

HELP-SEEKING INTENTIONS OF SLOVAK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on higher education and the lives of university students. This population is often considered vulnerable, with a lower propensity to seek and experience help. *Aim:* The present study aims to investigate the help-seeking intentions and experiences of Slovak university students during the COVID-19 pandemic and other associated factors. *Methods:* During November and December of 2021, 258 students (mean age = 21.86, SD = 2.05; 77.1% women) from Slovak universities participated in an online survey propagated across online Facebook university campus groups in Slovakia. The General Help-seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) was used to assess students' intentions to seek help (specifically within the next 4 weeks) if they were experiencing a personal or emotional problem. Each source was treated as a separate scale, and an overall scale including all sources of help was utilized. A supplementary question was also included within the GHSQ to assess past help-seeking experiences. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and the Fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCS) were employed in this study. Findings were analysed using the Mann-Whitney U Test and (multiple) linear regression. *Results:* We identified three primary help sources that are likely to be accessed by students when they experience a personal or emotional problem during the COVID-19 pandemic. These sources include informal help from their partner, friends, and parents. The lowest tendency of intentions was to seek help from teachers when students were experiencing a personal or emotional problem. The results indicated that women had a higher tendency of intentions to seek help from informal sources (partner, parents, other relatives) than men. Students with lifetime formal help-seeking experiences (28.2%) had a higher tendency of intentions to seek help from formal sources (such as mental health professionals) than students without lifetime help-seeking experiences. Multiple linear regression revealed associations between gender, satisfaction with life, fear of COVID-19, and help-seeking intentions. Women and students with higher levels of SWLS and FCS exhibited a higher level of help-seeking intentions. *Conclusion:* The results of this study support previous findings related to the willingness of young people, especially to use informal sources for help-seeking. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to improve mental health literacy among university students.

Keywords: Help-seeking intentions, satisfaction with life, university students, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced people across the world to change their social life (Arikkatt & Mohanan, 2021). The pandemic has led to high levels of psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and panic behaviors (Giusti et al., 2021). It has had a great impact on the life and well-being of university students. According to research, university students may be at greater risk for poor mental health than the general population (Blanco et al., 2008; in Beks et al., 2018) and are often considered vulnerable, with a lower propensity to seek and experience help (O'Connor et al., 2014).

Help-seeking intention and subsequent behavior have been defined as communication with other people in the sense of obtaining help in terms of understanding, advice, information, treatment, and general support in response to a problem or distressing experience. Help-seeking intention and behavior can be classified into two categories: 1.) informal help-seeking – from family, partner, friends, other relatives, etc., and 2.) formal help-seeking – from mental health professionals, youth workers, teachers, etc. (Rickwood et al., 2005; Çebi & Demir, 2020).

2. Design

The study utilized a cross-sectional design.

3. Objective

The present study aims to investigate the help-seeking intentions and experiences of Slovak university students during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other associated factors such as the well-being and fear of COVID-19 among university students.

4. Methods

4.1. Sample and procedure

258 students (mean age = 21.86, SD = 2.05; 77.1% women) from Slovak universities participated in an online survey distributed through various online Facebook university campus groups in Slovakia. The data collection among university students took place between November and December of 2021. Due to the repeated lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the data collection, we were compelled to shift the entire data collection process to an online platform. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Data collection was carried out after obtaining informed consent from each participant. The protocol of this study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Arts of Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice.

4.2. Measures

The study utilized the General Help-seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ; Rickwood et al., 2005), which comprises 14 items. It was employed to evaluate students' intentions to seek help (specifically within the upcoming 4 weeks) when experiencing personal or emotional problems. Two sources of help-seeking intentions were listed here: 1.) informal sources (e.g., partner like significant boyfriend or girlfriend; friend; parent; other relative/family member) and 2.) formal sources (e.g., mental health professional like a school counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist; phone helpline; family doctor; teacher). One item was seeking help from someone not listed above, and one item was that a participant would not seek help from anyone. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). Each source was treated as a separate scale, and an overall scale including all sources of help was utilized. A supplementary second question was also included within the GHSQ to assess past help-seeking experiences. It was operationalized by asking, whether professional help has been sought in the past for a specific problem and, if help has been sought, how many times it was sought, what specific sources of help were sought, and whether the help obtained was evaluated as worthwhile on a 5-point scale indicating more or less helpfulness (1 – extremely unhelpful; 5 – extremely helpful).

The fear of COVID-19 was measured by the Fear of COVID-19 Scale (Ahorsu et al., 2020) consisting of 7 items. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The higher score indicates a greater fear of COVID-19 ($C\alpha=0.622$).

The well-being of university students was measured through the construct of subjective well-being within the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Džuka & Dalbert, 2002). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with the 5 statements (e.g., “In most ways my life is close to my ideal.”) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The higher score indicates a higher level of well-being ($C\alpha=0.877$).

4.3. Statistical analyses

Findings were analysed using the Mann-Whitney U Test and (multiple) linear regression.

5. Results

5.1. Three primary sources of help which are likely to be accessed by students

We identified three primary sources of help that are likely to be accessed by students when they experience a personal or emotional problem during the COVID-19 pandemic. These sources include informal help from their partner ($M = 5.37$; $SD = 2.30$), friend ($M = 5.20$; $SD = 2.02$), and parents ($M = 4.94$; $SD = 2.05$). The lowest tendency of intentions was to seek help from teachers ($M = 1.79$; $SD = 1.36$). The results indicated that women had a higher tendency of intentions to seek help from informal sources (partner, parents, other relatives; $M = 19.55$; $SD = 5.32$) than men ($M = 17$; $SD = 6.12$). Students with lifetime formal help-seeking experiences (28.2%) had a higher tendency of intentions to seek help from formal sources (such as mental health professionals), than students without lifetime help-seeking experiences.

5.2. The associations between gender, satisfaction with life, fear of COVID-19 and help-seeking intention

Multiple linear regression revealed associations between gender ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .01$), satisfaction with life ($\beta = .13$, $p < .05$), fear of COVID-19 ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$), and help-seeking intentions. Women and students with higher levels of satisfaction with life and fear of COVID-19 exhibited a higher level of help-seeking intentions.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this research study contribute to the important investigation of help-seeking intentions among university students (Rickwood et al., 2005; Çebi & Demir, 2020). The results of this study support previous findings related to the willingness of young people, especially to use informal sources for help-seeking (MZ SR, 2022). The study confirmed the results that females possessed more favorable help-seeking attitudes than males and that perceived social support (friends and significant other), prior help-seeking experience, and gender significantly predicted positive attitudes to seeking psychological help (Çebi & Demir, 2020).

The results of this study could contribute to the implementation of these results into mental health services, counsellors' programs, and university counselling centers, which will focus more on improving help-seeking attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of the university students by targeting and eliminating the main barriers to treatment. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to improve mental health literacy among university students. The educational interventions about mental health literacy, de-stigmatization of mental health services, and providing better help-seeking sources of information, as to where exactly the potential providers of help can be found, could be performed. Similarly, this study may contribute to mental disorder treatment among university students and reduce the possible barriers to help-seeking intention and behavior.

The limitations and strengths of this study must be highlighted. The most significant limitation was using only online questionnaires because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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