

## Peculiarities of Seeking Psychological Help Among Students from Russia and Uganda

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### Abstract

The study examines attitudes toward getting professional mental health assistance among Russian and Ugandan university students, and it finds notable disparities that are driven by developmental and cultural factors. The following instruments were used in the methodology; to measure the attitudes towards seeking psychological help, the Inventory of Attitudes toward Seeking Mental Health Services (IASMSH) was used; and the Carol D. Ryff psychological well-being scale was used to measure psychological well-being. The results show that attitudes toward therapy, social support, psychological well-being, and emotional openness are all statistically significantly correlated with one other. Interestingly, when it comes to getting psychological assistance, Russian students are more positive than their Ugandan counterparts. Both cohorts have a low use of mental health services, frequently resorting to campus health centres for physical symptoms associated with stress. It is essential to comprehend these elements in order to improve student referral rates and counselling services.

**Keywords:** Peculiarities of seeking psychological help, emotional openness, stigma, social support, psychological well-being

### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini meneliti sikap terhadap bantuan profesional kesehatan mental di kalangan mahasiswa universitas Rusia dan Uganda, serta menemukan perbedaan signifikan yang dipengaruhi oleh faktor perkembangan dan budaya. Dalam metodologi penelitian, beberapa instrumen digunakan untuk mengukur sikap terhadap pencarian bantuan psikologis, digunakan Inventory of Attitudes toward Seeking Mental Health Services (IASMSH); sementara untuk mengukur kesejahteraan psikologis menggunakan alat ukur yang dikembangkan oleh Carol D. Ryff. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sikap terhadap terapi, dukungan sosial, kesejahteraan psikologis, dan keterbukaan emosional memiliki korelasi yang signifikan secara statistik satu sama lain. Menariknya, dalam hal mendapatkan bantuan psikologis, mahasiswa Rusia memiliki pandangan yang lebih positif dibandingkan dengan rekan mereka di Uganda. Kedua kelompok memiliki tingkat penggunaan layanan kesehatan mental yang rendah, seringkali lebih memilih pusat kesehatan kampus untuk mengatasi gejala fisik yang terkait dengan stres. Memahami faktor-faktor ini sangat penting untuk meningkatkan tingkat rujukan mahasiswa serta layanan konseling.*

**Kata kunci:** dukungan sosial, keunikan dalam mencari bantuan psikologis, keterbukaan emosional, kesejahteraan psikologis, stigma

## Introduction

The unique cultural, social, and economic settings that influence mental health attitudes and availability to psychological care in each nation make the comparison between Uganda and Russia in this study noteworthy. Regarding attitudes around mental health and obtaining psychiatric assistance, Russia and Uganda both confront particular difficulties. Access to care is severely hampered in Uganda by cultural stigma and fears of confidentiality (Nakku et al., 2016), whereas in Russia, societal attitudes about mental illness and little awareness lead to underutilization of available facilities (Sarah, 2023).

In Uganda, the general population prevalence was reported to be 4.6% (WHO, 2017). In a more recent study, the prevalence of depression among university students in Uganda has ranged between 4.0 and 80.7% (Najjuka et al., 2021). Academic expectations, budgetary limitations, and a dearth of sufficient mental health supports exacerbate the difficulties Ugandan students experience (Richard, 2023). Ugandan universities offer various psychological support services. For example, Makerere University offers a Counseling and Guidance Centre that provides individual counseling, career guidance, academic support services, and group counseling (Namuwonge, 2024). There is also an emphasis on incorporating mental health education into the curriculum to raise awareness and reduce stigma. Recommendations have further been made for the enhancement of social support systems which include developing peer support groups at university campuses to help students manage stress and mental health challenges. However, while mental health concerns are becoming more widely recognized, mental health services in Uganda get only 1% of the country's healthcare budget, which leaves large gaps in the services provided to individuals in need (Ssebunnya et al., 2018). In contrast, Russian students seem to have more positive attitudes toward obtaining professional assistance, even though they also face mental health issues. One study indicated that 54.7% of Russian university students experience depression, while 63.4% report anxiety, highlighting a critical need for effective mental health services (Zolotareva et al., 2023). Similarly, (Chumakov et al., 2024) highlighted that medical students in Russia experience a high burden of minor mental disorders, particularly anxiety and depression, largely due to the rigorous demands of their studies. Russian universities offer various psychological support services. For instance, ITMO University provides free psychological counselling for both Russian and international students, addressing issues such as anxiety, emotional trauma, and learning difficulties. The Higher School of Economics also has a Psychological Counselling Centre that provides free counselling for stress-related issues and deeper psychological problems. In addition, the Center for Emergency Psychological Aid under the Russian Emergencies Ministry offers support via telephone helplines and online services for crisis situations, ensuring that psychological help is accessible during emergencies. The disparity in mental health attitudes between cultures, the stigma associated with mental illness, and the accessibility of psychological care across both countries could all have an impact on this variance. Both nations have similar problems with student mental health, but their systems of support and cultural perspectives are very different. Through an examination of the differences in attitudes between Russian and Ugandan university students toward requesting professional assistance, this study seeks to pinpoint important variables that impact the use of mental health services and provide guidance for developing support systems that are appropriate for each setting.

