Reviewer's report

Title: The Working Alliance in Online vs. Face-to-Face Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Depression: A Randomized Controlled Trial

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Reviewer: Thomas Berger

Reviewer's report:

As always from your group this is a very interesting and well-conducted study. To my knowledge, this is the first direct experimental comparison of an Internet-based treatment for depression with a Face-to-Face condition, and - as mentioned in the manuscript - more research should be done on therapeutic process factors such as the alliance and predictors of treatment outcome in online settings. Thus, this is a timely study and there is no doubt that it should be published. However, I also need to ask you for some major (compulsory) revisions and some minor revisions. I hope that this helps to make your manuscript even better.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. Some information about the main outcome of this interesting RCT (Online vs. Face-to-Face CBT) needs to be given. I understand that main outcome data of this trial are not published yet and I strongly believe that it is totally appropriate to publish an own paper regarding the results on the working alliance. However, without any knowledge regarding the efficacy of the Online and Face-to-Face intervention, it is hard to interpret the results on the working alliance. I think that it would be enough to shortly summarize the main results.

2. The fact that the WAI was assessed "only" at posttreatment must be discussed as an important limitation of this study in the discussion section (e.g. confounding with outcome; comparability with other studies in which the alliance was used as a process measure rather than as a "outcome" measure). BTW, assuming that your alliance measure is strongly confounded with symptomatic outcome, I was surprised that the correlations between the WAI and the BDI-scores were not higher.

Minor Essential Revisions:

1. Procedure: More information about the randomization procedure should be given.

2. Methods: Exclusion criteria of the study are defined under "Measures". This part should be moved to the "Procedures"-section.

3. Methods: Therapists: Some information about the allocation of the therapists to the patients/treatment conditions should be given. Were they randomly allocated to the patients/conditions? Did the same therapists do both, online and
FtF therapy?

4. Treatment: Online Condition: What is meant by frequent scheduled therapist guidance and feedback? Once a week? If possible, data about the amount of therapist time and/or the number of contacts should be presented? What is meant by "highly structured web-based intervention" (access to one module each week?)? More information should be given on this.

5. Data Analysis: "Depression levels were measured in terms of (a)….. and (b) the residual gain score (difference between depression score at baseline and posttreatment)." -> Residual gain scores are not just the difference between depression scores at baseline and posttreatment (residual gain score control change scores for baseline scores). I think that you used "change scores" because else it would be strange to enter BDI baseline scores into the multiple regression analyses in which the residual gain score was the dependent variable. Please clarify. Personally, I would prefer to use "real" residual gain scores in your correlational analyses rather than change scores. If you do this, you could consider to drop the multiple regression analyses because – as I wrote – residual gain scores would already control for BDI-baseline scores.

6. In the discussion (p.17) you wrote: "the results showed that the baseline depression score significantly influenced treatment outcome (depression at postmeasurement) in both groups, with patients who had lower depressive symptoms scores at baseline benefiting more from the intervention in both groups". At least the second part of this sentence is not in line with the results. It is not that the patients with lower depressive symptoms scores at baseline benefited more from the intervention, rather, patients with lower BDI-scores at pretreatment had lower BDI-scores at posttreatment. Results on the association of BDI prescores with change scores, i.e. improvement, are not reported in results section. This should be done. Only then, one could know if patients with lower baseline scores benefited more from the intervention (I would guess that it is the other way around: with higher baseline scores, there is more room for improvement).

Discretionary Revisions:

1. Title: The authors could consider to slightly change the title. From my point of view, the term "Randomized Controlled Trial" is not ideally used in the title ("The Working Alliance in Online vs. Face-to-Face CBT for Depression: A Randomized Controlled Trial"). Something like "The Working Alliance in a Randomized Controlled Trial comparing Online with Face-to-Face CBT for Depression" could be a better choice.

2. Background: Therapeutic Alliance: The authors could mention that although the association between working alliance and outcome is a robust/consistent finding, correlations are not very high (r around .22 which means that only about 4% of the outcome variance is explained by the alliance; e.g. Martin et al., 2000).

3. Participants: BDI baseline scores do not seem to differ between the two groups. However, test statistics should be presented.
4. Measures: "Fidy found no significant differences between paper-and-pencil and online administration of the German versions of the BDI and BSIS". In this section, the abbreviation BSIS is used for the first time. I would write something like "…of the BDI and the Beck Suicide Ideation Scale (BSIS), which was also used in this study".

5. Discussion: One further limitation of this study is that no follow-up data are included. This should be mentioned. The question if the alliance at posttreatment predicts outcome at follow-up will be very interesting.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests