

MAPPING THE INTELLECTUAL LANDSCAPE OF MENTAL HEALTH HELP-SEEKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH TRENDS, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS, AND EMERGING FRONTIERS (2015–2024)

MAPEANDO O PANORAMA INTELECTUAL DA BUSCA POR AJUDA EM SAÚDE MENTAL NO ENSINO SUPERIOR: UMA ANÁLISE BIBLIOMÉTRICA DAS TENDÊNCIAS DE PESQUISA, DOS MARCOS TEÓRICOS E DAS NOVAS FRONTEIRAS (2015–2024)

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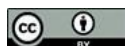
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Abstract

Mental health help-seeking in higher education has attracted growing scholarly attention, yet the intellectual structure of this literature remains insufficiently mapped. This study conducted a bibliometric analysis of publications indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection between 2015 and 2024, employing VOSviewer for keyword co-occurrence, co-authorship, and co-citation network mapping alongside MATLAB for quantitative visualization. The analysis identified four principal thematic clusters and confirmed stigma as the structurally dominant mechanism suppressing service engagement, while co-citation mapping revealed that stigma theory, behavioral help-seeking models, and attitudinal frameworks constitute the field's primary theoretical foundations. Co-authorship patterns suggest that research within Chinese and East Asian contexts has developed along a partially independent trajectory, indicating potential limitations in the cross-cultural applicability of existing models. These findings provide an evidence-based intellectual map to guide the development of culturally adapted, theoretically integrated frameworks for future empirical research and campus-based mental health intervention design.

Resumo

A procura de ajuda em saúde mental no ensino superior tem atraído crescente atenção acadêmica; no entanto, a estrutura intelectual dessa literatura ainda não foi suficientemente mapeada. Este estudo realizou uma análise bibliométrica das publicações indexadas na Web of Science Core Collection entre 2015 e 2024, utilizando o VOSviewer para o mapeamento de redes de coocorrência de palavras-chave, coautoria e cocitação, juntamente com o MATLAB para a visualização quantitativa. A análise identificou quatro grupos temáticos principais e confirmou o estigma como o mecanismo estruturalmente dominante que suprime o envolvimento com os serviços, enquanto o mapeamento de co-citação revelou que a teoria do estigma, os modelos comportamentais de busca de ajuda e os marcos atitudinais constituem os principais fundamentos teóricos do campo. Os padrões de coautoria sugerem que a pesquisa nos contextos chinês e do Leste Asiático se desenvolveu ao longo de uma trajetória parcialmente independente, indicando possíveis limitações na aplicabilidade intercultural dos modelos existentes. Essas descobertas fornecem um mapa intelectual baseado em evidências para orientar o desenvolvimento de estruturas culturalmente adaptadas e teoricamente integradas para



Keywords: Mental Health Help-Seeking. Higher Education. Bibliometric Analysis. Stigma. University Students.

futuras pesquisas empíricas e o projeto de intervenções de saúde mental em campi universitários.

Palavras-chave: Busca de Ajuda em Saúde Mental. Ensino Superior. Análise Bibliométrica. Estigma. Estudantes Universitários.

1 INTRODUCTION

Mental health has been recognized as a critical issue in the context of higher education systems worldwide, with epidemiological studies across the globe confirming the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and mental health issues among university student populations. In the context of Chinese society, in which academic pressures and clinical training demands intersect with pre-existing cultural norms of emotional independence, the prevalence of depressive symptoms among university students has been estimated at 28%, with medical students being identified as an at-risk group due to the compounding pressures of academic and professional training demands within the medical environment [1]. The extent of the mental health issue among university students, in combination with the epidemiological evidence of the concentration of mental health concerns among medical students, suggests that mental health concerns in the context of higher education systems are not uniform but rather subject to a range of institutional, occupational, and cultural factors that warrant critical consideration by academic scholars [2]. In addition to the individual costs of untreated mental health concerns among university students, the broader societal implications of mental health concerns among university students include academic performance, professional preparedness, and the risk of mental health deterioration in later life, underscoring the critical importance of considering the conditions under which university students seek or avoid professional support [3].

Notwithstanding this evident degree of psychological necessity, a notable disparity has remained between the degree of mental health issues and the utilization of available counseling services. Survey results from Chinese university student populations have suggested that less than half of those in psychological distress actively seek help from professional agencies, and this is not necessarily explained by a lack of awareness but by a complex interplay of factors that suppress help-seeking behaviors [4]. Findings

collected in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted student mental health and counseling services, have further suggested that psychological distress does not necessarily translate into help-seeking behaviors, and this is particularly evident even when access is available [5]. Systematic reviews of this phenomenon in multiple international contexts have suggested that, for university student populations in general, stigmatization, barriers to access, and mental health literacy have consistently been cited as key barriers to help-seeking behaviors [6]. Face concerns and self-stigmatization have also been identified as independent predictors of help-seeking intentions for Chinese international students, and this is particularly notable in terms of the degree to which psychological factors mediate this relationship [7].