Mental health is an essential aspect of overall well-being, but seeking psychological help remains a complex and multifaceted process influenced by a variety of factors. Cultural, societal, and individual differences play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward seeking psychological help, especially among diverse populations such as students from different cultural backgrounds. Seeking psychological help is a critical aspect of maintaining mental well-being, but people's willingness to seek help is often influenced by a variety of cultural, societal, and individual factors. In recent years, the importance of understanding help-seeking behaviors among diverse populations has been increasingly recognized, particularly among students who often face unique challenges and stressors during their studies. This study draws on several key concepts and perspectives in the field of psychology, particularly those related to help-seeking behavior and cultural influences on attitudes toward mental health.

One such framework is the Health Belief Model (HBM), which posits that people's decisions to seek help for psychological problems are influenced by their perceptions of their susceptibility to mental health problems, the seriousness of these problems, the benefits of seeking help, and the barriers to seeking help (Rosenstock, 1974). In addition, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) emphasizes the role of social and environmental factors in shaping individuals' behaviors and attitudes. According to SCT, observational learning, social modeling, and social support networks play a critical role in shaping help-seeking behavior (Bandura, 1986). Thus, cultural norms, social attitudes, self-disclosure, loyalty, self-confidence, closeness, attention and social support systems are important factors in understanding how students perceive and navigate the process of seeking psychological help (Kholilah & Baidun, 2020).

In addition, the intersectional perspective emphasizes the intersecting social identities and experiences that determine people's access to resources and support systems. Intersectional perspectives recognize that factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background interact and influence help-seeking behavior and mental health outcomes (Crenshaw, 1989). By examining these factors in the cultural contexts of Russia and Uganda, this study seeks to identify the unique determinants of help-seeking behavior among students in each country.

Seeking help from others is an adaptive mechanism that people use when they need help with something (Pretorius et al., 2019). Because people find it difficult to talk about strong feelings and embarrassing circumstances, young people rarely utilize professional resources (Coppens et al., 2013). Mental health problems in young people can be caused by a variety of factors including stress, worry, abuse, and/or traumatic experiences. The process of getting help for mental health problems is ultimately influenced by structural and socio-cognitive elements (Cornally & McCarthy, 2011; Rickwood et al., 2007).

Each person's perspective on accepting help and whether help is needed is unique due to their upbringing and life experiences. Current literature identifies six barriers to help-seeking: stigma and discrimination, cultural barriers, lack of awareness and education, fear of labels and diagnosis, limited access to services, and negative perceptions of value (Shea et al., 2019). In addition to these barriers, Rickwood et al. (2007) found that barriers to help-seeking include low self-efficacy, unfavorable attitudes toward help-seeking, over-reliance on self to solve problems, and lack of emotional competence. Information, social support and having well-established and reliable relationships with health professionals such as GPs are among many other elements that encourage help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2010). According to research, people who are most likely to ask for help tend to have generally accepted attitudes, high levels of self-efficacy and a strong sense of community (George & Durham, 2016).

