

Cross-Cultural Comparison of Self-Stigma in Psychological Help-Seeking: A Study of Local and International University Students in Malaysia

Kesantini AthinarayananRao, Getrude C.Ah Gang, Carmella E. Ading
Universiti Malaysia Sabah

*Corresponding author's e-mail:
kishantini.athinarayananrao89@gmail.com

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Abstract In recent years, there has been an increase in mental health challenges among university students in Malaysia. Despite this, local and international students exhibit a reluctance to seek psychological help, revealing a gap in addressing mental health needs. Self-stigma emerges as a significant barrier to proactive psychological help-seeking attitudes. Cultural nuances further complicate attitudes toward seeking psychological help. To further understand the interplay between self-stigma and psychological help-seeking attitudes among different cultures and genders, a cross-cultural comparison study was conducted. Eight universities consisting of four public and four private universities in Malaysia were chosen as the sample population of this study. The instruments that were used were the Attitudes towards Professional Psychological Help-Seeking Scale -Short Form (ATSPPH-SF) and the Self-Stigma of Seeking Help (SSOSH). Results revealed that self-stigma negatively predicted psychological help-seeking attitudes among university students, particularly among international students. Furthermore, male international students were more open to seek professional psychological help while female international students placed more value and need on psychological help. Overall, the psychological help-seeking attitudes remained low and insignificant across the samples. Therefore, integrating cultural perspectives into mental health interventions may help build trust and provide supportive environments that may encourage positive psychological help-seeking attitudes.

Keywords: Self-stigma, Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes, Cross-Cultural, Malaysian University Students, International Students.

Abstrak Sejak kebelakangan ini, terdapat peningkatan dalam cabaran kesihatan mental dalam kalangan pelajar universiti di Malaysia. Walaubagaimanapun, pelajar tempatan dan antarabangsa menunjukkan keberatan untuk meminta bantuan psikologi, yang mendedahkan jurang ketara dalam memenuhi keperluan kesihatan mental. Stigma sendiri adalah penghalang utama kepada sikap proaktif untuk meminta bantuan psikologi. Faktor budaya turut merumitkan lagi sikap terhadap usaha meminta bantuan psikologi. Bagi memahami hubungan stigma sendiri dengan sikap meminta bantuan psikologi dalam kalangan pelbagai budaya dan jantina, sebuah kajian silang budaya telah dijalankan. Sebanyak lapan universiti, yang terdiri daripada empat universiti awam dan empat universiti swasta di Malaysia, telah dipilih sebagai populasi sampel kajian ini. Instrumen yang digunakan adalah Skala Sikap terhadap Permintaan Bantuan Psikologi Profesional - Bentuk Pendek (ATSPPH-SF) dan Stigma Kendiri terhadap Mendapatkan Bantuan (SSOSH). Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa stigma sendiri secara negatif meramalkan sikap meminta bantuan psikologi dalam kalangan pelajar universiti, khususnya dalam kalangan pelajar antarabangsa. Tambahan pula, pelajar antarabangsa lelaki lebih terbuka untuk meminta bantuan psikologi profesional, manakala pelajar antarabangsa wanita lebih menghargai dan mempunyai keperluan terhadap bantuan psikologi. Secara keseluruhannya, sikap meminta bantuan psikologi masih rendah dan tidak signifikan dalam kalangan sampel. Oleh itu, pengintegrasian perspektif budaya ke dalam intervensi kesihatan mental mungkin dapat membantu membina kepercayaan.

Kata kunci: Stigma Kendiri, Sikap Meminta Bantuan Psikologi, Silang Budaya, Pelajar Universiti Malaysia, Pelajar Antarabangsa

Introduction

Transitioning from adolescence to adulthood often results in academic, social, and personal struggles. University students often view universities as a place to achieve ultimately (Kumaran, 2023). However, the continuous pressure to excel in all aspects while in university results in a journey filled with both physical and emotional difficulties (Islam et al., 2018; Pheng et al., 2019). In the past few years, there has been a growing interest globally in mental health concerns among university students, particularly about stigma and perceptions

of help-seeking (Eui & Tan, 2019). For instance, a study among university students in Selangor revealed worrisome levels of moderate to severe depression, anxiety, and stress, highlighting the increased prevalence of mental health issues (Wong et al., 2023; Auerbach et al., 2018). Similarly, this worrying pattern affects students worldwide, including those in the United Kingdom and the United States (Brown, 2018; Mey & Yin, 2015). Past studies (Shamzaeffa et al., 2024) have identified several factors that contribute to university students' low mental health levels, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, social connections, cultural values, physical activity, academic

stress, and internet usage.