The contributions of empirical research to the understanding of specific facilitating variables of help-seeking behaviors, such as stigma, counselor variables, personal attributes of the student, and problem-solving skills, have already been noted. Multinational research in diverse university contexts across various countries has shown that attitudes towards seeking psychological help are a function of the interaction between personal and situational variables, and that in all contexts, stigma plays a mediating role in attenuating the influence of all facilitating variables [8]. Research in Chinese university samples has shown that mental health literacy is a mediating influence on help-seeking behaviors indirectly via social support and stigma, suggesting that cognitive and social resources are mediated in their effects and do not have a direct impact [9]. Related research has confirmed that structural barriers such as insufficient service availability and support from the institution add to the psychological barriers that students experience, creating a compound effect that is a multilayered impediment to seeking professional help and is unlikely to be alleviated by raising awareness [10]. Research in culturally distinct university contexts such as Arab and Middle Eastern samples has further supported the observation that, although stigma is a cross-contextual barrier, it is culturally specific in form and is context-dependent and requires culturally specific intervention frameworks [11].

Despite these contributions, it is evident that a more comprehensive bibliometric synthesis is necessary for delineating the intellectual architecture of help-seeking research in its various theoretical foundations, thematic clusters, and geographic distributions of knowledge. Previous bibliometric analyses of student mental health research have

focused on more general constructs of student wellness, leaving the more specific mechanisms of help-seeking behavior less characterized [12]. Moreover, a recent domain-specific bibliometric analysis of student mental health research using CiteSpace and VOSviewer methods also suggests that knowledge mapping in adjacent domains of student mental health and well-being in college student populations has not integrated the more specific thematic and theoretical dimensions most pertinent to counseling engagement and help-seeking barriers [13]. The current study attempts to address this gap by using a more comprehensive and systematic approach for analyzing 998 publications in the Web of Science Core Collection from 2015 to 2024, and its objectives include tracing longitudinal trends in publications, characterizing the thematic and theoretical structure of help-seeking research through keyword co-occurrence and co-citation networks, and identifying emerging frontiers of research that have substantial potential for relevance in culturally sensitive and theoretically integrated investigations of help-seeking behavior in Chinese higher education settings. The results of this analysis will be used as an evidence-based intellectual map for guiding future research and intervention in this domain toward its most impactful unresolved questions.

2 METHODS

2.1 Data source and search strategy

The Web of Science Core Collection (WoSCC) was selected as the sole data source for the purposes of the present study due to its comprehensive coverage of high-impact publications from various fields of study and its well-established compatibility with mainstream bibliometric analysis software [14]. As a methodological approach, bibliometric analysis allows for the quantification of publications, the identification of intellectual structures, and the detection of new research trends by means of objective and replicable procedures—attributes that make bibliometric analysis particularly well-suited for the study of a multidisciplinary field like mental health help-seeking among higher education students [12].

The search was executed on March 1, 2025, using the Advanced Search interface of WoSCC with the following Boolean query applied to the Topic field (Title, Abstract, Author Keywords, and Keywords Plus):

TS = ("help-seeking" OR "help seeking" OR "counseling utilization" OR "mental health service use") AND TS = ("higher education" OR "university students" OR "college students") AND TS = ("stigma" OR "counselor" OR "psychological distress" OR "mental health")

The temporal scope included a period from January 1, 2015, to December 31, 2024. This scope represents a decade of intensified global focus on the mental health of students, the establishment of counseling services in institutions, and the recognition of culturally constructed barriers to service utilization. All records were exported in plain text, including complete bibliographic information and references. This configuration is critical for subsequent co-citation and network analysis.

2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The structured screening protocol was used for analytical rigor and thematic appropriateness of the final corpus. Only records were retained for which the publication type was Article or Review, the language was English, and the thematic focus was on factors influencing mental health help-seeking behavior within the tertiary education domain. Editorials, conference proceedings, book chapters, letters, and grey literature were excluded as their citing practices and indexing patterns deviate significantly from peer-reviewed journals and would introduce considerable bias in network-based analysis [15]. Incomplete bibliographic records, especially those without author affiliations and cited reference lists, were excluded as they would compromise the accuracy of co-authorship and co-citation analysis. Records with publication years outside the 2015–2024 period, including Early Access articles with a publication date beyond December 31, 2024, were excluded during the cleaning process. Following the application of the above selection criteria, the final corpus consisted of 998 publications for analysis, which was found appropriate considering the methodological norms established in recent bibliometric studies examining student mental health literature [13].

2.3 Analytical tools and procedures

VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) was used as the main visualization tool due to its well-established ability to create bibliometric maps based on co-occurrence, co-authorship, and co-citation relationships [16]. Three distinct mapping processes were undertaken within the VOSviewer environment. Firstly, a keyword co-occurrence analysis with a minimum of five occurrences was undertaken to create a network of key terms. The key terms were then clustered to identify the dominant themes present within the literature. Secondly, a co-authorship analysis at the country level with a minimum of three publications was undertaken to create a map of international collaboration. Lastly, a co-citation analysis of the cited literature with a minimum of ten citations was undertaken to create a map of the dominant theoretical frameworks present within the literature.

Quantitative aspects of this analysis, namely annual publication volume, overall output, and country- and journal-level productivity distributions, were calculated from the exported WoSCC data set and visualized using MATLAB (R2023b). This allowed for precise control over figure formatting and ensured that all graphical outputs met necessary criteria in terms of resolution and typography for submission to a journal [17]. The dual methodology of using VOSviewer for network-based structural mapping and MATLAB for statistical visualization is methodologically complementary and has recently been used in large-scale bibliometric analyses of health-related research domains in a way that balances interpretive depth and quantitative transparency.