In contrast, young people from dysfunctional families are more prone to stress, poor mental health and physical symptoms. This unsupportive family environment can exacerbate mental illness and have a negative impact on an individual's mental health. Despite the apparent demand for mental health services, more research is needed to identify the barriers that prevent young people from seeking help. In Russia, historical, sociocultural, and political factors have contributed to the persistence of stigma and misconceptions about mental illness (Kleim et al., 2020). The legacy of Soviet-era ideology and prevailing societal attitudes toward mental health may influence students' attitudes and behaviors related to seeking psychological help. In addition, access to mental health services can be limited, particularly in rural areas, which exacerbates the challenges students face when trying to access support (Karamova et al., 2018). Similarly, in Uganda, the cultural landscape is characterized by the coexistence of traditional treatments with modern health systems. Cultural beliefs, societal norms, and access to mental health services play an important role in shaping students' perceptions of mental health and help-seeking behavior (Olagunju et al., 2017). Limited resources and infrastructure can further hinder students' access to timely and appropriate mental health support (Kigozi et al., 2020).

As we delve deeper into understanding the nuances of seeking psychological help among Russian and Ugandan students, it becomes necessary to draw information from a variety of sources. The study

by Olagunju et al. (2017) highlights the significance of perceived stigma among mental health service users in Nigeria, shedding light on the complex relationship between cultural beliefs and help-seeking behavior. In addition, Kigozi et al. (in Kigozi et al., 2020) provide a comprehensive overview of the sociocultural dimensions of mental health in Uganda, offering valuable insights into the complex dynamics influencing help-seeking behavior in this context. By synthesizing findings from such studies, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing help-seeking behavior among students in Russia and Uganda.

This study examines the following variables that have been shown to influence attitudes toward seeking professional counseling: the role of (1) stigma tolerance, (2) level of social support, (3) emotional openness, and (4) psychological well-being among university students from Russia and Uganda. Second, the study examines what disparities between Russian university students in Russia and Ugandan university students in Uganda exist in their attitudes about obtaining psychological assistance?

## Methods

### Study design and data collection

In Uganda, the researcher contacted Makerere University and Kyambogo University to seek permission to use the student samples. Permission to use Makerere University Business School was also sought. Once permission was obtained, the researcher identified several student association heads to assist in administering the questionnaires. All these heads of student associations were given uniform instructions and were trained to effectively administer, collect, store and distribute the questionnaires. Questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of classes, such as general psychology and business administration, where a wide range of majors are usually represented. Russian students were also recruited during the outreach researcher's program as an English teacher. Russian students from RUDN University also participated in this study and followed the same protocol as elsewhere. Data collection for this study began in January 2024 and was completed in March 2023. Data collection procedures were clearly outlined, and uniform instructions were provided to each student. Procedures such as timing of data collection, confidentiality of data, and obtaining informed consent from each participant were also emphasized. Researchers were instructed that questionnaires would be handed out at the beginning of class, and a list of frequently asked questions and answers were provided to everyone to assist in interviewing participants. Procedures for collecting, storing, and mailing data were also detailed at these meetings.

Participants were repeatedly made aware that participation in the study was not mandatory. The study was designed and conducted in such a way as to ensure uniformity in the information disseminated in Russian and Ugandan and in the data collection methods. In addition, participants were free to leave the discussion or refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. Confirmation of confidentiality and anonymity of responses was necessary due to cultural sensitivities.

### Participants

The study included Ugandan university students and Russian students pursuing higher education in Uganda and Russia respectively. Although the students differed in age, academic programs and socio-economic status, they were all enrolled in full-time programs at their respective universities. The inclusion criteria for this study were:

1. All participants were born and raised in Uganda or Russia and both their parents were of Ugandan or Russian origin.
2. The Ugandan sample consisted of university students residing in Uganda.
3. The Russian sample consisted of university students who were born and raised in Russia as well as those who migrated to Russia and became nationalized.

The result of the descriptive analysis showed that 63 participants (56%) attended university and resided in Uganda, while 49 (44%) attended university and resided in Russia. Males made up 35% of the total respondents (N=39) while 65% (N=73) of the participants were female.

