

LISTENING TO SILENT STRUGGLES: A META-SYNTHESIS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS

¹Hananeel Jay A. Cabiling

College of Arts and Sciences, Bukidnon State University
Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, Philippines

Correspondence Tel.: +63 9653973477 Email: hananeeljaycabiling@bksu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT: *Mental health concerns among college students are rising, yet a persistent gap remains between available counseling services and student help-seeking. Using a meta-synthesis design guided by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) and an interpretivist paradigm, this study synthesized qualitative findings from 25 studies (2015–2025) retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Selection followed PRISMA and quality appraisal used CASP. Inductive coding, constant comparison, and reciprocal translation produced five themes: internal psychological barriers; social stigma and cultural influences; accessibility and perceptions of counseling services; support systems; and digital help-seeking pathways. Help-seeking emerges as a complex, dynamic, socially embedded process shaped by individual, interpersonal, institutional, and technological factors. Internal resistance and stigma frequently inhibit help-seeking, whereas supportive relationships, accessible services, and digital platforms facilitate engagement. From these findings the Integrated Help-Seeking Pathways Model (IHSPM) was developed to illustrate cyclical, multi-layered help-seeking. The study advances theoretical understanding and offers practical guidance for more responsive, inclusive, and context-sensitive counseling in higher education.*

Keywords: Psychological resilience, Counseling utilization, Perceived stigma, Help-seeking barriers, Student support systems, and Digital mental health

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health problems among college students, including rising rates of anxiety, depression, stress, and emotional exhaustion, have grown markedly, affecting large student cohorts and drawing urgent attention from educators, clinicians, and policymakers [1]. The college years are a distinct developmental window: intensified academic expectations, shifting social networks, financial strain, and identity formation converge with new responsibilities and separation from prior supports, producing both episodic crises and chronic symptom trajectories [2]. These psychological difficulties impair learning, retention, relationships, and quality of life, prompting institutions to expand counseling centers, wellness initiatives, and preventive programs [3,4]. Yet service expansion alone does not ensure uptake; the key question is how students recognize distress, appraise the need for professional help, and decide whether to engage available supports [5].

Research identifies multiple correlates that shape help-seeking: stigma and fear of judgment, cultural norms about emotional expression and resilience, limited awareness of services, confidentiality concerns, logistical constraints (cost, scheduling), and doubts about counseling effectiveness [6]. However, the literature is fragmented. Quantitative studies map prevalence and associations but often lack depth on lived experience, while qualitative studies richly describe students' narratives, meanings, and negotiations yet remain dispersed and under-synthesized [7, 8]. Consequently, many investigations treat factors as isolated predictors rather than interacting elements of a broader psychosocial system.

This meta-synthesis addresses that gap by systematically integrating qualitative findings to reveal recurring patterns and higher-order themes. Rather than merely cataloguing barriers, the synthesis frames help-seeking as a dynamic, socially embedded, and contextually mediated process in which internal meanings (e.g., self-reliance, shame), interpersonal influences (peers, family), institutional

conditions (visibility, accessibility, perceived counselor relevance), and technological options (digital resources, anonymity) interact over time. The Integrated Help-Seeking Pathways Model (IHSPM) derived from this work conceptualizes help-seeking as cyclical and non-linear: recognition of distress is filtered through internal and cultural lenses, mediated by relational and institutional supports, and may lead to formal counseling, informal help, digital pathways, or continued non-disclosure. Understanding these interacting pathways directs interventions beyond service provision toward reframing help-seeking, reducing stigma, enhancing service visibility and trust, engaging peers and families, and integrating technology in ways that align with students' lived realities.

METHODS

Design and Theoretical Orientation

This study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis informed by Sandelowski and Barroso [9] and grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. The meta-synthesis approach was selected to move beyond aggregation toward interpretive abstraction, comparing, translating, and synthesizing findings from multiple qualitative investigations to generate higher-order conceptualizations of how college students experience and enact mental health help-seeking. Anchored in interpretivism, the design treated help-seeking as meaning-laden, contextually situated, and produced through social interactions rather than as a fixed, individual-level behavior.

Research Purpose and Questions

The primary research question asked how qualitative studies conceptualize college students' mental health help-seeking behaviors. Secondary questions examined: (a) the internal psychological factors that shape recognition of need and willingness to seek help; (b) social and cultural influences that facilitate or inhibit disclosure; (c) institutional and structural conditions that enable or constrain access to counseling; (d) the role of digital and technological supports;

and (e) observable patterns of engagement, delay, avoidance, or negotiation across contexts. These questions oriented the synthesis toward understanding help-seeking as a multidimensional and negotiated process.

Search Strategy and Scope

A systematic literature search was conducted across interdisciplinary databases, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, and Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords such as “mental health help-seeking” AND “college students,” “university students” AND “counseling behavior,” and “help-seeking barriers” AND “higher education.” Search strings were adapted for each database’s indexing conventions to maximize sensitivity and relevance. In addition to electronic searching, forward- and backward-citation tracking and manual reference checks were used to locate potentially relevant studies not retrieved via database searches. The temporal scope was restricted to publications from 2015–2025 to capture contemporary trends, including the increasing prominence of digital help-seeking pathways.

Selection, Screening, and Appraisal

The review process followed PRISMA-guided stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Initial database queries produced 1,020 records; after duplicate removal and title/abstract screening, 160 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Inclusion criteria required that studies: focus on college or university student populations; investigate mental health help-seeking behaviors, experiences, or perceptions; employ qualitative methods or mixed-methods with substantive qualitative findings; be peer-reviewed and available in English. After full-text review and quality appraisal, 25 studies met inclusion. Methodological rigor and conceptual contribution were appraised using the CASP Qualitative Checklist, evaluating clarity of aims, appropriateness of qualitative design, data collection and analysis rigor, reflexivity, and credibility of findings. Studies judged to have insufficient qualitative depth or limited relevance to help-seeking processes were excluded.

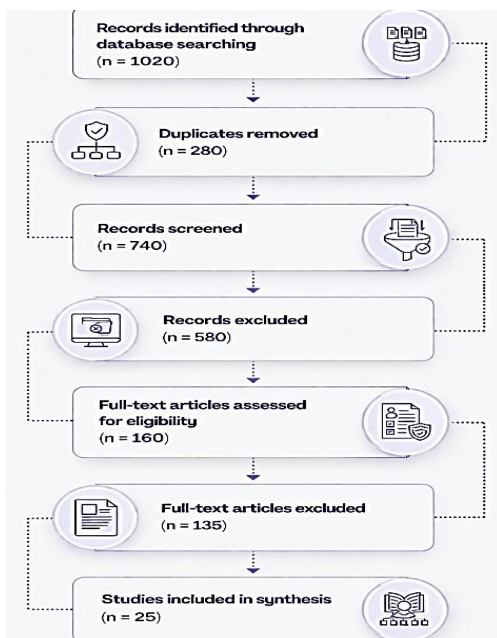


Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart

Classification and Data Management

Included studies were systematically classified to create an analytic map of the evidence base. For each study, metadata were extracted: author(s), year, geographic setting, institutional context, sample characteristics, research design, theoretical framing, data collection methods, analytic approach, and principal qualitative findings related to help-seeking. Classification enabled identification of contextual variation (e.g., cultural setting, institutional resources) and methodological diversity, which informed sensitivity to transferability and boundary conditions during synthesis.

Extraction, Coding, and Thematic Development

An inductive, manual coding strategy was employed. Repeated close readings of findings and discussion sections across studies supported immersion in the primary data. Initial codes captured recurring concepts (e.g., shame, self-reliance, peer influence, perceptions of counseling). Through constant comparison, codes were iteratively refined, clustered, and abstracted into provisional categories: internal experiences, social influences, institutional interactions, and digital behaviors. Manual coding preserved interpretive nuance and supported reflexive analytic judgments.

Reciprocal Translation and Model Generation

Reciprocal translation techniques were applied to compare and translate concepts across studies, identifying convergence, divergence, and context-specific variations. This integrative process distilled five interrelated themes and facilitated development of the Integrated Help-Seeking Pathways Model (IHSPM), representing help-seeking as a cyclical, non-linear process shaped by internal filters, sociocultural contexts, institutional enablers, relational supports, and digital pathways.

The model was refined repeatedly against the dataset to endure consistency and reliability in the studies that were included.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The meta-synthesis portrays college student mental health help-seeking as a complex, socially embedded, and interactional phenomenon shaped by the interplay of personal meaning-making, interpersonal relationships, institutional structures, and technological affordances. Across the 25 qualitative studies synthesized, five core thematic domains repeatedly surfaced as primary determinants of help-seeking trajectories: internal psychological barriers; social stigma and cultural influences; accessibility, awareness, and perceived effectiveness of counseling; the role of peer, family, and institutional supports; and emerging digital pathways. Together these themes illuminate a central tension that runs through students’ accounts: the recognition of psychological distress on one hand and the hesitation, delay, or avoidance of help-seeking on the other, a tension mediated by internalized beliefs, societal expectations, and institutional realities.