Despite the high prevalence of mental health issues, many university students remain untreated due to low psychological help-seeking attitudes (Kumaran, 2023). The hindrance towards seeking psychological help stems from various factors, including limited awareness of available services, misconceptions regarding the seriousness of mental health conditions, and the enduring stigma surrounding mental health services and professionals (Aguirre-Velasco et al., 2020; Yee, 2018; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Raaj et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many services, including counselling, shifted online. Liebert et al. (2006) found that individuals comfortable with online environments were more inclined to use online counselling services. Therefore, it was assumed that tech-savvy university students might benefit from online mental health support. However, Kotera and Ting (2021) reported minimal use of online psychological services, suggesting stigma continues to significantly impact help-seeking behaviours among Malaysian students. This reluctance, often rooted in shame and embarrassment, is closely linked to cultural influences in Malaysia (Su Lin, 2018).

One of the most prominent cultural influences related to mental health is the collectivist cultural values (Dong et al., 2022). Malaysia is a collectivist society, particularly among the majority Malay, Chinese and Indian population (Tehseen et al., 2021). Collectivism places high value on social harmony, family unity, and group reputation. Conversely, mental health issues are often viewed as a threat to these values, potentially bringing shame to families (Gao et al., 2022). Therefore, individuals in the collectivist community tend to avoid discussing mental health concerns openly or seeking help to prevent family or social embarrassment. This reluctance can further lead to self-stigma when internalised (Ahad et al., 2023).

According to Corrigan (2004), stigma is a prominent barrier to psychological help-seeking attitudes. There are two stigmas related to psychological help-seeking attitudes, namely, public stigma and self-stigma. Public stigma refers to society's perception that seeking help is socially unacceptable, leading to prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination against those seeking psychological help (Corrigan, 2004). Individuals may hide psychological concerns and avoid seeking treatment to mitigate the harmful consequences of public stigma. Meanwhile, self-stigma, a phenomenon wherein individuals internalize negative societal attitudes and beliefs about mental illness, acts as a significant barrier to seeking psychological support (Corrigan, 2004). While public stigma has shown mixed impacts on psychological help-seeking attitudes, self-stigma still remains to impact psychological help-seeking attitudes significantly and negatively (Eui & Tan, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

To further explain the interplay between self-stigma and psychological help-seeking attitudes among local and international students, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) was used as the ground of this study. According to TPB, there are three elements, attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control that influences an intention to perform a behaviour. When one of these elements result in negative response, the intentions to perform a behaviour reduces thus inhibiting a behaviour from being performed (Ajzen, 1991). In the case of self-stigma (perceived behavioural control), it is possible that although the attitudes to seek psychological help may be positive, with sufficient support from social system, the intentions to seek psychological help may be reduced by self-

stigma, resulting in negative psychological help-seeking behaviours.

Aims

- This study aims to investigate the effect of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes.
- This study aims to explore the differences between local and international university students regarding the effect of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes.
- This study aims to compare the psychological help-seeking attitudes between male and female students.

Objectives

- To investigate the effect of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes.
- To explore the differences between local and international university students regarding the effect of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes.
- To compare the psychological help-seeking attitudes between male and female students.

Operational Definition

Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes

Psychological help-seeking attitudes are defined as an individual's perceptions and willingness to seek professional psychological help, when facing emotional, mental health or psychological challenges. These attitudes determine whether someone is likely to reach out for psychological help and their view on psychological therapy.

Openness to Seeking Professional Psychological Help

Openness to Seeking Professional Psychological Help is defined as an individual's willingness and positive tendency to engage with professional mental health help.

Value and Need in Seeking Professional Psychological Help

Value and need in Seeking Professional Psychological Help is defined as the ability to recognise the perceived benefits from a psychological help and factors that prompt an individual to realise that they require professional psychological help.

Self-Stigma

Self-stigma refers to the internalisation of negative stereotypes, prejudice, or discriminatory beliefs about oneself, in mental health.

Public Stigma

Public stigma refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes held by the society about individuals who experience mental health concerns and for seeking professional mental health help.

Rationale

University students are at risk for mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and stress (Wong et al., 2023). In Malaysia, mental health issues among students are increasing, but many students hinder from seeking professional psychological help

due to self-stigma, making it crucial to explore how internalized stigma affects their help-seeking behavior (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020). Self-stigma significantly impacts individuals' attitudes to seek professional help (Pheng et al., 2019). The internalization of societal stigma about mental illness causes individuals to view their struggles as a personal failure, resulting in shame, reduced self-esteem, and reluctance to seek help. Therefore, it is important to explore how self-stigma affects Malaysian university students' attitudes toward psychological help to identify effective strategies to address these barriers and encourage early intervention.