2.4 Ethical considerations

This study was carried out only through the analysis of bibliographic data accessed from a publicly available database. There was no collection of primary data in any stage of the research process. Hence, no individually identifiable data was accessed or obtained. Thus, no approval from an ethical review committee is required for this research. All procedures for data handling are in accordance with the guidelines for research integrity. The bibliometric methods employed in this research are replicable and reproducible, considering the search parameters and configurations mentioned above.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Publication trends and annual growth

In order to outline the dynamics of development of the subject of mental health help-seeking in higher education over time, the publication output from 2015 to 2024 was extracted and examined. The publication dynamics over time is considered a major factor in determining the growth trajectory of a subject and points to specific time points at which interest in the subject was greatest, thus providing a critical backdrop for interpreting the thematic and structural findings of subsequent sections.

The annual publication volume and cumulative output across the study period are presented in Figure 1 to enable a direct visual assessment of growth dynamics.

Figure 1

Annual Publication Volume and Cumulative Output in Mental Health Help-Seeking Research (2015–2024)

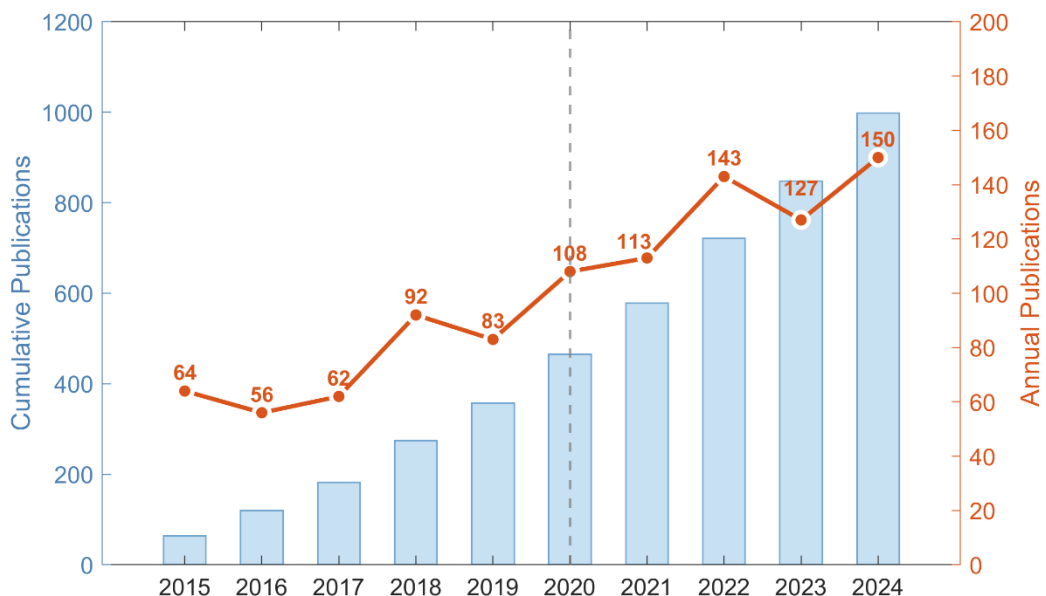


Figure 1 shows how annual output has consistently increased over time, from 64 publications in 2015 to 150 in 2024, representing a total increase of 134%. From 2015 to 2019, annual output varied within a narrow range of 56-92 publications per year. This

represents a period of incremental development in this domain. However, from 2020 onwards, annual output significantly increased, reaching 108 publications in 2020 and continuing in 2021 and 2022 at 113 and 143 publications per year, respectively. This is likely associated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on campus-based mental health services. Annual output decreased in 2023 to 127 publications and then increased in 2024 to its highest in the decade, reaching 150 publications. The total publications in this domain reached 998 by the end of this study, confirming that this domain has not only continued its scholarly development but also its capacity for new publications.

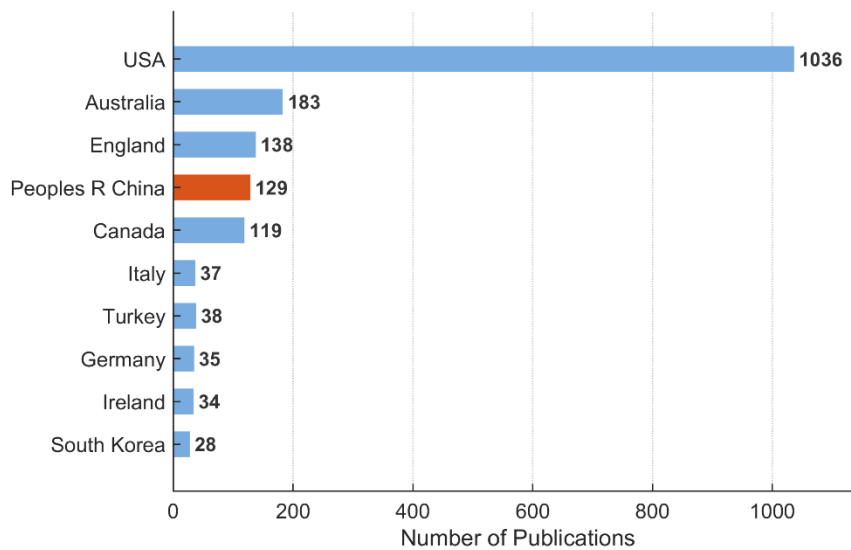
3.2 Productive countries, institutions, and journals

Geographic and journal-level publication distributions indicate the structural concentration of knowledge production in specific national research traditions. These publication distributions are significant in identifying the production of empirical evidence and are equally significant in recognizing the scholarly community whose contexts of research and publication may be less represented.

