Trends and Barriers to Seeking Counselling Help Among University Students in China: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Seeking counselling help is an essential strategy for addressing mental health issues, particularly among university students who face various academic and personal challenges. This research examines help-seeking behaviour for counselling among university students from China. A systematic search of electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, CNKI, and Google Scholar was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines. Search terms included "Chinese university students" AND "counselling" OR "mental health help" OR "mental health service" AND "mental health" AND "help-seeking" OR "seeking help" AND "barriers to seeking counselling" OR "challenges in seeking counselling." The research was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2024. Quality assessment was performed on the identified studies. Based on the selection criteria, 32 articles, met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 23 studies employed quantitative methods; one used a cohort design, three used qualitative methods, one used mixed methods, and four used experimental designs. Drawing on data from 39,495 participants, the analysis revealed the prevalence of help-seeking, the barriers to help-seeking and the interventions implemented. Findings suggest that help-seeking for counselling among Chinese university students is relatively low. The decision to seek help is influenced by a complex interplay of barriers, including attitudes, stigma, mental health literacy, and other facilitators. Additionally, cultural factors play a significant role in shaping help-seeking behaviours. Future research should focus on experimental studies to better understand trends in help-seeking behaviour and to develop high-reliability and high-validity intervention programmes that account for cultural influences.

Keywords: Chinese university students, help-seeking, mental health literacy, intervention, barriers

Abstrak

Mendapatkan bantuan kaunseling merupakan cara penting untuk menangani masalah kesihatan mental, terutamanya dalam kalangan pelajar universiti yang menghadapi pelbagai cabaran akademik dan peribadi. Kajian ini mengkaji penyelidikan tentang mendapatkan bantuan kaunseling dalam kalangan pelajar universiti di China. Pencarian sistematik daripada pangkalan data elektronik termasuk PubMed, PsycINFO, CNKI dan Google Scholar dilaksanakan mengikut panduan PRISMA. Istilah carian termasuk 'pelajar universiti Cina' DAN 'kaunseling' ATAU 'bantuan kesihatan mental' ATAU 'perkhidmatan kesihatan mental' DAN 'kesihatan mental' DAN 'mencari bantuan' ATAU 'mencari bantuan' DAN 'halangan untuk mendapatkan kaunseling' ATAU 'cabaran untuk mendapatkan kaunseling'. Kajian ini terhad kepada artikel semakan rakan yang diterbitkan antara 2010 dan 2024. Penilaian kualiti telah dijalankan dalam kajian-kajian yang dikenal pasti. Berdasarkan kriteria pemilihan, 32 artikel termasuk 4 kajian intervensi mencari bantuan memenuhi kriteria inklusi. 23 kajian menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan kuantitatif; 1 menggunakan reka bentuk kohort, 3 menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan kualitatif; 1 menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan campuran dan 4 eksperimen. Analisis itu mendedahkan kelaziman pencarian bantuan dalam kalangan pelajar universiti di China, halangan untuk mencari bantuan, dan intervensi yang dilaksanakan kepada pelajar universiti di China yang terdiri daripada 39,495 peserta. Kajian menunjukkan bahawa mendapatkan bantuan kaunseling dalam kalangan pelajar universiti Cina ialah agak rendah. Pencarian bantuan pelajar universiti Cina dipengaruhi oleh interaksi kompleks halangan seperti sikap, stigma, celik kesihatan mental dan beberapa faktor lain. Walaupun budaya merupakan faktor berpotensi penting yang mempengaruhi pencarian bantuan dalam kalangan pelajar universiti di China. Penyelidikan masa depan harus memberi tumpuan kepada kajian eksperimen untuk lebih memahami trend dalam tingkah laku mencari bantuan dan membangunkan program intervensi yang kebolehpercayaan dan kesahan tinggi dalam pengaruh budaya.

Kata kunci: Pelajar universiti di China, mendapatkan bantuan, literasi kesihatan mental, intervensi, halangan