Similar to many Asian cultures, Malaysians often emphasized autonomy and collective well-being, which may discourage open discussion about mental health issues or seeking professional psychological help (Shamzaeffa et al., 2024). In addition, cultural norms may associate mental health issues and mental health help-seeking as a sign of weakness or lack of discipline, contributing to shame and embarrassment that causes self-stigma. Investigating the effect of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes in a cross-cultural context may be a steppingstone in developing culturally sensitive interventions, particularly on managing self-stigma related to mental health. Moreover, studies consistently demonstrate gender differences in psychological help-seeking attitudes (Guney et al., 2024). Globally, men are less likely to seek psychological help due to traditional norms of masculinity that emphasize emotional restraint and self-reliance (Ozdemir

et al., 2023). In the Malaysian context, gender roles may further influence psychological help-seeking attitudes (Koon et al., 2023). Malaysian women may be more open to seeking help, whereas men may face stronger pressures to avoid appearing vulnerable.

Examining the gender differences in self-stigma and psychological help-seeking attitudes could provide targeted interventions for male and female students.

The results of such a study could provide data to guide mental health policy and resource allocation within Malaysian universities. It could highlight the need for stigma-reduction programs, counseling services tailored to gender and cultural differences, and initiatives to foster more supportive attitudes toward mental health care among students.

Hypothesis

- There is an effect of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes.
- There are differences between local and international students in terms of the effect of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes.
- There are differences between male and female students in terms of psychological help-seeking attitudes.

Conceptual Framework

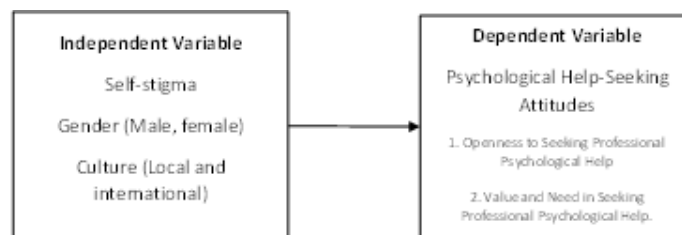


Figure 1. Independent and Dependent Variables of the Study.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. The independent variables include self-stigma, gender and culture. The dependent variable of this study is psychological help-seeking attitudes which includes two subconstructs, namely, openness to seeking professional help and value and need in seeking professional help.

Methods

Research Design

This research employed a quantitative approach, utilizing survey forms as the primary means of data collection. The survey forms were directly administered to the selected population sample, employing both online channels (necessitated by campus closure) and face-to-face interactions. For participants with online accessibility, survey forms were distributed via email, while those within physical reach were provided with hard copies. In this research, the independent variable is self-stigma, while the dependent variable is psychological help-seeking attitudes. For the data analysis, a combination of the Special Package for Social Statistics (SPSS) version 28 and SMART-PLS 4 was employed to ensure a comprehensive examination of the research variables. To test the hypotheses, a structural equation model and multigroup analysis from SMART-PLS 4 were used. Furthermore, an independent t-test conducted using

SPSS 28.0 examined the disparities between male and female students regarding their openness to seeking professional help, as well as their perceived value and necessity of seeking such help.

Sampling Technique

Simple random sampling technique was used in this research.

Sampling Strategy

The sample of the study involved participants from four public universities and four private universities, strategically selected across Johor, Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Sarawak. These locations were chosen due to the universities' willingness to accommodate external research activities and reports highlighting the prevalence of mental health challenges in these regions. Specifically, reports from The Star (2023) concerning the high rates of depression and anxiety in Kuala Lumpur, particularly among youths, and another report from Bernama (2021) identifying Selangor, Johor Bahru, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, and Sarawak as regions with elevated suicide rates between 2015 and 2020, influenced the selection of these states for the study's focus. In total, the study recruited 501 participants, comprising 250 local students and 251 international students.

Participants

Inclusion Criteria

- Local students encompassing individuals with Malaysian citizenship pursuing their undergraduate education across various public and private universities within Malaysia.
- International students encompassing individuals who relocated to Malaysia other than their own solely for the purpose of undergraduate education in public or private universities in Malaysia.