To facilitate a systematic comparison of the research productivity of different nations, Figure 2 illustrates the ten most productive contributing countries by the number of publications, which equates to the total number of records in the index with at least one author affiliation from each country. It is worth noting that as a single publication can be affiliated with multiple institutional affiliations from different countries, the sum of the publications from each country can exceed the total number of publications in the corpus.

Figure 2

Top 10 Most Productive Countries in Mental Health Help-Seeking Research (2015–2024)



As can be seen in Figure 2, the United States had the highest number of publications, with 1,036 records. This is a function of both the scope of research infrastructure in America and its traditional status as a field of study in its own right in the context of American culture. Australia had the second highest number of publications, with 183 publications, followed by England (138), China (129), and Canada (119), making up the core group of five countries that make up the majority of publications. Turkey (38), Italy (37), Germany (35), Ireland (34), and South Korea (28) make up a group of countries that contribute in much smaller quantities. The position of China as the fourth most productive country is of particular interest in this context, as the structural characteristics of Chinese university counseling, in which a counselor is responsible for administrative, ideological, and psychological support within a single institution, is a configuration that has not received much attention in the international context in terms of its practical policy implications.

The distribution of publications across journals offers a complementary perspective on how the field is disciplinarily anchored and through which outlets empirical contributions reach the scholarly community. The ten most productive journals by publication volume are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Top 10 Most Productive Journals in Mental Health Help-Seeking Research (2015–2024)

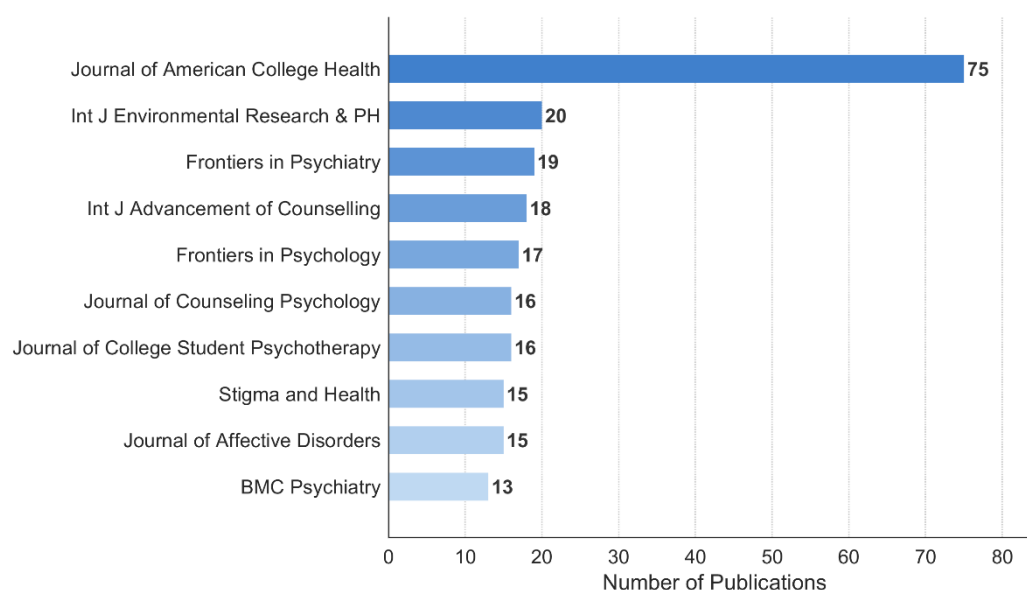


Figure 3 shows that the *Journal of American College Health* was the most prolific publication venue with 75 articles, reflecting its longstanding focus on the health behaviors and service utilization patterns of tertiary student populations. The *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* contributed 20 publications, followed by *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (19), the *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling* (18), *Frontiers in Psychology* (17), the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (16), the *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* (16), *Stigma and Health* (15), the *Journal of Affective Disorders* (15), and *BMC Psychiatry* (13). The existence of journals in the areas of public health, counseling psychology, psychiatry, and environmental research indicates that the phenomenon of help-seeking behavior in higher education settings is viewed as inherently multidisciplinary in nature. This phenomenon draws on the theoretical and methodological traditions of several adjacent disciplines rather than a single one.

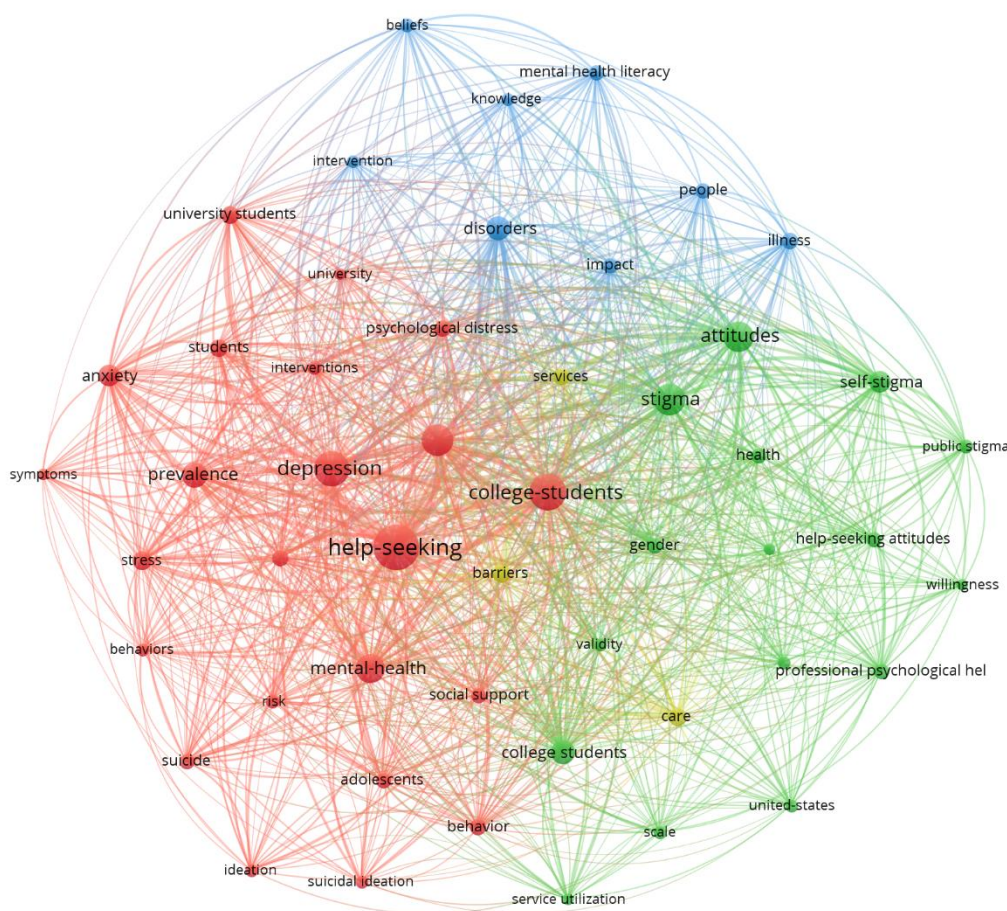
3.3 Keyword co-occurrence analysis and research clusters

Keyword co-occurrence analysis is one of the most informative techniques for describing the thematic structure of a research field, as it helps to understand the proximities and co-activation patterns that govern how researchers collectively organize their research. A co-occurrence network was created using VOSviewer software with a minimum threshold of five occurrences for each keyword, and the high-frequency keywords were grouped into distinct clusters using the modularity-based clustering function of the software.

The keyword co-occurrence network generated from the full corpus of 998 publications is presented in Figure 4, where node size reflects keyword frequency and line thickness reflects co-occurrence strength.

Figure 4

Keyword Co-occurrence Network of Mental Health Help-Seeking Research (2015–2024)



As presented in Figure 4, there were four major thematic clusters identified by the analysis, and these represented coherent and cohesive parts of the overall body of literature. The thematic content and keywords for these clusters are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Keyword Co-occurrence Clusters

Cluster	Color	Core Keywords	Research Theme
Cluster 1	Red	help-seeking, depression, anxiety, prevalence, university students, stress, symptoms, suicide, risk	Mental Health Burden and Help-Seeking Behavior
Cluster 2	Green	stigma, self-stigma, public stigma, attitudes, help-seeking attitudes, willingness, professional psychological help	Stigma and Counseling Attitudes

Cluster 3	Blue	mental health literacy, beliefs, knowledge, disorders, illness, intervention	Mental Health Literacy and Awareness
Cluster 4	Yellow	barriers, social support, gender, service utilization, scale, care	Contextual Barriers and Service Utilization

As shown in Table 1, these four clusters account for the entire range of help-seeking. This range begins with the epidemiological dimension of psychological distress (Cluster 1), followed by attitudinal and stigma-related barriers to help-seeking (Cluster 2), and then moves on to cognitive and knowledge-related facilitators of help-seeking (Cluster 3), and, finally, contextual, structural, and demographic moderators of help-seeking and access to counseling services (Cluster 4). The relatively large size of Cluster 2, where constructs of stigma and self-stigma, as most frequently used terms within the network, dominate, supports the notion that these constructs hold a structurally dominant position within the field, as they have been most frequently used as a mechanism for connecting psychological need and help-seeking action. The emergence of Cluster 3 as a specific thematic cluster, revolving around mental health literacy and its interrelation with beliefs and knowledge, supports the notion that, indeed, the field has begun to recognize informational and cognitive resources as preconditions for help-seeking.

3.4 Co-authorship network analysis

Collaboration patterns at the international level are an indicator of the extent to which the production of knowledge within a particular research field is distributed across geographical boundaries or is contained within nationally self-contained scholarly communities. The country-level co-authorship network was created using VOSviewer software with a minimum publication requirement of three, resulting in a total of 57 countries whose collaborative relationships are represented by edges of varying scale based on the frequency of co-authorship.

To examine the structure of international collaboration, the country-level co-authorship network is presented in Figure 5, where node size reflects total national publication volume and edge thickness reflects the strength of bilateral co-authorship relationships.

Figure 5

Country-Level Co-authorship Network in Mental Health Help-Seeking Research (2015–2024)

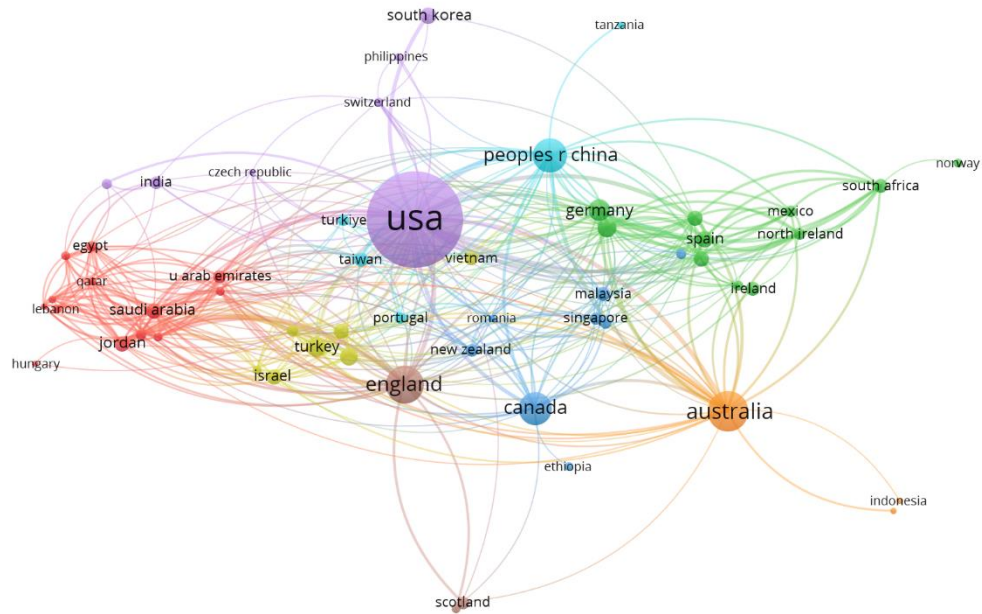


Figure 5 reveals that the global collaboration landscape is comprised of two distinct groupings. A Western cluster, dominated by the United States, Australia, England, and Canada, demonstrates the highest density of co-authorship links. This is a reflection of the strong collaborative traditions in these Anglophone research contexts, shaped by their common theoretical and methodological traditions. A second cluster, dominated by China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia in the context of East and Southeast Asia, demonstrates a higher internal clustering of ties but relatively fewer and less dense links to the Western cluster. These relatively low levels of inter-cluster connectivity suggest that the research tradition in Chinese and East Asian higher education contexts has developed a partially autonomous research tradition, a phenomenon that has important implications for the transferability of theoretical traditions that have been developed primarily in response to Western empirical research.

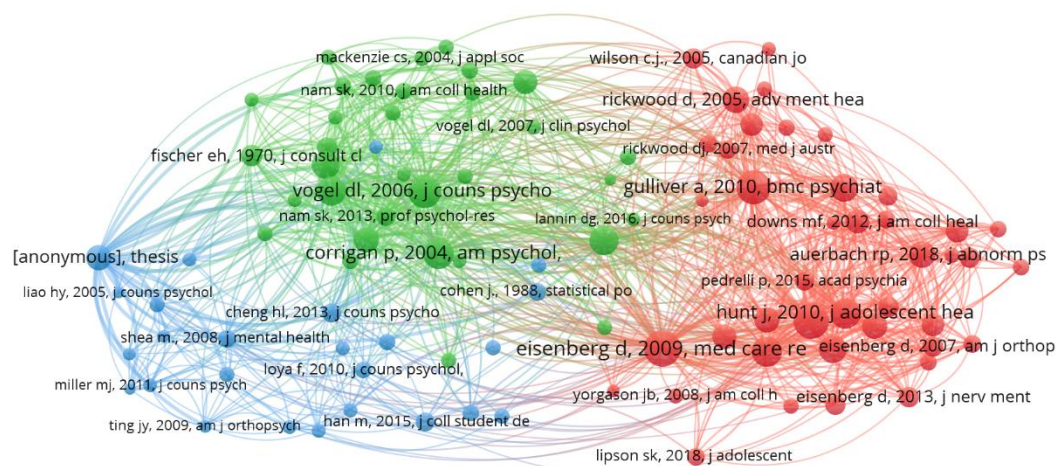
3.5 Co-citation analysis and dominant theoretical frameworks

Co-citation analysis helps in outlining the intellectual base of a research field by demonstrating how frequently two cited references co-occur in terms of citation within the same publications, thereby presenting a picture of those works that researchers regard as theoretically and conceptually close and compatible. The co-citation network was constructed using VOSviewer software based on a minimum of ten citations, yielding a structured co-occurrence of frequently co-cited references grouped into three theoretically meaningful clusters.

The reference co-citation network is presented in Figure 6, where node size reflects total citation frequency within the corpus and cluster membership is indicated by color, enabling the dominant theoretical orientations of the field to be identified and compared.

Figure 6

Reference Co-citation Network of Mental Health Help-Seeking Research (2015–2024)



As shown in Figure 6, three coherent theoretical orientations structure the intellectual foundations of the field. The specific works constituting the most influential nodes within this network are consolidated in Table 2, ranked by citation frequency.

Table 2*Top 10 Most Frequently Co-cited References*

Rank	Reference	Journal	Theoretical Contribution
1	Corrigan P., 2004	<i>American Psychologist</i>	Stigma and mental health care
2	Vogel D.L., 2006	<i>Journal of Counseling Psychology</i>	Self-stigma of seeking help (SSOSH)
3	Gulliver A., 2010	<i>BMC Psychiatry</i>	Barriers and facilitators to help-seeking
4	Eisenberg D., 2009	<i>Medical Care Research</i>	Stigma and help-seeking among college students
5	Rickwood D., 2005	<i>Adv Mental Health</i>	Youth help-seeking behavioral model
6	Ajzen I., 1991	<i>Organizational Behavior & Human Decision</i>	Theory of Planned Behavior
7	Komiya N., 2000	<i>Journal of Counseling Psychology</i>	Emotional openness and help-seeking attitudes
8	Lannin D.G., 2016	<i>Journal of Counseling Psychology</i>	Self-stigma and help-seeking probability
9	Nam S.K., 2013	<i>Professional Psychology</i>	Meta-analysis of help-seeking stigma
10	Downs M.F., 2012	<i>Journal of American College Health</i>	Stigma and service utilization

As can be seen from Table 2, the co-citation network revolves around three major theoretical traditions. The green cluster, centered on Corrigan (2004) and Vogel et al. (2006), represents the tradition of stigma theory, in which both public and self-stigma are considered to be major psychological factors that impede the formation of help-seeking intentions through the experience of shame, label avoidance, and discrimination. The red cluster, centered on Gulliver et al. (2010), Eisenberg et al. (2009), and Rickwood et al. (2005), represents the tradition of the behavioral model of help-seeking, in which the interplay of awareness, attitude, social influence, and accessibility of mental health services is seen to play a critical role in the formation of help-seeking intentions. Finally, the blue cluster, centered on Ajzen (1991) and Komiya et al. (2000), represents the tradition of the Theory of Planned Behavior and attitude-based approaches, in which help-seeking intentions are seen to be formed through the experience of subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and culturally based emotional dispositions. Moreover, the fact that Corrigan (2004) and Vogel et al. (2006) were the two most frequently co-cited references confirms that the tradition of stigma theory, and in particular the tradition of the operationalization of the construct of self-stigma of seeking help, constitutes the most fundamental tradition in the development of the subject area, with significant implications

for the development of research studies in culturally based mechanisms of stigma in university settings.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Overall growth trends and research momentum

As suggested by the bibliometric data provided in Section 3, the field has undergone substantial and steady development in the past decade from 2015 to 2024, and the rise in annual publication volume from 2020 onward represents the catalyzing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on worldwide awareness of student psychological distress. Yet this development is not only quantitative in nature; it also represents a qualitative expansion of the field's conceptual scope, as researchers from various disciplines have increasingly come to realize that help-seeking cannot be explained by singular models but requires integrated models that simultaneously address institutional, psychological, and cultural factors. The coincidence of the four thematic clusters identified in the keyword co-occurrence analysis and the three dominant theoretical orientations identified in the co-citation mapping analysis points toward a level of structural maturation in the field that is sufficient for the development of comprehensive and cross-culturally valid explanatory models, as well as toward the existing lacunae that such models must help bridge.

4.2 Stigma as the central mediating mechanism

The position of constructs associated with stigmatization in the keyword co-occurrence network and the co-citation centrality of stigmatization theory as the most frequently cited theory converge on an interpretative conclusion that stigmatization, in both its self-perceived and socially mediated forms, is a core psychological mechanism through which personal and situational factors converge on suppressed help-seeking behaviors. Recent evidence points to the complex interrelationship between stigmatization and engagement in services, wherein family-based stigmatization of help-seeking in university students from collectivist cultures is found to have an independent

suppressive effect on satisfaction and engagement in counseling services beyond self-stigmatization as a personal factor [18]. Comparative research has also found that willingness to engage in mental health counseling is significantly differentiated across ethnic and demographic groups, wherein stigmatization factors operate differently in function of intersecting identities, masculinity, and mental health discourse familiarity [19]. At a more general level, evidence based on university student samples from multiple countries points to a uniform suppressive effect of stigmatization on the psychological distress-professional help-seeking process, irrespective of access to services and in spite of national differences in healthcare systems and access, thereby implying that destigmatization needs to be considered as a prerequisite condition for intervention effectiveness, as opposed to merely as an auxiliary component of intervention packages [20]. A systematic synthesis of help-seeking intentions, behaviors, and barriers in college student samples also points to stigmatization as one of the most consistently identified structural barriers to engagement in help-seeking and counseling services, a finding that has remained robust across research methods, sample populations, and time periods [21]. These findings collectively suggest that future research on stigmatization and help-seeking needs to prioritize the identification of stigmatization reduction factors that are culture-specific as opposed to universally applicable, particularly in institutional settings wherein values on help-seeking differ fundamentally from those in Western culture-based counseling traditions.

4.3 Counselor-related factors: high impact, underproduced

The co-authorship network analysis suggests that studies in Chinese higher education settings have evolved in a way that can be characterized as partially independent from the dominant Western academic cluster. This can be attributed to more than just geographical seclusion; it can also be linked to unique features of Chinese university counseling services. In Chinese HE settings, student affairs counselors are professionally required to take care of all aspects of ideological and political education, crisis management, academic guidance, and psychological counseling in one person. This configuration inherently leads to contradictions between administrative power and psychological security in a counseling relationship [22]. This structural duality thus bears

significant theoretical importance in that it might contribute to a greater level of concern among students regarding confidentiality and self-disclosure in counseling services, thus potentially leading to a greater level of stigma activation in avoiding professional services altogether. Research into Chinese student populations using extended behavioral models supports that a person's perceived level of behavioral control over the process of seeking help—encompassing aspects of trust in the counselor as well as confidence in confidentiality protection—was found to be a significant predictor of intention to seek help; furthermore, it found this factor to be particularly sensitive to aspects of the counseling relationship [23]. Cross-cultural studies have also shown that cultural values, such as concerns related to face and collectivist identities, mediate the relationship between counselor-related perceptions and help-seeking attitudes in a way that accentuates barriers to services specifically among Asian cultural groups [24]. In conclusion, it becomes clear that a significant gap exists in current knowledge in that counselor-related variables are arguably among the most significant predictors of help-seeking behavior but are also arguably under-explored in relation to more individual-level psychological aspects.