■1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 years, mental health problems have become increasingly prevalent among university students in China (Liao, 2023). Local studies report that 20% to 25% of university students in China experience mental health problems (Fan et al., 2024; Lei et al., 2016). Another study found that 40.7% of students exhibited at least one mental health symptom, while 7.6% reported suicidal behaviour in the previous year (Tang et al., 2018). Several studies observed a decline in student mental health between 2005 and 2019, characterized by rising rates of

anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and suicide attempts (Chen et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022). It is estimated that approximately 50% of students suspended or withdrawn from university have psychological disorders or mental illnesses (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated these mental health challenges, with mental health problems now being one of the leading causes of academic failure and suicide among university students in China (Huang & Saito, 2020; Liang & Feng, 2024). Timely mental health support or seeking help is crucial in facing mental health problems among university students. The early recognition of mental health issues and prompt help-seeking behaviour can significantly moderate the long-term impact of mental health challenges (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Islam et al., 2020).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) is highly relevant to help-seeking behaviour, as it explains how individuals decide whether to seek help and provides a valuable framework for understanding and addressing barriers to help-seeking. Therefore, mental health interventions that focus on changing attitudes, reducing stigma, and increasing social support can effectively encourage help-seeking behaviour.

Vogel et al. (2017) define mental health help-seeking as the intentional act of obtaining support or treatment to address mental health needs, including direct actions, such as visiting a counsellor or therapist, and indirect efforts, such as discussing mental health concerns with friends or family. This definition aligns with the framework proposed by Rickwood and Thomas, who describe help-seeking as involving the "utilization of care," which includes visiting healthcare providers, seeking advice, and expressing a willingness to seek help (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). For college students, mental health help-seeking involves recognizing when they're facing emotional or psychological challenges and taking steps to get support from both formal sources, like campus counsellors or therapists, and informal ones, such as friends, family, or online resources. With the rising number of adolescents experiencing mental health problems, the help-seeking tendency among university students in China remains uncertain. Timely help-seeking can alleviate mental health difficulties. In this review, the focus on seeking help from formal sources refers to seeking help from mental health professionals, particularly through counselling services, when experiencing mental health problems.

Research indicates that only 21.4% of college students have utilized psychological counselling services. Additionally, 38.0% of undergraduate students and 11.9% of college and junior college students have expressed no intention of using university counselling services (Wang et al., 2021). These studies indicate that many students who experience mental health problems do not seek help, the low rate of mental health help-seeking among college students in China is a pressing concern. As a result, there is a critical need for research focused on identifying and addressing these barriers, as well as developing interventions that can increase help-seeking rates among students. Such research is essential to better understand the factors that influence help-seeking behaviour and to create targeted strategies to promote mental health help services utilization.

This systematic review aims to present an updated overview of the literature on the barriers and current state of mental health help-seeking, with a focus on counselling services among university students in China, as well as the effectiveness of interventions designed to enhance help-seeking behaviour. Although most studies have focused on Chinese international students, especially in the U.S., where they face additional cultural challenges, examining help-seeking for counselling among university students in China is critical. This focus allows for an understanding of the unique barriers and challenges reported by students in China regarding counselling services. The findings from this review can also support future research on strategies to increase the utilization of counselling services.

■ **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

This review synthesizes data on counselling help-seeking behaviours, barriers, and interventions among Chinese university students. Counselling help-seeking is defined as seeking professional mental health assistance, particularly through counselling services, for mental health issues. In China, due to translation and cultural nuances, "seeking mental health help" is often termed "seeking professional psychological help". Thus, both terms are considered equivalent to counselling help in this review.

2.1 Search Strategy and Study Selection

This systematic review used a comprehensive search through PubMed, PsycINFO, CNKI, and Google Scholar, covering articles from 2010 to 2024. The search was conducted in July 2024, and the entire process of literature identification, screening, and eligibility assessment was completed over approximately two weeks. Following a 2007 guidance published by China's Ministry of Education to enhance mental health education and establish student counselling centers, this timeframe allows for analysis of both long-term and recent trends in counselling help-seeking among university students in China. The review, following PRISMA guidelines, includes English and Chinese studies on barriers, facilitators, and interventions for help-seeking, excluding issues like psychosis and anorexia because we aimed to focus on the most prevalent mental health issues that share a more similar help-seeking process.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria for the studies were the following: (1)those that address either mental health help-seeking behaviour OR attitude related to counselling AND those that discuss barriers OR facilitators of mental health help-seeking; (2) those that involve university students in China; (3) those that employed any type of study designs, whether quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods; (4) must be full-text peer-reviewed articles published in scholarly journals or book chapters, 2010-2024; (5) written either in English or Chinese; and (6) available in printed or downloadable format. Multiple articles based on the same research are treated as one study/paper.

Exclusion criteria were: (1) studies in which the reported problems that prompted help-seeking are medical, career or vocational, academic or developmental disorders, unless specified that there is an associated mental health concern (e.g., anxiety, depression, trauma); (2) studies that discuss general health-seeking behaviours; (3) studies that are not from the perspective of mental health service users (e.g., counselor's perspective); (4) systematic reviews, meta-analyses and other forms of literature review; and (5) unpublished studies including dissertations and theses, clinical reports, theory or methods papers, commentaries or editorials.