Exclusion Criteria

- Data was collected from public and private universities in Malaysia only.
- Postgraduate and school students were not included in this research.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF SELF-STIGMA IN PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP-SEEKING

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=501)

	Frequency	Percentage	N
Gender			501
Male	174	34.7	
Female	327	65.3	
Age			501
18 to 22 years old	393	78.4	
23 to 27 years old	103	20.6	
28 to 32 years old	5	1.0	
Academic Course			501
Islamic Studies	19	3.8	
English Literature	14	2.8	
Informational Technology	23	4.6	
Science and Technology	44	8.8	
Biotechnology	15	3.0	
History	15	3.0	
Applied Arts and Design	21	4.2	
Marketing	5	1.0	
Business Admin and Finance	19	3.8	
Engineering	26	5.2	
Tourism	10	2.0	
Accounting	59	11.8	
Human Sciences	23	4.6	
Law	4	0.8	
Biomedical Sciences	40	8.0	
Medicine and Surgery	164	32.7	
Academic Stage			501
Year 1	144	28.7	
Year 2	210	41.9	
Year 3	87	17.4	
Year 4	49	9.8	
Year 5	11	2.2	
Nationality			501
Malaysian	250	50.0	
International	251	50.0	
Country of Origin			501
Malaysia	250	50.0	
Singapore	45	9.0	
India	45	9.0	
China	22	4.5	
Indonesia	12	2.4	
Thailand	4	0.8	
Brunei	5	1.0	
Saudi Arabia	4	0.8	
Maldives	11	2.2	
Sri Lanka	18	3.6	
Korea	3	0.6	
Bangladesh	5	1.0	
Iraq	2	0.4	
Pakistan	10	2.0	
Philippines	3	0.6	
Africa	11	2.2	
Sudan	2	0.4	
Mauritius	1	0.2	
Nigeria	15	3.0	
Kenya	1	0.2	
Papua New Guinea	2	0.4	
Russia	1	0.2	
United Kingdom	24	4.8	
Canada	1	0.2	
Australia Continent	1	0.2	

Religion			501
Islam	206	41.1	
Hinduism	109	21.8	
Christianity	101	20.2	
Buddhism	76	15.2	
Sikh	8	1.6	
Non-Religious	1	0.2	

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic qualities of the study's respondents. There was a sum of 501 respondents who participated in this study and fit in the inclusion criteria. Most of them were female participants (65.3%), and the remainder of them were male (34.7%). The age of the participants were appropriated as follows: (78.4%) age in the range of (18) and (22), (20.6%) age in the field of (23) and (27), and only (1.0%) of them age in the range to (28) and (32).

Moreover, the participants represented various academic courses from academic fields such as religious studies, literature studies, computer science, arts, science and technology, business, tourism management, law, humanities and social science and medicine. A large portion of the participants, (32.7%), are currently pursuing their degree in medicine and surgery, followed by (11.8%), from the accounting academic course. Most of the participants (41.9%) in this study are currently in their second academic year, followed by (28.7%) in first academic year and (17.4%) from third academic year.

As one of the most prominent predictor variables in this study is culture, the yielded investigation of respondent's nationality recommended that 50.0% of the participants of this study are international students while 50.0% of them are Malaysian (local) students. International students in this study are defined as students who undertake their tertiary education in a country other than their own and move to that country for the purpose of studying. Respondents who most participated in this study are from Malaysia (50.0%), followed by Singapore (9.0%), India (9.0%), United Kingdom (4.8%), China (4.4%), Sri Lanka (3.6%), and Nigeria (3.0%). International students who participated in this study represented the culture of 25 different countries. All participants indicated speaking English fluently. The religion background of participants was as follows: (41.1%) Islam, (21.8%), Hinduism, (20.2%) Christianity, (15.2%) Buddhism, (1.6%) Sikh and (0.2%) non-Religious.

Assessment Measures

Demographic Form

The demographic section was provided to the participants enquiring information regarding gender, age, academic course and stage, country of origin, and religion.

Self-Stigma of Seeking Help (SSOSH)

SSOSH was developed by Vogel (2006). The 10-item scale assesses threats to one's self-evaluation for seeking psychological help. Items are rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with five reversed scored items. A sample item is 'I would feel inadequate if I went to a therapist for psychological help'. This scale predicts attitudes and willingness to seek counselling. The internal consistencies range from .86 to .90 in college samples (Vogel et al., 2006).

The cross-cultural invariance of the psychometrics of the SSOSH scale has also been examined in six separate studies from six different countries, namely England, Greece, Israel, Taiwan, Turkey and the United States. This scale has

shown a unidimensional factor structure and adequate reliability among samples drawn around U.S. Internal consistency has been reported in previous research for general samples of college students (.79 - .92). The reliability values for Middle Eastern American sample (.79; Soheilian & Inman, 2009), samples of African American (.84), Asian American (.85), Latino American (.89; Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011). Test-retest reliabilities among college students were reported to be .72 (Vogel et al., 2006). SSOSH is therefore reliable for predicting attitudes toward ($r = -.65$) and intention to seek ($r = -.37$; Vogel et al., 2006) psychological help. The reliability values for six countries samples, it was found that the internal consistencies across country samples (.77 - .89) were consistent with previous findings on college students (.79 - .92; Vogel et al., 2006) and non-majority samples (.79 - .89; Soheilian & Inman, 2009; Vogel et al., 2011). This is evidence that the SSOSH possesses a construct that can be used to measure cross-cultural groups.

Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale Short Form (ATSPPH-SF)

The Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Scale Short Form (ATSPPH-SF) was developed by Fischer and Turner in 1970 to measure attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help. This scale consists of 10 items such as, 'Although there are clinics for people with mental troubles, I would not have much faith in them (item 1), and emotional difficulties, like many things, tend to work out by themselves (item 9). Participants will need to rate how much they agree with certain statements regarding seeking help from a psychiatric or mental health professional on a 4- point Likert scale (0 = disagreement, 1 = probable disagreement, 2 = probable agreement and 3 = 72 agreement). After the reverse scoring for all the 10 items, the total score indicates participants' help-seeking attitude. A high score indicates positive attitudes towards seeking professional help in mental health services. The internal reliability was .83 (Fischer & Turner, 1970). This scale also demonstrated strong validity when known-group validity tests were run (Fischer and Turner, 1970).

Elhai et al. (2008) identified two constructs within the ATSPPH-SF: openness to seeking professional psychological help and the value and need in seeking professional psychological help. Items 1, 3, 5, 6, and 7 measure openness to seeking professional psychological help, while items 2, 4, 8, 9, and 10 measure the value and need in seeking professional psychological help. The total score ranges from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. A cut-off scores greater than 20 points overall, and greater than 10 points for each construct, signifies positive attitudes. Higher total scores are associated with lower levels of stigma against mental illness (Elhai et al., 2008). A local study on Psychological help-Seeking Attitudes among Malaysian university and college students conducted by Salim (2010) found that this scale showed good and moderately strong consistencies, $r = .86$ ($n=26$), and $r = .89$ ($n=47$) throughout test-retest reliabilities.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, participants provided informed consent. Data was collected from four public

universities and four private universities from Johor Bahru, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Sarawak. Data collection as conducted by participants who were interested to be part of the study. Participants were also allowed to complete the survey at their pace to avoid incomplete or erroneous responses.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical compliance in this research:

- Ethical approval was obtained from the participating universities, adhering to institutional guidelines for conducting research with human subjects.
- Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study through a comprehensive debriefing and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequence.
- Confidentiality of participants' personal information was strictly maintained, with all data securely stored to safeguard their privacy throughout the research process.

Results

Reliability and Validity Analysis

The Cronbach’s alpha trial of internal consistency was utilized to survey constructs that measure the effect of stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes. The Cronbach’s alpha test demonstrated that both the constructs used in this study demonstrated an acceptable to good reliability. Cronbach’s alpha ranged from 0.63 (Self-Stigma of Seeking Psychological Help) to 0.74 (Attitudes towards Professional Psychological Help Seeking). Reliability analysis was conducted to further determine the reliability of sub-constructs for three constructs that measure attitudes in professional psychological help-

seeking.

Reliability analysis was conducted to further determine the reliability of sub-constructs for three constructs that measure attitudes in professional psychological help-seeking. The Cronbach’s alpha value resulted in decent and acceptable value, ATSPPH ($\alpha = 0.74$), openness to seeking professional psychological help ($\alpha = 0.75$), and value and need in seeking professional psychological help ($\alpha = 0.65$).

To determine the validity of unidimensional scale, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. All the items in the SSOSH scale accounted to an acceptable Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value, as it is greater than 0.50 (Kaiser, 1974). Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant for all the three scales ($p < 0.00$), which supports that items in each construct have a shared variance.

Furthermore, a convergent validity analysis was conducted to indicate how closely a scale is related to other variables and other measures of the same construct. Pearson’s r was used to determine whether correlations existed between constructs based on existing correlation standards such as $r = 0$ means no correlation, 0.00 to 0.19 means very weak, 0.20 to 0.39 means weak, 0.40 to 0.59 means moderate, 0.60 to 0.79 means strong, 0.80 to 1 means very strong. The alpha level of significance was set at 0.05, therefore a p value of 0.05 or lower was considered significant (Laerd Statistics, 2020).

The Openness to Seeking Professional Help construct was significantly and positively correlated with the ATSPPH-SF with r -value 0.85. Similarly, the Value and Need in Seeking Professional Help construct correlated significantly and positively with ATSPPH-SF with 0.76 correlation. Moreover, a significant and positive, albeit a weak correlation was observed between the Openness in Seeking Professional Help and Value and Need in Seeking Professional Help constructs with r -value 0.31.