Theme 1 Internal Psychological Barriers A pervasive cluster of intrapersonal factors constrains help-seeking.

Students commonly described feelings of shame, fear of negative evaluation, and a tendency to minimize or normalize their difficulties, often by comparing themselves to peers perceived to be worse off or by labeling their responses as transient overreactions [10, 11, 12]. Many narratives framed

help-seeking as an admission of weakness or failure, conflicting with internalized ideals of resilience and self-sufficiency characteristic of emerging adulthood [13]. These internal barriers operate through cognitive appraisals (“I should cope on my own”) and affective reactions (embarrassment, vulnerability) that together delay problem recognition and reduce the likelihood of seeking formal support. The studies indicate that simple informational campaigns are unlikely to overturn these deeper meaning systems; instead, interventions must directly engage students’ self-concepts, reframe counseling as an agentic strategy for problem-solving, and provide safe, normalized narratives that validate help-seeking as consistent with competence rather than contradictory to it.

Theme 2 Social Stigma and Cultural Influences Stigma

both anticipated from others and internalized was reported across diverse cultural settings as a potent disincentive to disclosure and professional help-seeking [14]. In collectivist and family-centered contexts, mental health problems can be experienced as a threat to family honor or social standing, prompting concealment and preference for private or culturally sanctioned coping strategies [15]. Cultural norms that valorize stoicism, endurance, and emotional restraint further discourage open acknowledgement of distress. Consequently, many students seek support through family, faith communities, or trusted peers rather than formal counseling. The implication for practice is clear: culturally responsive outreach is essential. Counseling services must engage culturally salient values, involve family and community where appropriate, and present help-seeking in ways that do not threaten social identity or group belonging [16].

Theme 3 Accessibility, Awareness, and Perceived Effectiveness of Counseling

Across studies, structural and procedural barriers substantially affected willingness to use services. Students reported limited awareness of what services existed and how to access them, ambiguous intake procedures, long waiting periods, understaffing, and inconvenient hours that clash with academic schedules [17,18]. Accessibility thus emerges as a multifaceted construct encompassing not only availability but visibility, navigability, timeliness, and usability. Equally important are perceptions of counseling quality: doubts about counselor competence, concerns about confidentiality, and fears that counseling would be impersonal or irrelevant undermined trust and deterred engagement [19,20]. The studies collectively suggest that institutional work must go beyond increasing capacity to include proactive communication about services, transparent confidentiality policies, user-friendly access pathways, and demonstrable efforts to create therapeutic relationships that feel relevant and safe to students.

Theme 4 Peer, Family, and Institutional Support Systems

Social networks function both as primary sites of support and as gateways to formal care. Many students first disclose distress to peers; positive, validating peer responses can normalize help-seeking and encourage transition to professional services, while dismissive or minimizing reactions can entrench silence and avoidance [21,22]. Families operate similarly: supportive family attitudes can

legitimize seeking help, whereas stigmatizing or uninformed family responses can inhibit it [23]. Institutional culture plays a parallel role: universities that visibly prioritize student well-being, by embedding mental health into campus life, training faculty and staff to recognize distress, and integrating supports into academic routines—create enabling environments for help-seeking [24]. Conversely, institutional environments that emphasize performance and marginalize well-being discourage disclosure and make students less likely to access resources [25]. This evidence underscores the need for systemic, whole-campus approaches that mobilize peers, families, and staff as part of a coordinated support ecology.

Theme 5 Digital Pathways and Emerging Modes of Help-Seeking

The synthesis highlights that help-seeking unfolds within a wider support ecology peers, family, institutions, and digital options which together shape whether students pursue formal care. Peers are often the first point of disclosure and provide empathy, validation, and practical assistance; supportive peer responses can bridge students to professional services, while dismissive or stigmatizing reactions reinforce silence and avoidance [26]. Family responses similarly influence trajectories: supportive families normalize help-seeking and reduce shame, whereas unsupportive or uninformed families heighten resistance [27]. Institutional contexts matter as well: universities that visibly promote mental health, embed counseling in student life, and train faculty/staff to recognize distress create enabling conditions for help-seeking, whereas institutions that marginalize well-being or prioritize performance discourage disclosure [28]. Digital resources (anonymous forums, apps, teletherapy) interact with these social and institutional factors by offering low-stigma, accessible entry points that can complement or precede formal care. Strengthening peer, family, and institutional supports and integrating credible digital pathways makes help-seeking safer, more normalized, and more sustainable.