The quality of cross-sectional, experimental, and qualitative studies was assessed using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) framework (Moola et al., 2020; Tufanaru et al., 2020). The quality of mixed-method studies was evaluated with the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018). In this review, all papers (n = 32) met the minimum quality assessment criteria for their respective study designs and were therefore included.

■3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Study Selection

Of the initial 954 records identified through database searches, a total of 113 articles were deemed eligible for full-text review after removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts. Among these, 32 studies met the eligibility criteria, while 81 studies were excluded. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA Flow Diagram of the search strategy
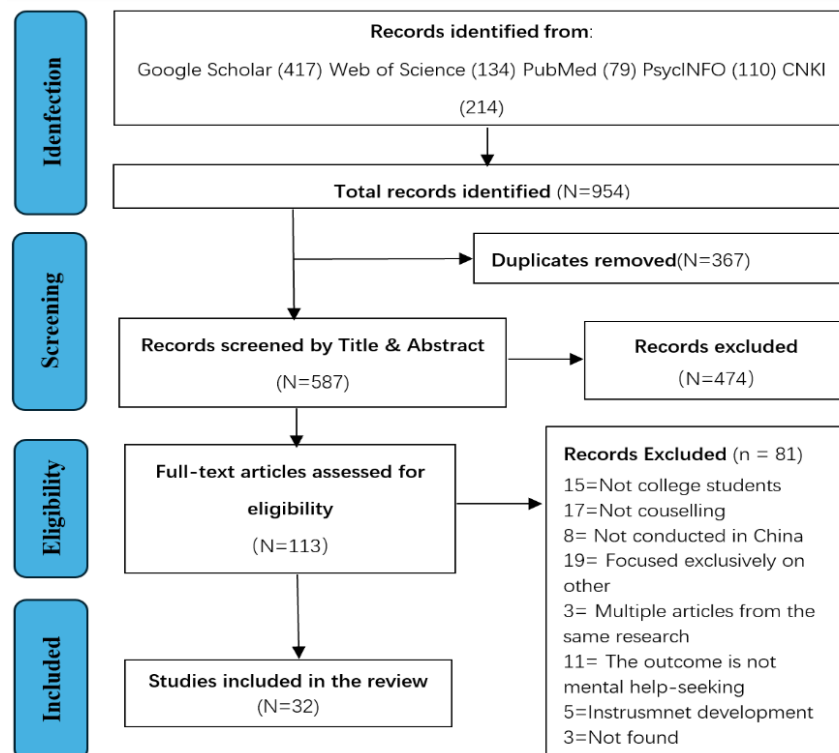

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram of Search Strategy

3.2 Study Quality

The quality assessment of the studies is based on the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) and Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) frameworks, which assess critical aspects of research design, data collection, analysis, and overall reliability. The JBI criteria assess the clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of the design, sample representativeness, data collection methods, validity and reliability of tools, ethical considerations, and the support of conclusions by results. The MMAT criteria focus on the adequacy of the study design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, data integration in mixed methods, and the consistency between findings and conclusions. The quality of the study based on their score that 80-100 is good-quality study with well-addressed criteria, 60-79 is fair-quality with some criteria not fully addressed, lower than 50 is poor quality. The quality of these studies shows in Table 1. Of the 23 quantitatively designed studies, 18 were of 'good' quality and 5 were of 'fair' quality. Two qualitative studies were of 'good' quality and one was 'fair'. Additionally, of the mixed-methods study was of 'fair' quality. The cohort design study was 'good' quality. Among the experimental studies, 2 were of 'good' quality, while 2 were 'fair' quality.