Table 2
Effect of Self-Stigma on Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes

	Local				International				Complete			
	B	t	p	Results	B	t	p	Results	B	t	p	Results
Hypothesis 1	0.32	1.30	0.27	Not supported	-0.38	7.71	0.00	Supported	-0.03	4.96	0.00	Supported
Self-stigma Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes		R-sq	Q-sq		R-sq	Q-sq		R-sq	Q-sq		R-sq	Q-sq
		0.10	0.01		0.15	0.10		0.09	0.06			

Note. Relationships are significant at $p < 0.05$. B=Beta coefficient, T= t-statistics, p=Probability(p) value.

The results in Table 2 revealed that the results for each nationality-specific sample are essentially consistent with those for the total sample. Although the effect of self-stigma on the attitudes towards psychological help-seeking was insignificant for the local sample ($b = 0.32, t = 1.09, p = 0.27$), a significant negative effect of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes was found among the international ($b = -0.38, t = 7.71, p = 0.00$).

Next, model explanatory power is assessed. The R-square values for the endogenous variables ranged from 0.09 – 0.16 across the local, international and complete samples in the study. The R-square values can be described as weak to moderate. Predictive relevance was accessed using Q-square value. The Q-square values of the endogenous construct range from 0.01 – 0.10. The Q-square value in the study can be described as weak. This analysis depicts that self-stigma negatively predicts psychological help-seeking attitudes among the overall sample of this study. Hence, hypothesis 1 is supported.

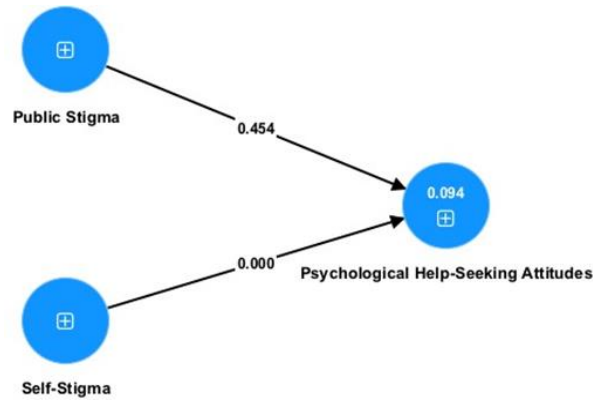


Figure 2. Structural Equation Model Analysis for the Effect of Stigma on Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes among Malaysian University Students.

Table 3

Differences among Local and International Students in Terms of the Effect of Self-Stigma on the Attitudes Towards Psychological Help-Seeking.

Relationships	Difference (local-international)	p-value
Self-stigma – Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes	0.71	0.01*

Note. *The differences are significant in the relationships between the two samples ($p < 0.05$).

Next, the notable variations between local and international samples in terms of the effects of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes were explored. The findings revealed that significant differences were found. The differences in path coefficients revealed that the impact of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes were

stronger and significant among international samples. These findings depict that there are differences in terms of the effects of self-stigma and psychological help-seeking attitudes among local and international students. Hence, hypothesis 2 is supported. The results of the multigroup analysis were summarized in Table 3.

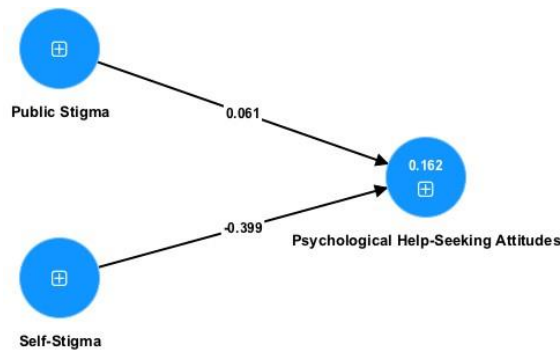


Figure 3. Multigroup Analysis on the Effect of Stigma on Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes between Local and International University Students.

Table 4

The Differences Between Male and Female Students in Terms of Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes.

		Mean	SD	N	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Psychological help-seeking attitudes	Male	15.55	4.96	174	0.99	499	0.31
	Female	15.07	5.17	327			
Openness to seeking professional psychological help	Male	9.29	3.31	174	1.76	499	0.07
	Female	8.72	3.54	327			
Value and need in seeking professional psychological help	Male	6.25	2.70	174	-0.37	499	0.70
	Female	6.35	2.72	327			

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the psychological help-seeking attitudes for male and female participants. There were no significant differences in terms of the psychological help-seeking attitudes ($t(499) = 0.99, p = 0.31$) in scores for male ($M = 15.55, SD = 4.96$) and female ($M = 15.07, SD = 5.17$). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 0.47, 95% CI: -0.46 to 1.41) was very small. However, the group statistics show that male students ($M = 9.29, SD = 3.31$) held more positive psychological help-seeking attitudes and are open to seeking psychological help compared to female ($M = 8.72, SD = 3.54$) albeit the insignificance. Female participants scored higher ($M = 6.35, SD = 2.72$) than their counterparts ($M = 6.25, SD = 2.70$) for the value and need in seeking professional help albeit the insignificance.