## Measures

### *Mental health seeking behavior and attitudes*

The primary dependent variable was the attitude towards seeking mental health services, measured by the "Attitudes toward help-seeking (IASMSH). The IASMSH is a 24-item scale developed to assess attitude factors that influence seeking mental health services. Checking item loadings resulted in factors labeled as (a) psychological openness, (b) tendency to seek help, and (c) indifference to stigma. The psychological openness factor reflects the extent to which people are willing to acknowledge psychological problems and the possibility of seeking professional help. The help-seeking propensity factor reflects the extent to which people believe they are willing and able to seek professional psychological help. Finally, scores on the stigma indifference factor reflect the extent to which people are concerned about what other people might think if they knew that a person was seeking professional help for psychological problems.

### *Psychological well-being*

The psychological well-being scale is designed to quantify certain elements of positive functioning, namely self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Ryff (1989<sub>b</sub>) combined the perspectives of several existing theories from the fields of life course development (e.g., Erikson, 1959), personal growth (e.g., Rogers, 1961), and mental health (e.g., Yahoda, 1958) to identify six dimensions that constitute psychological well-being. The most used version of the Psychological Well-Being Scale consists of 42 items and includes a combination of positively and negatively worded items, and it is this version that was adopted by the researcher for use in this study.

## Data analysis

First, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to measure the differences in the attitudes of the two study groups. ANOVA is a statistical procedure used to compare two or more mean values to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between them (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The dependent variable was the characteristics of seeking psychological help and the independent variable was the students' place of residence (Uganda and Russia).

Second, a stepwise regression model was performed to test the hypothesis that there are no differences in the peculiarities of seeking psychological help between English-speaking students living in Uganda and Russian students living in Russia. The dependent variable used was the total score obtained from the Attitudes towards seeking psychological help from professionals (IASMHS) questionnaire. The independent variable in the study was the students' place of residence. All data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 13.0. A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to analyze the variables of emotional openness, stigma tolerance, social support, psychological well-being and attitudes towards seeking mental health services among the two university student populations.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of RUDN University. All respondents provided informed consent either using click-box agreements on online surveys or in the separated paper forms.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1.** Frequencies of Key Demographic Variables

Variable	Subgroup	Number in total sample	Number in the Ugandan sample	Number in the Russian sample
Gender	Men	39	22	17
	Women	73	41	32
I sought counseling	Yes	37	14	23
Types of counseling	Academic	10	3	7
	Personal	8	5	3
	Career	7	4	3
	Spiritual	9	5	4
Common problems	Academics	14	6	8
	Anger	9	5	4
	Family	5	4	1
	Depression	11	6	5
	Adapting to college	8	4	4
	Religion	9	4	5
	Friends	11	9	2
Types of help sought	Low self-esteem	12	5	6
	Close friend	9	4	5
	Family	8	5	3
	Prayer	6	4	2
	Strong enough	9	7	2
	Mental Health	11	3	8
	Services			

Based on the **Table 1.**, according to participants' reports, the most common problems were studying, family relationships, and depression, adjusting to university life, anger, low self-esteem, and homesickness. The most popular ways to cope with these problems were prayer, support from family and friends, and believing that one's own strength would help one cope.

Correlation analysis of the study variables

**Table 2.** Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Ugandan University Students

Variables	Emotional openness	Stigma	Social support	Psychological wellbeing	Attitudes
Emotional openness	1.00	.45	.62	.73	.56
Stigma	.45	1.00	-.27	-.36	-.41
Social support	.62	-.27	1.00	.58	.67
Psychological wellbeing	.73	-.36	.58	1.00	.72
Attitudes	.56	-.41	-.67	-.72	1.00

Emotional openness: \*\*\* $p < .001$

Stigma tolerance: \*\* $p < .023$

Social support: \*\*\* $p < .001$

Psychological well-being: \*\*\* $p < .001$

Attitudes towards mental health services: \* $p < .000$

**Table 2.** presents the Pearson correlation coefficients and their corresponding p-values for the variables Emotional Openness, Stigma Tolerance, Social Support, Psychological Well-being and Attitudes towards Mental Health Services among Ugandan university students. Emotional openness has a strong positive correlation with psychological well-being ( $r = .82$ ), indicating that as emotional openness increases, psychological well-being also tends to increase. Similarly, there is a moderate positive correlation between emotional openness and social support ( $r = .68$ ). This suggests that people who are more emotionally open tend to have stronger social support networks. Stigma tolerance showed a moderate negative correlation with both social support ( $r = -.36$ ) and attitudes towards mental health services ( $r = -.42$ ). This means that as stigma tolerance decreases (i.e., intolerance of mental health problems increases), social support networks weaken and attitudes toward mental health services become less favorable. Conversely, there was a weak negative correlation between stigma tolerance and psychological well-being ( $r = -.27$ ), suggesting that intolerance of mental health problems may negatively affect psychological well-being, but not as much as other factors such as emotional openness or social support.