Table 1 Quality of these studies

Study	Design	Sample Size	Risk of Bias	Quality Rating
Quantitative				
Chang,2014	cross-sectional	981	Low	Good
Lan,2016	cross-sectional	214	Low	Good
Li, Denson&Dorstyn,2017	cross-sectional	1128	Low	Good
Tao, Zheng & Tang,2017	cross-sectional	186	Low	Good
Wang & Xia,2017	cross-sectional	1408	Low	Good
Tang &Du,2020	cross-sectional	197	Low	Good
Peng &Hao,2020	cross-sectional	673	Low	Good
Alflre, Xie & Yi,2021	cross-sectional	262	Low	Good
Sum et al.,2022	cross-sectional	945	Low	Good
Hu et al.,2022	cross-sectional	254	Low	Good
Pan & Hao,2022	cross-sectional	817	Low	Good
Wang, Chen &Di,2022	cross-sectional	222	Low	Good
Wong et al.,2022	cross-sectional	186	Low	Good
Wang et al.,2023	cross-sectional	569	Low	Good
Su,2023	cross-sectional	1042	Low	Good
Jia et al.,2023	cross-sectional	12,850	Low	Good
Shui, Song & Chen,2023	cross-sectional	950	Low	Good
Xiao & Zheng,2024	cross-sectional	500	Low	Good
Chan et al.,2016	cross-sectional	258	Medium	Fair
Li,2016	cross-sectional	333	Medium	Fair
Du et al.,2021	cross-sectional	995	Medium	Fair
Li, 2013	cross-sectional	360	Medium	Fair
Chan et al.,2016	cross-sectional	258	Medium	Fair
Qualitative				
Ning et al,2022	focus groups	147	Low	Good
Yu et al.,2022	focus groups	288	Medium	Good
Busiol, 2016	Interview	32	Low	Fair
Mixed-method				
Jiang, Tang & Zhang,2020	Cross-sectional & Interview	653+44	Medium	Fair
Cohort design				
Liu et al.,2017	cohort design	13,085	Low	Good
Experimental				
Ahorsu et al.,2021	Randomized Controlled Trials	62	Low	Good
Song et al.,2021	Randomized Controlled Trials	200	Medium	Good
Wang & Chan,2015	Randomized Controlled Trials	60	Medium	Fair
Zheng,2021	Randomized Controlled Trials	No information	Medium	Fair

Overall, the quality of the studies ranged from moderate to high, with most studies demonstrating appropriate research designs and well-executed data collection methods. However, common areas for improvement include addressing potential biases, enhancing the reliability analysis, and better integrating qualitative and quantitative data in mixed-methods studies. Moreover, most quantitative studies use cross-sectional designs, this restricting the ability to make causal inferences (Savitz & Wellenius, 2022). More qualitative and experimental research is needed to explore the factors that influence counselling help-seeking and identify causal relationships among the factors.

3.3 Published Year, Location And Language Of Studies

Table 2 summarizes the number and year of publication of the included reviews. More than 62.5% of the studies have been conducted since 2020, while fewer than 13% were conducted before 2015. Among the included papers, 17 were written in English, and 15 were in Chinese. Moreover, 25 studies were conducted in mainland China, 4 in Hong Kong, 2 in Taiwan, and 1 in Macao.

Table 2 Published year and numbers of studies

Published Year	Number	Reference
2010-2015	4(12.5%)	Li,2013; Cheang & Davis ,2014; Chang,2014; Wang & Chan,2015;
2016-2020	11(31.25%)	Chan et al.,2016; Lan,2016; Busiol, 2016; Li, Denson&Dorstyn,2017; Wang & Xia,2017; Liu et al.,2017; Tao, Zheng & Tang,2017; Li,2016; Tang &Du,2020; Jiang, Tang & Zhang,2020; Peng &Hao,2020;
2020-2024	17(56.25%)	Pan & Hao,2022; Shi & Hall,2021; Ahorsu et al.,2021; Song et al.,2021; Alflre, Xie & Yi,2021; Zheng,2021; Du et al.,2021; Ning et al,2022; Yu et al.,2022; Wong et al.,2022; Wang, Chen &Di,2022; Hu et al.,2022; Wang et al.,2023; Su,2023; Xiao & Zheng,2024; Jia et al.,2023; Shui, Song & Chen,2023

3.4 Title, Abstract And Keywords Of Studies

The results showed that 30 articles included "help-seeking" in the title: 6 reference behaviour, 15 attitude, 3 intention, 3 factors, and 3 performance and situation. One article used "treatment-seeking." Additionally, 9 articles mentioned stigma, 3 mental health literacy, and 2 gender. About 65.6% (N=21) had structured abstracts with clear context, objectives, methods, results, and summaries, while the rest do not clearly describe the study and do not provide the reader with a clear overview of their studies.

Keywords in 62.5% (n=20) of articles mentioned college students, 6 including "counselling" and 12 "mental health help-seeking." "Help-seeking attitude or attitude" appeared in 43.75% (n=14) of the keywords, stigma in 31.25% (n=10), and mental health literacy in 15.62% (n=5). Additionally, two other articles included 'Chinese culture' and 'face' in their keywords.