Discussion

The Effect Of Self-Stigma On Psychological Help Seeking Attitudes.

Results of this study indicated that self-stigma significantly and negatively affected the attitudes towards seeking psychological help among both local and international students. In other words, higher levels of self-stigma correlate with more negative attitudes towards seeking psychological support (Corrigan, 2004). Negative attitudes towards psychological help-seeking include reluctance and unreadiness to seek psychological help. This reluctance to seek help may stem from internalized societal stigmas surrounding psychological help-seeking, which can deter individuals from seeking help for their mental health issues. These findings could be understood through the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which posits that behaviour is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. The TPB framework suggests that while participants generally valued psychological help (positive attitudes), their internalised societal perceptions of help-seeking (subjective norms) and feelings of self-stigma (perceived behavioural control) may have limited their intentions to seek help. This, in turn, manifested as reluctance or hesitation in actually seeking psychological support. The self-stigma served as a form of perceived behavioural control in this study, diminishing students' confidence and perceived ability to take the step toward accessing mental health services. These findings align with past research, such as that by Topkaya (2014), which established that self-stigma often predicts negative attitudes towards help-seeking. Additionally, the Theory of Reasoned Action suggests that attitudes and perceptions of social norms influence intentions, indicating that societal perceptions may contribute to self-stigma, thus hindering help-seeking behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000).

An intriguing observation from this study was that 33.7% (169 participants) somewhat disagreed that their self-esteem would increase by seeking professional help. This could be due to the self-perceptions that form self-labelling that impacts self-esteem following professional help. According to Corrigan (2004), self-esteem is perceived to be threatened by seeking psychological help. Fewer positive attitudes towards seeking psychological help are linked to the fear of the aftereffects of seeking psychological help which may reduce self-esteem (Vally et al., 2018). To address these barriers, targeted interventions could focus on reducing self-stigma and building coping mechanisms for issues related to self-esteem. One promising approach is through psychotherapy and psychoeducational programs, which have shown effectiveness in reducing stigmatising beliefs and reshaping attitudes toward mental health (Olah et al., 2022). These interventions could help students challenge negatives internalised beliefs and

increase their readiness to seek help when needed (Eui & Tan, 2019). In conclusion, the significant impact of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes underscores the importance of addressing this issue through targeted interventions, as it can have profound effects on university students' mental well-being.

The differences between local and international students in terms of the effect of self-stigma on the attitudes towards psychological help-seeking.

This study revealed significant differences between local and international students in terms of the impact of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes. Self-stigma significantly predicted reluctance to seek help among international students but not among local students. This discrepancy may stem from local students' exposure to mental health education initiatives, such as the National Strategic Plan for Mental Health in Malaysia Ministry of Health Malaysia (2021). These efforts aim to enhance mental health literacy and awareness, fostering a positive attitude towards mental health and reducing self-stigma. Local students, recently completing secondary education, likely benefited from mental health programs, fostering positive attitudes toward seeking help. Their familiarity with mental health issues and available support services may contribute to reduced self-stigma and increased help-seeking behaviour Ibrahim et al. (2019).

On the other hand, international students from diverse cultural backgrounds, may face higher levels of self-stigma due to cultural differences and lack of exposure to mental health education in their home countries (Lu & Tang, 2018). Furthermore, socioeconomic status may influence self-stigma and psychological help-seeking attitudes, with lower socioeconomic status associated with higher self-stigma among local students Ibrahim et al., (2019). Additionally, religious beliefs may influence informal support preferences over professional help among religious students (Ramadhan et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of addressing self-stigma among international students to promote psychological help-seeking. Educating students about mental health, improving access to support services, and fostering a supportive campus environment are crucial in reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behaviour. Future research could explore interventions targeting self-stigma reduction among international students to further enhance mental health outcomes.