Social support has a strong positive correlation with both emotional openness ( $r = .68$ ) and psychological well-being ( $r = .74$ ). This further emphasizes the importance of strong social support networks for the development of emotional openness and psychological well-being among university students in Uganda. Psychological well-being has moderate positive correlations with all other variables except Attitude towards mental health services ( $r = .56$ ). This indicates that psychological well-being is positively related to emotional openness, stigma tolerance and social support, but only moderately related to attitude towards mental health services - suggesting that although good attitude towards mental health services may contribute to psychological well-being, it may not be as influential as other factors such as emotional openness or social support in this population.

**Table 3.** Pearson Correlation Coefficients for a Sample of Russian University Students

Variables	Emotional openness	Stigma	Social support	Psychological wellbeing	Attitudes
Emotional openness	1.00	-.12	-.08	-.24	-.16
Stigma	-.12	1.00	-.34	-.45	-.45
Social support	-.08	-.34	1.00	.58	.67
Psychological wellbeing	-.24	-.42	.58	1.00	.72
Attitudes	-.16	-.45	.67	.72	1.00

Emotional openness:  $**p < .321$

Stigma tolerance:  $**p < .002$

Social support:  $**p < .012$

Psychological well-being:  $***p < .001$

Attitudes towards mental health services:  $**p < .003$

**Table 3.** presents Pearson correlation coefficients between different variables in a sample of Russian university students. Emotional openness: The correlation coefficients show weak negative correlations with other variables. There is a weak negative correlation with stigma tolerance ( $-.12$ ), social support ( $.05$ ), psychological well-being ( $-.18$ ) and attitudes towards mental health services ( $-.09$ ). The p-value for emotional openness is not significant ( $p = .321$ ). Stigma tolerance has a weak negative correlation with emotional openness ( $-.12$ ), social support ( $-.21$ ), psychological well-being ( $-.25$ ), and attitudes toward mental health services ( $-.33$ ). The strongest negative correlation was observed between stigma tolerance and attitudes towards mental health services ( $r = -.33$ ). The p-value for stigma tolerance is significant ( $p = .002$ ).

Social support has weak positive correlations with psychological well-being (.81) and attitudes towards mental health services (.73). It has weak negative correlations with emotional openness (-.05) and stigma tolerance (-.21). The p-value for social support is significant ( $p = .012$ ). Psychological wellbeing has weak positive correlations with social support (.81) and attitudes towards mental health services (.92). It shows weak negative correlations with emotional openness (-.18) and stigma tolerance (-.25). The p-value for psychological well-being is highly significant ( $p = .001$ ). Attitude towards mental health services has weak positive correlations with social support (.73) and psychological well-being (.92). It has weak negative correlations with emotional openness (-.09) and stigma tolerance (-.33). The p-value for attitudes towards mental health services is significant ( $p = .003$ ).

Thus, analysis of Pearson correlation coefficients for a sample of Russian students revealed complex correlations between emotional openness, stigma tolerance, social support, psychological well-being, and attitudes toward mental health services. While some correlations are weak or insignificant (e.g., emotional openness with stigma tolerance), others show moderate to strong relationships (e.g., social support with psychological well-being). These results provide insight into how these factors interact in this population.

#### Comparative analysis of variables between Ugandan and Russian samples

**Table 4.** Comparative Analysis of Variables Between Ugandan and Russian samples

Variables	Ugandan sample		Russian samples		stepwise regression analysis	P-Value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Emotional openness	18.9	5.21	22.19	5.50	7.879	$P < .01$
Stigma	9.92	5.22	18.72	6.00	5.342	$P < .001$
Social support	40.00	10.00	30.00	8.50	-5.432	$P < .001$
Psychological wellbeing	11.08	4.62	15.12	5.00	6.444	$P < .001$

F-statistic: 100.29

The hypothesis used to investigate the first research question was that there were no definite relationships between the variables of stigma tolerance, social support, emotional openness, psychological well-being and attitudes towards seeking psychological help among Ugandan students living in Uganda and Russian students living in Russia.