3.5 Method Of Studies

A total of 32 articles, including 4 intervention studies focused on help-seeking, met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 25 employed quantitative research methods, 1 utilized a cohort design, 3 used qualitative research methods, and 3 employed mixed-method approaches. In total, 39,495 participants were involved, including 412 students in Hong Kong, 1,195 in Taiwan, and 391 in Macao.

Of the 32 articles in the study, 3 used purposive sampling, 9 used convenience sampling, 18 employed random sampling, 1 utilized stratified sampling, and 1 study did not mention the sampling method. The fact that half of the studies used random sampling suggests that their findings may be generalizable (Andrade, 2021). Additionally, 24 (75%) studies employed cross-sectional designs, 4 is experimental study and experimental and mixed method studies remain uncommon.

Table 3 show the instruments used in these articles. The instruments used are widely used in many countries, but some have not been verified for reliability and validity in the Chinese population. Among instruments used in these studies, the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPH, Hao et al.,2007 Chinese version) used in 6 studies, the Stigma Scale for Receiving Psychological Help (SSRPH; Hao et al.,2011 Chinese version) in 3 studies and the Self- Stigma of Seeking Help Scale (SSOSH; Hao et al.,2007 Chinese version) in 1 study were Chinese version adapted by Hao et al. 1 study conducted back-to-back translation of instruments. Other studies may use the instruments directly. This finding suggests that culturally adapted instruments were not common. Additionally, six studies used self-developed instruments based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

Table 3 Instruments of studies

Variables	Instrument	Number of used
Attitude	The Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form (ATSPPH; Fischer and Farina, 1995)	11
	The Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form (ATSPPH, Hao et al.,2007 Chinese version)	6
	Attitudes of College Students Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (Yang, 2006)	1
	Attitude Toward Seeking Help from Counselor (ATSHC)	1
	The scale on help-seeking attitudes in cyber counseling (Rochlen et al.2004)	1
stigma	Self- Stigma of Seeking Help Scale (SSOSH; Vogel, Wade & Haake, 2006)	3
	Self- Stigma of Seeking Help Scale (SSOSH, Hao et al.,2007 Chinese version)	1
	Stigma Scale for Receiving Psychological Help (SSRPH; Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000).	1
	Stigma Scale for Receiving Psychological Help (SSRPH; Hao et al.,2011 Chinese version).	3
	Perceptions of Stigmatization by Others for Seeking Help scale (PSOSH; Vogel et al. 2009)	2
	Stigma Scale Towards People with Mental Illness, (SSForPMI)	1
Mental health literacy	National Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire	1
	Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire (MHLQ)	1
	Adolescent Mental Health Literacy Rating Scale (AMHLAQ)	1
Intention	Intentions to Seek Counseling Inventory (ISCI, Cash et al. 1975)	2
	Willingness to See a Counselor scale (WSC; Gim et al. 1990)	1
Behaviour	Indirect Help-seeking Experiences Questionnaire (IHSEQ)	1
Culture	The Loss of Face scale (LOF; Zane & Yeh, 2002)	1
	The Asian Values Scale (AVS; Kim et al. 1999)	2

3.6 Results Of Studies

Table 4 shows the main results of the 32 articles. Among these, there are 29 articles focused on factors affecting help-seeking and the inter relationships among these factors, while 7 articles mentioned the current situation of mental health help-seeking and attitudes among university students in China. 4 studies validated the effectiveness of intervention programs designed based on these influencing factors.

Table 4 Main results of the studies

	Results	Number of mentioned	Number of studies
Help-seeking Influence Factors	Attitude	20	29
	Stigma (Self-Stigma AND Public-stigma)	18	
	Mental health literacy	6	
	Self-esteem/ self-efficiency/ Self-concealment	6	
	Gender	5	
	Age/Grade	4	
	Mental health status	3	
	Social support	3	
	Prior counselling Experience	2	
	Chinese Culture	2	
	Perceived Need of counselling	1	
	Proactive personality	1	
Intervention strategy	education and contact	1	4
	Peer-lead	1	
	Group counselling	1	
	Brief media	1	