An additional explanation for this finding is that international students may experience high levels of self-stigma due to limited awareness of mental health issues in their home countries. Poor governance was identified as a barrier to effective mental health care integration in low- and middle-income countries like India, South Africa, and Nigeria which results in inadequate mental health awareness (Petersen et al., 2017). This lack of awareness contributes to international students' inability to access mental health resources on campus, especially for those from countries with limited mental health education (Lau et al., 2018). For instance, international students with self-stigma may avoid discussions about mental health to avoid confronting their condition. Therefore, normalizing mental health conversations and raising awareness of available support services on university campuses are crucial, particularly in cultures where mental health is stigmatized (Ismail & Kahwa, 2020). Additionally, a survey on barriers to accessing mental health support among international students highlighted a lack of regular communication about available services (ICEF, 2022). To address these challenges, international students could receive education on effective strategies for dealing with mental health stigma during their university induction week (Lau et al., 2018; Olah et al., 2022).

The differences between male and female students in terms of psychological help-seeking attitudes.

This study found no significant gender-based differences in psychological help-seeking attitudes among students. Similarly, Samsudin et al. (2023) found that gender did not play a significant role in determining psychological help-seeking attitudes in their study. Despite statistically insignificant, male students displayed a greater openness towards seeking psychological help compared to their female counterparts. Conversely, female students were found to place a higher value and express a greater need for professional help (Guney et al., 2024). These findings suggest that despite holding positive attitudes towards seeking professional help, male students may hinder from doing so due to self-stigmatization, which was associated with a negative prediction of psychological help-seeking attitudes (Ozdemir et al., 2023). The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) helps elucidate these findings, emphasizing the role of alignment among attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in shaping intentions and subsequent behaviours. For male participants in the study, although they exhibited openness and positive attitudes towards seeking professional help (attitudes), the internalized stigma surrounding help-seeking (perceived behavioural control) hindered their intentions to seek psychological support, thus impeding actual help-seeking behaviour.

Additionally, societal norms linking masculinity with strength contribute to the public stigma attached to male help-seeking behaviours, often construed as signs of weakness and incompetence (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2021). Consequently, these perceptions, when internalized, manifest as self-stigmatization among males, deterring them from seeking professional psychological assistance (Kocabiyyik & Bacioğlu, 2021). Despite the absence of significant gender-based differences, the study underscores the universal importance of psychological support for university students, given the escalating prevalence of mental health issues within this demographic (Samsudin et al., 2023). However, reluctance persists among university students to seek help, even in times of crisis (Ramdass et al., 2020), indicating that self-stigma continues to exert a negative impact on psychological help-seeking attitudes among this population. Moving forward, future research could explore additional factors contributing to negative psychological help-seeking attitudes among university students in the Malaysian context. Understanding these factors is imperative for devising effective interventions aimed at promoting mental health support-seeking behaviours among this vulnerable demographic.

Conclusion

In Malaysia, a concerning increase in cases related to poor mental health has been observed (Arumugam et al., 2021). Stigma has emerged as a significant barrier preventing individuals from seeking professional help for mental health issues (Eui & Tan, 2019). Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the impact of self-stigma on psychological help-seeking attitudes, as well as explore whether this relationship varied among local and international university students in the Malaysian context.

In this quantitative cross-cultural comparison study, 501 responses were gathered from university students enrolled in both public and private universities across Malaysia. Participants were selected through simple random sampling from September 2022 to January 2023, utilizing online surveys via Google Form and physical surveys. The Attitudes towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form (ATSPPH-SF) and the Self-Stigma of Seeking Help (SSOSH) were employed as measurement instruments. After data

cleaning and screening, the analysis focused on 251 Malaysian students and 250 international students.

The results revealed that self-stigma negatively predicted psychological help-seeking attitudes among university students in this study. These findings address a notable gap in societal understanding regarding how self-stigma influences attitudes towards seeking psychological help. Notably, lower scores on self-stigma were associated with higher scores on psychological help-seeking (Yu et al., 2023), suggesting that self-stigma may exert a more significant impact on university students' attitudes and intentions regarding seeking help compared to public stigma. Consequently, the study suggests that educational initiatives aimed at fostering positive self-perception among university students regarding help-seeking behaviors could be beneficial (Mesran et al., 2023).

The interconnectedness of mental health literacy, self-stigma regarding seeking psychological help, and attitudes towards seeking help is evident (Cheng et al., 2018). Enhancing mental health literacy and promoting positive attitudes towards help-seeking can contribute to reducing self-stigma. Thus, it is crucial to design targeted programs tailored to specific student groups, imparting understanding of how self-stigma influences their thoughts and equipping them with coping strategies to overcome negative perceptions towards seeking help (Lannin et al., 2019). For example, web-based intervention programs, such as online interventions, have demonstrated promise in reducing stigma and fostering help-seeking behaviors (Goh et al., 2021), offering accessible platforms for individuals to engage in stigma reduction strategies (Rodriguez et al., 2022).

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