Integrated Help-Seeking Pathways Model (IHSPM)

Synthesizing these themes, the Integrated Help-Seeking Pathways Model conceptualizes help-seeking as a cyclical, non-linear process. The model begins with recognition of distress but emphasizes that recognition alone does not predict action. Recognition is filtered through internal psychological barriers and sociocultural lenses (fear, self-reliance, stigma, cultural norms), which shape initial appraisals and preferred coping responses. Movement toward support is mediated by enabling systems: institutional features (visibility, trustworthiness, responsiveness), relational supports (peers, family, mentors), and technological options (digital resources). Depending on the interaction of these factors, students may pursue formal counseling, rely on informal supports, engage digital tools, or remain non-disclosive. Importantly, trajectories are iterative: students may cycle between informal and formal supports, try digital resources before seeking counseling, or return to self-management if prior help-seeking was unsatisfactory. The model implies that interventions must be multi-layered addressing meaning-making and stigma, building relational bridges, ensuring service accessibility and responsiveness, and integrating digital options so that support systems align

with students' lived realities and shifting needs. Practical Implications Operationalizing the IHSPM requires

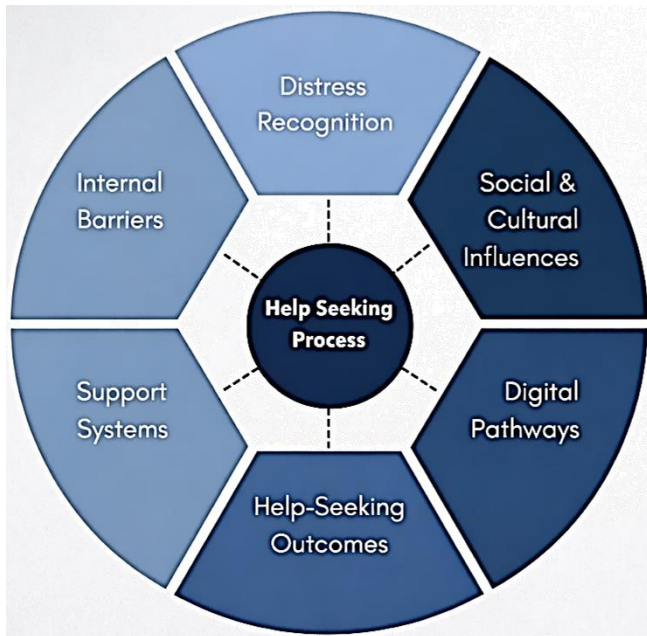


Fig. 2 The Integrated Help-Seeking Pathways Model (IHSPM) for College Student Mental Health
Source: Image generated thru Canva Software

coordinated strategies: psychoeducational efforts that reframe help-seeking as agentic; culturally tailored stigma reduction; proactive outreach and transparent service navigation; investment in staffing, timeliness, and counselor–student relational quality; training peers and faculty to recognize and respond to distress; and deploying high-quality digital tools as complementary modalities. Policy and program design grounded in these interrelated domains can reduce the recognition–hesitation gap and create more inclusive, responsive mental health ecosystems for college students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This meta-synthesis shows that college students' mental health help-seeking is socially embedded, negotiated across contexts, and inherently multidimensional. Recognition of distress is only the first step; whether students act on that recognition is filtered through internal dispositions (e.g., shame, self-reliance), sociocultural influences (e.g., stigma, family norms), institutional conditions (e.g., visibility, accessibility, perceived counselor relevance), and available digital pathways. The Integrated Help-Seeking Pathways Model (IHSPM) captures these interacting layers and emphasizes that outcomes vary—formal counseling, informal support, digital help, or continued non-disclosure—and that students may move iteratively among options over time. To increase help-seeking, institutions must adopt holistic, multi-layered strategies: (1) directly address internalized stigma and reframe help-seeking as agentic and adaptive; (2) develop culturally responsive outreach that engages family and community values; (3) strengthen peer networks and train faculty/staff to recognize and facilitate help-seeking; (4)

enhance service accessibility through clear communication, streamlined navigation, reasonable wait times, and demonstrable confidentiality and relational quality; and (5) integrate high-quality digital resources as complementary entry points and ongoing supports. Policies and programs should be grounded in students' diverse lived experiences and evaluated iteratively to ensure relevance. Such coordinated approaches can foster inclusive campus mental health ecosystems that promote help-seeking, sustain well-being, and support academic persistence.

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