Table 5 summarizes the variables, methods and key findings of the studies investigating help-seeking behaviour in the context of mental health. These studies employed various research designs, including qualitative (N=3), quantitative (cross-sectional studies, N=23; cohort design study, N=1), mix-method (N=1) and experimental (N=4) desings, with samples ranging from university students in mainland China (N=33,953) to broader Chinese populations (N=1,998). Common barriers to help-seeking identified across studies include stigma (particularly self-stigma), low mental health literacy, cultural influences, and misconceptions or mistrust about counselling services. Mental health literacy consistently emerges as a key facilitator, with higher literacy levels linked to a greater willingness to seek professional help. Other factors influencing help-seeking include self-esteem, self-efficacy, gender, and academic year, highlighting the role of demographic and psychological characteristics in shaping help-seeking behaviour. Additionally, experimental and peer-led interventions were found to have potential in enhancing students' mental health awareness and reducing barriers to seeking help. Overall, the findings emphasize the need for multi-level interventions that address both individual and contextual factors to promote timely and effective help-seeking among students and other populations.

Table 5 Summary of the variables, ,methods and key findings

Variables		Study (Year)	Methodology	Key Findings
Help-seeking behaviour	Help-seeking behaviour	Busiol, 2016	Qualitative	Help-seeking benavuour rate is low among Chinese college students.
	Help-seeking attitude and behaviour	Li,2013 Ning et al,2022 Jiang, Tang & Zhang,2020	Cross-sectional Qualitative Mix -method	Help-seeking attitude affects help-seeking behaviour.
	Help-seeking stigma and behviour	Ning et al,2022; Yu et al.,2022 Jiang, Tang & Zhang,2020 Tao, Zheng & Tang,2017; Du et al.,2021; Wong et al.,2022; Wang, Chen &Di,2022 Song et al.,2021	Qualitative Mix -method Cross-sectional Experimental	Self-stigma and public stigma (including stigma towards psychiatry) are significant influence help-seeking behaviour.
	MHL and behaviour	Ning et al,2022 Liu et al.,2017	Qualitative Cohort design	Low mental health literacy is a barrier that prevents students from seeking help.
	Grade and behaviour	Li,2016; Tang &Du,2020; Alflre, Xie & Yi,2021	Cross-sectional	Academic year influence help-seeking behaviour. Freshmen may be more skeptical or less likely to seek help.
Help-seeking Intention	Help-seeking attitude and intention	Lan,2016; Wang & Xia,2017; Shi & Hall,2021; Pan & Hao,2022; Wang et al.,2023	Cross-sectional	Help-seeking attitude, mental health literacy, and stigma were all significant predictors of intention to seek professional help.
	Help-seeking stigma and intention	Shi & Hall,2021		
	MHL and intention	Jia et al.,2023		
Help-seeking Attitude	Stigma and attitude	Cheng & Davis, 2014; Li, Denson&Dorstyn,2017; Tao, Zheng & Tang,2017; Wang, Chen &Di,2022; Wong et al.,2022; Su,2023; Shui,Song & Chen,2023	Cross-sectional	Participants with lower levels of stigma had significantly more positive attitudes towards seeking help.
	MHL and attitude	Hu et al.,2022; Xiao & Zheng,2024	Cross-sectional	Higher mental health literacy is associated positively attitude towards seek professional help.
		Ahorsu et al.,2021 Song et al.,2021 Zheng,2021 Wang & Chan,2015	Experimental	
	Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, Hope and attitude	Wang & Xia, 2017; Peng & Hao,2020	Cross-sectional	Self-Esteem, self-efficacy, hope are positively correlated with help-seeking intention.

Findings show that help-seeking behaviours, attitudes, and intentions among Chinese university students are suboptimal, needing significant improvement. Key influences include attitudes, stigma (self and public), and mental health literacy, with attitudes highlighted in 20 of 29 studies. Additional factors such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-concealment, all linked to stigma and cultural context, also play roles, as do gender, age, mental health status, social support, and prior counselling experience. Interventions identified to address barriers to help-seeking generally use psychoeducation and group counselling in the form of strategies such as social contact, peer-led and brief videos. These findings emphasize the complexity of help-seeking behaviour and the importance of targeted interventions to address various influencing factors, particularly those related to stigma and cultural influences.

■4.0 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This systematic review focused on the barriers, facilitators, and interventions related to seeking counselling help among university students in China. Since 2020, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies addressing help-seeking behaviour, reflecting a growing concern among students about mental health issues, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Abrams, 2022). Despite this heightened awareness, a large gap remains between recognizing mental health needs and actively seeking help. Although many Chinese universities offer accessible counselling services, the utilization rate remains low, which aligns with global trends suggesting that structural accessibility alone is insufficient to encourage engagement with mental health services (Hubbard et al., 2018; Lipson et al., 2020).