4.4 Student attributes and problem-solving ability

Individual-level factors, including personality characteristics, self-efficacy perceptions, and cognitive competencies, are an intriguing although methodologically complex construct of the help-seeking literature. Studies of student populations from various educational settings have provided evidence of the significant indirect effect of distal personality characteristics, such as conscientiousness and openness, upon academic and behavioral outcomes via proximal self-efficacy perceptions. This supports the theoretical argument of a mediated relationship between personality characteristics and the ultimate behavior of seeking help [25]. The manner by which self-stigma prevents the behavior of seeking information and accessing services has been further clarified by longitudinal research demonstrating the marked decrease in the probability of seeking professional help among students whose perceptions of societal attitudes toward mental health are negative, even when accounting for symptom severity and service availability [26]. A longitudinal study has further demonstrated the dynamic nature of the

internalization process of self-stigma, wherein exposure to public stigma predicts the increase of self-stigma, which in turn predicts the decrease of behavioral engagement of counseling services [27]. A distinct student-intrinsic factor that may influence the behavior of seeking help is a student's problem-solving capacity. A student's problem-solving ability may influence the behavior of seeking help by a different pathway. It is plausible that students who possess a higher problem-solving ability are better able to perceive psychological distress as a challenge to be overcome, evaluate counseling as an effective coping strategy, and successfully traverse the service-access pathway with increased confidence due to the reduced perceived cost of seeking help relative to the perceived benefit. In contrast, students who possess a lower problem-solving ability may experience increased psychological distress levels coupled with decreased readiness to seek professional help due to the feelings of helplessness and perceived uncontrollability.

4.5 Cultural moderators and the chinese higher education context

The nature of sparse inter-cluster connectivity in the co-authorship network connecting both Eastern and Western academic communities underscores an intrinsic limitation of the knowledge base currently represented by the academic community, wherein intervention models and theoretical models of counseling and therapy routinely implemented by Western academic systems on Chinese student populations are not adequately adapted to address the unique features of the academic and cultural landscape of China. Research on the interrelated constructs of self-stigma, mental health literacy, and help-seeking attitudes among Chinese university students has underscored the need for stigma reduction programs to be embedded in a theoretically integrated model of educationally based interventions addressing face-related issues and help-seeking behaviors as a competency-enhancing rather than a weakness-signaling construct [28]. Experimental studies of cognitive bias modification-based interventions targeting internalized stigma as a determinant of help-seeking behaviors among students experiencing untreated psychiatric symptoms underscore the need for such interventions to result in demonstrable reductions in help-seeking inhibition, though the efficacy of such interventions also depends on the cultural framing of intervention content and its relative alignment with pre-existing values and normative expectations of participants

[29]. This underscores the need for theoretically integrated models in which stigma functions as a central mediating mechanism linking counselor-related perceptions, student-level attributes, and contextual factors to help-seeking outcomes among Chinese medical university students—models that warrant rigorous empirical testing given the persistent help-seeking paradox observed in the Chinese higher education context.

4.6 Limitations

Several limitations of the present study must be noted. Firstly, the present study's reliance solely on the Web of Science Core Collection is methodologically justified by the Web of Science's indexing standards and software compatibility. However, the sole reliance of the present study on the Web of Science would inevitably result in the underrepresentation of publications indexed only in Chinese databases like the CNKI. Such an underrepresentation would be problematic since the present study is interested in the research conducted within the Chinese institutional context, which is the relevant population of theoretical interest [30]. The present study's results are also limited to the English language publications. Such a language bias would inevitably distort the geographic distribution of the research contributions. The bibliometric method is inherently incapable of providing an objective evaluation of the methodological quality of the publications. Therefore, the results of the present study must be interpreted only as an indication of the intellectual influence of the relevant publications. Despite the aforementioned limitations of the present study, the bibliometric method adopted by the present study provides a comprehensive empirical basis for identifying the dominant themes of the relevant field of study, its theoretical foundations, and its structural shortcomings.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This present bibliometric analysis is based on 998 publications in the Web of Science Core Collection database from 2015 to 2024. It therefore provides a systematic and empirically grounded overview of the intellectual landscape that governs mental health help-seeking in higher education. The overall trend of increased annual output,

particularly accelerating from 2020 onwards, confirms this domain having achieved considerable scholarly momentum and continuing to attract interdisciplinary empirical attention in various higher education and cultural settings. The four clusters of mental health burden, stigmatization and counseling attitudes, mental health literacy, and contextual barriers, as revealed through keyword co-occurrence analysis, overall indicate this domain having implicitly developed towards a multi-determinant view of help-seeking behavior, even if integrated and systematic empirical exploration of each of these constructs within a unified and integrated framework is still comparatively scarce. The co-citation analysis reveals a core set of stigmatization theory, behavioral help-seeking models, and attitudes as forming a core and underlying theoretical structure for this domain, with stigmatization itself playing a structurally prominent position as a frequently researched construct associated with decreased engagement in services. The co-authorship analysis demonstrates research conducted in Chinese and East Asian higher education settings as having developed along a partially independent trajectory from the overall Western mainstream, a structure which might itself limit the cross-cultural applicability of some of the extant and underlying theoretical models. Overall, it therefore suggests a potentially highly productive and fertile area of research as it might attempt to develop theoretically integrated models of help-seeking that position stigmatization as a mediating factor within a more integrated structure of counselor factors, student factors, and contextual factors, and prioritize its empirical exploration within Chinese higher education settings where the gap between psychological burden and help-seeking utilization is particularly evident.

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