Academic Major, Gender, and Perceived Helpfulness Predict Help-Seeking Stigma

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Abstract : Mental health issues are prevalent among Vietnamese undergraduate students, and they are greatly exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic for this population. While there is empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness and efficiency of therapy on mental health issues among college students, the rates of Vietnamese college students seeking professional mental health services were alarmingly low. Multiple factors can prevent those in need from finding support. The Internalized Stigma Model posits that public stigma directly affects intentions to seek psychological help via self-stigma and attitudes toward seeking help. However, little research has focused on what factors can predict public stigma toward seeking professional psychological support, especially among this population. A potential predictor is academic majors since academic majors can influence undergraduate students' perceptions, attitudes, and intentions. A study suggested that students who have completed two or more psychology courses have a more positive attitude toward seeking care for mental health issues and reduced stigma, which might be attributed to increased mental health literacy. In addition, research has shown that women are more likely to utilize mental health services and have lower stigma than men. Finally, studies have also suggested that experience of mental health services can increase endorsement of perceived need and lower stigma. Thus, it is expected that perceived helpfulness from past service uses can reduce stigma. This study aims to address this gap in the literature and investigate which factors can predict public stigma, specifically academic major, gender, and perceived helpfulness, potentially suggesting an avenue of prevention and ultimately improving the well-being of Vietnamese college students. The sample includes 408 undergraduate students (Mage = 20.44; 80.88% female) Hanoi city, Vietnam. Participants completed a pen-and-paper questionnaire. Students completed the Stigma Scale for Receiving Psychological Help, which yielded a mean public stigma score. Participants also completed a measurement assessing their perceived helpfulness of their university's counseling center, which included eight subscales: future self-development, learning issues, career counseling, medical and health issues, mental health issues, conflicts between teachers and students, conflicts between parents and students, and interpersonal relationships. Items were summed to create a composite perceived helpfulness score. Finally, participants provided demographic information. This included gender, which was dichotomized between female and other. Additionally, it included academic major, which was also similarly dichotomized between psychology and other (e.g., natural science, social science, and pedagogy & social work). Linear relationships between public stigma and gender, academic major, and perceived helpfulness were analyzed individually with a regression model. Findings suggested that academic major, gender, and perceived counseling center's helpfulness predicted stigma against seeking professional psychological help. Specifically, being a psychology major predicted lower levels of public stigma ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$). Additionally, gender female predicted lower levels of public stigma ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$). Lastly, higher levels of perceived helpfulness of the counseling center also predicted lower levels of public stigma ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$). The study's results offer potential intervention avenues to help reduce stigma and increase well-being for Vietnamese college students.