This review highlights several key factors influencing help-seeking behaviour, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-concealment, which often mediate their impact through self-stigma. These psychological constructs, intertwined with cultural values, add complexity to the barriers faced by university students in China seeking mental health support. Drawing from TPB, the findings of this review suggest that university students' mental health help-seeking behaviours are significantly influenced by their attitudes toward seeking help, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioural control. Attitude serves as a major determinant of help-seeking intention were shaped by factors such as stigma, cultural beliefs, and past experiences. In collectivist cultures, peer and family expectations played pivotal roles as social approval is highly valued. Furthermore, students perceived behavioural control such as their confidence in accessing and utilizing counselling services was influenced by barriers including low mental health literacy, service accessibility, and self-efficacy. These findings align with TPB, reinforcing that interventions aimed at improving help-seeking behaviours should not only target individual attitudes but also work to shift social norms across different cultural contexts and enhance students' sense of control and capability in accessing mental health support.

Self-esteem emerged as a significant factor shaping attitudes towards seeking help. Interestingly, higher self-esteem was paradoxically associated with greater self-stigma, as many students with elevated self-esteem perceive that seeking help for mental health issues could lead to negative judgments or a loss of social standing (Park et al., 2019; Thai, 2024). This behaviour is strongly linked to traditional Chinese cultural values, such as "face-saving," which emphasizes maintaining social dignity and avoiding shame (Cavallo & Hirniak, 2017; Ning et al., 2022; Tsai et al., 2021). Consequently, seeking help is often perceived as a sign of personal inadequacy, reinforcing the reluctance to seek counselling help (Chen, Mak, & Lam, 2020). And the fear of being judged or labeled can prevent them from seeking necessary help (Gulliver et al., 2010). However, the interplay between self-esteem and help-seeking is complex; some studies suggesting that individuals with low self-esteem may be less likely to seek help when needed (Bridge et al., 2019; Moksnes & Reidunsdatter, 2019). However, Nadler et al. (1985) found that individuals with high self-esteem are more sensitive to perceived threats to their self-worth when seeking help, which can lead to avoidance behaviors. And, individuals who internalize negative beliefs about mental health and the act of seeking help often experience a decline in self-esteem, which can lead to avoidance of treatment options (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

Similarly, self-concealment plays a central role in reinforcing self-stigma and inhibiting help-seeking behaviours (Masuda & Boone, 2011). Many students actively conceal their emotional struggles, driven by the fear of being stigmatized by peers or authorities (Larson et al., 2015). This tendency toward self-concealment reflects a deep-rooted cultural emphasis on self-reliance and emotional restraint (Wong, 2019; Louie et al., 2013). In collectivist societies like China, where individuals are often judged in the context of their community, students may feel pressure to present themselves as capable and self-sufficient, avoiding any display of vulnerability that could lead to public scrutiny or judgment (Asgarova & Tsang, 2022; Forbes et al., 2011). The pressure to maintain an image of strength exacerbates the stigma surrounding mental health and further discourages students from seeking counselling help.

Interestingly, self-efficacy also plays a nuanced role. High self-efficacy can act as both a facilitator and a barrier. On one hand, students who believe in their ability to handle emotional challenges may feel empowered to address their mental health concerns independently (Bandura, 1997). However, when self-efficacy is excessively high, students may develop an overreliance on their personal coping strategies, belief that he/she can solve his/her problems, leading them to perceive counselling help as unnecessary or even a sign of weakness. (Topkaya, 2015). A high level of self-efficacy may align with cultural expectations of self-reliance, leading students to avoid mental health services even when they face significant emotional distress (Fwu et al., 2017; Weikel et al., 2010). Research by Schwarzer (2014) highlights how individuals with high self-efficacy may internalize the idea that they should be able to handle problems on their own, making them less likely to seek help when needed.

These findings underscore the powerful influence of cultural values such as collectivism, face-saving, and self-reliance on help-seeking behaviours. In China, where group harmony and social cohesion are often prioritized, the fear of disrupting these dynamics through the acknowledgment of personal mental health struggles can be overwhelming (Hung-Bin & Sedlacek 2004; Kung, 2003). Students may avoid seeking help to maintain their social standing within the group, contributing to the persistence of self-stigma (Talebi et al., 2013). The pressure to avoid losing face influence students' intention to engage with mental health help, even when those services are free (Dong et al., 2020; Moller et al., 2016).

