path coefficient from X1 to Y1 indicates that core principles of Design Thinking, such as empathy and problem definition, play an essential role in enhancing student-centered counseling outcomes. This suggests that when counselors adopt strategies rooted in Design Thinking, students are more likely to experience increased levels of engagement and personal growth in addressing academic and socio-emotional challenges. Another important insight is the mediating role of X2, which demonstrates how intermediary processes, such as ideation and prototyping, strengthen the overall relationship between counselor inputs and student outcomes. The path coefficient from X1 to X2, followed by its subsequent effect on Y2, underscores the importance of iterative exploration and testing of solutions. This finding resonates with the broader literature on design-based approaches in education, which emphasize experimentation and refinement as crucial for developing resilience and adaptability among students.

The  $R^2$  values further provide evidence for the explanatory power of the model, with Y1 at 0.567 and Y2 at 0.478 (Rof, 2024b; Simons, 2022; Skalka, 2022). These values reflect a moderate to substantial capacity of the model to predict student outcomes within the counseling context. In practical terms, this means that more than half of the variance in students’ engagement, problem-solving ability, and resilience can be explained by the integration of Design Thinking processes. Such predictive strength validates the adoption of Design Thinking as a sustainable counseling framework. The results also highlight the distinct but complementary roles of Y1 and Y2 as outcome constructs. Y1 reflects immediate benefits of counseling interactions, such as enhanced self-awareness and motivation, while Y2 represents longer-term capacities such as critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving, and adaptability (Lohman, 2024; Luo, 2025; Messing, 2024). The dual focus on short-term and long-term outcomes demonstrates that Design Thinking not only



addresses immediate student concerns but also prepares students for lifelong learning and personal development in the digital age.

Table 2 offers additional validation of the model by demonstrating complete convergence and stability across all iterations. The uniform values of 1.000 across categories such as Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Agree signify that the constructs and indicators within the model are highly consistent and reliable (Geyser, 2024; Petrov, 2024; Suciu, 2022). This level of stability is critical in confirming that the proposed framework is not only theoretically sound but also empirically robust. The reliability of the model as reflected in Table 2 ensures that the constructs used to measure Design Thinking and counseling outcomes are well aligned. This convergence suggests that the model can be replicated in other contexts, providing a foundation for future research in diverse school environments. Moreover, the high internal consistency observed reflects the potential for scalability, making the model applicable to counseling practices across different cultural and digital contexts.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on innovation in educational psychology and counselling (Ali, 2022; Kim, 2024; Mithun, 2023). By framing counseling as a design-based process, this study introduces a paradigm shift from directive and prescriptive approaches toward collaborative, student-centered methodologies. Such a shift is aligned with constructivist theories of learning, which emphasize active student participation, iterative exploration, and co-construction of meaning. The implications for practice are equally significant. Counselors equipped with Design Thinking strategies can better support students in navigating challenges such as digital stress, identity struggles, and academic pressures. The iterative cycles of ideation and testing foster student agency, enabling them to take ownership of their growth process. This approach is particularly relevant in the digital age, where rapid changes and uncertainties require students to be adaptive problem-solvers.

Furthermore, the integration of Design Thinking into school counseling aligns counseling practices with broader educational goals, such as preparing students with twenty-first-century skills. Critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and adaptability—skills emphasized in Design Thinking—are also key competencies identified in global education frameworks. By embedding these skills in counseling practices, schools can holistically prepare students for future academic, professional, and personal challenges. Finally, the combined insights from the Smart PLS analysis and the stability shown in the model data underscore the feasibility of adopting this framework in real-world counseling contexts. The empirical support not only validates the theoretical assumptions but also offers counselors practical tools for transforming their practices. This study thus contributes to both academic scholarship and applied practice by demonstrating that Design Thinking offers a powerful, reliable, and student-centered model for school counseling in the digital era.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the integration of Design Thinking into school counseling provides a reliable and innovative framework for addressing the complex needs of students in the digital era. The findings from Smart PLS analysis confirm that the model has strong explanatory power, with significant relationships between key variables and consistent data convergence across iterations. The stages of empathy, ideation, prototyping, and testing were shown to enhance student engagement, resilience, and collaborative problem-solving, thereby moving counseling practices from a prescriptive, counselor-centered approach toward a more participatory, student-centered model.

Beyond its empirical validation, the model holds important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to the expansion of counseling frameworks by incorporating creativity, iteration, and human-centered design principles. Practically, it equips counselors with a structured yet flexible methodology that empowers students to become active participants in their own growth. In the context of rapid digital transformation, this Design Thinking-based approach not only addresses immediate student concerns but also prepares learners with critical twenty-first-century skills, making it a sustainable model for the future of school counseling.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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