Addressing these deeply ingrained cultural and barriers will require interventions that not only reduce stigma but also challenge the self-stigma beliefs that are led by culture. Help-seeking awareness program that resonate with local beliefs, values, and traditions are more likely to succeed in shifting deeply ingrained attitudes (Ishikawa et al., 2010; Sichimba et al., 2022). Initiatives that highlight seeking mental health help not as a sign of weakness but as an integral aspect of overall well-being can foster a more supportive environment. Furthermore, enhancing students' mental health literacy and providing them with clear, culturally sensitive messaging about the value of professional support could empower them to see counselling as a tool for growth rather than a sign of failure.

However, this review identified only four empirical studies directly addressing these cultural factors. The limited number of studies indicates that while mental health awareness is improving, there is still a considerable gap in academic literature regarding the development and evaluation of effective interventions for university students in China. This gap contrasts with the increasing prevalence of mental health interventions in other regions (Donovan et al., 2024; Henderson et al., 2017; Salerno, 2016). The existing studies propose promising strategies such as educational programs, peer support, and social contact interventions, but these efforts remain in early stages, with their scalability and long-term effectiveness yet to be thoroughly examined. The scarcity of research may reflect barriers such as cultural stigma, limited funding, and challenges in accessing university populations for longitudinal studies. Addressing these gaps is essential for creating evidence-based interventions that fit the unique cultural and social contexts of Chinese students.

Age and grade level also play complex roles in shaping help-seeking attitudes, which can influence their actual help-seeking behaviours. Some studies found that as students' progress through their academic years, their attitudes towards seeking help become more positive, possibly due to increased maturity and awareness of mental health services (Alfire, Xie, & Yi, 2021). This relationship suggests that educational interventions could be beneficial in promoting positive help-seeking behaviors, particularly among younger populations who may be less inclined to seek help (Perenc & Radochoński, 2016). In contrast, some studies suggest that younger people are more willing to seek help. Liang et al. (2020) highlighted that younger college students were more likely to seek counselling help when experiencing significant mental health distress, such as fear and depression. Their findings suggest that heightened emotional states can motivate younger individuals to seek support, indicating that situational factors may play a crucial role in their help-seeking behaviors (Liang et al., 2020). Cheang and Davis (2014) reported that younger students were more likely to seek help, possibly due to a greater willingness to embrace new experiences or heightened stress during their transition into university life. This aligns with the notion that while younger students may

initially have negative attitudes towards help-seeking, situational factors such as stress or emotions motivate them to seek counselling help. These mixed findings also highlight the need for more empirical research to explore how attitudes influence behavior and to establish causal relationships between attitudes and help-seeking behaviour.

Most of the studies relied on self-reported data, which are susceptible to biases such as social desirability and recall errors (Althubaiti, 2016). Additionally, the use of various instruments to measure help-seeking behaviours makes it difficult to compare results across studies, as most instruments were based on Western scales with minimal cultural adaptation. Furthermore, more empirical studies are needed to test the effectiveness of various approaches and explore innovative strategies to encourage help-seeking among Chinese university students.

■5.0 LIMITATIONS OF FINDINGS

This review also notes several limitations in the included studies. In this study, when discussing the influence of cultural factors on mental health help-seeking, only studies about university students in China were considered. However, the fact is that help-seeking among Chinese in Southeast Asia and Chinese in Western countries are all influenced by Chinese culture, so subsequent studies could consider the impact of culture on Chinese in different places and compare the impact on Chinese in different regions.

Another limitation is that this review primarily analyzed the quality and content of the included articles without conducting a more detailed and in-depth analysis of their data and methodologies. As a result, the findings and perspectives presented here are limited. Future reviews should aim to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of the data and methods used in the included studies to provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing help-seeking behaviours.

■6.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, stigma and negative attitude regarding mental health services emerge as the most significant barriers to help-seeking among students in Chinese university, while positive attitudes toward counselling and high mental health literacy serve as the most relevant facilitators. Many studies have identified key factors that influence seeking counselling help among university students in China. Additionally, few experimental studies have been conducted to explore interventions aimed at improving help-seeking among these students. While these studies have shown promise, suggesting that help-seeking can be enhanced through education, contact, and other strategies, these interventions have yet to be widely implemented in practice.

To bridge the gap between research and practice, future efforts should focus on developing high reliability and validity programs and integrating these into campus mental health education, improving accessibility to counseling services, and promoting help-seeking among students. In particular, it is crucial to develop culturally adapted awareness-raising programs that address the unique challenges and stigmas associated with mental health in China. Furthermore, tailoring these programs to fit within the cultural framework would increase their effectiveness.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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