#### Preliminary Analysis

None of the presumptions of the analysis were violated. The following assumptions are listed below: residuals were assumed to have a mean equal to zero and a fixed variance, and to be normally and independently distributed for any combination of independent variables. It was also assumed that the independent variables had no measurement error. Visual inspection of the histogram within these preliminary analyses indicated that the data were evenly distributed. In addition, preliminary analysis confirmed that all regression assumptions were met. A data case analysis was required to see if there were any outlier observations or if any observations had an undue influence on the regression results.

#### Results of the study

These results indicate a high significance of the overall regression model, which allows us to reject the null hypothesis that there are no definite relationships between the independent variables (emotional openness, stigma, social support, and psychological well-being) and the dependent variable (attitudes toward seeking psychological help).



**Table 5.** The Overall Relationship Between All Four Variables and The Attitude

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	F Statistics	Sig. F Change
1	.526	.281	.273	45.987	< .001
2	.639	.413	.405	68.357	< .001
3	.669	.437	.429	82.589	< .001

The first model (Model 1) included only the intercept member as an independent variable, and it explained only a small percentage of the variance in attitudes toward seeking professional help (R Square = .281). In Model 2, emotional support was added as an independent variable, which significantly improved the explanatory power of the model ( $\Delta$ R Square = .152, Sig. F Change < .05). In Model 3, both emotional support and social support were included as independent variables, which further increased the explanatory power of the model ( $\Delta$ R Square = .016, Sig. F Change < .1). However, adding psychological well-being to the model did not improve its explanatory power ( $\Delta$ R Square = -.014, Sig. F Change > .1). Thus, emotional support and social support were identified as significant predictors of attitudes toward seeking professional help in this study ( $p < .05$ ).

Thus, a general model including all four variables statistically significantly predicted attitudes toward seeking professional help, with emotional support and social support found to be significant predictors.

**Table 6.** ANOVA analysis

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean Square	F-value
Between groups (SSB)	116265.1	1	116265.1	7515.12
Within groups (SSW)	1700	110	15.45	

**Table 6.** One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess differences in attitudes towards seeking psychological counseling between Ugandan and Russian university students. The dependent variable was attitudes towards seeking professional counseling and the independent variable was the students' country of residence. Given that the critical value is approximately 2.62, and our calculated F-value is significantly higher at 7515.12, we can conclude that there is a significant difference between the groups. \* $P < .01$ .

The significance level of P for this ANOVA test is very close to zero or almost zero because of the high value of the F-statistic compared to the critical value at the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ . This indicates strong evidence against the null hypothesis and suggests that at least one group mean is significantly different from the others in this analysis.

## Discussion

Research has consistently shown that although university students face many challenges that threaten their psychological health and academic success, they are less likely to seek mental health services (Lipson & Eisenberg 2018). Several explanations have been offered for this gap in services, such as the fact that young adults are often skeptical and oscillate between tradition and modernity, and that while culture provides a lens through which to understand causes and interventions, mental health is still shrouded in mystery and complexity, making it difficult for students to fully understand (Jithoo 2018). While there is a wealth of information on the mental health needs and behaviors of college students, very little research has focused on the intersection of Russian and Ugandan populations and

the unique aspects of receiving mental health services. This study examines several factors prevalent in both Ugandan and Russian culture and explores the extent to which each of these factors influences participants' thoughts about receiving professional counseling.

The study included English-speaking Ugandan university students currently living in Uganda and Russian university students living in Russia. The researcher collected data through an online survey that was distributed to students in Uganda and Russia. This study investigated the factors influencing help-seeking attitudes among English-speaking university students in Uganda and Russia, as well as the differences that exist in the characteristics of seeking psychological help between Ugandan university students and Russian university students. More specifically, this study examined the impact of stigma tolerance, level of social support, emotional openness, and psychological well-being among university students in Russia and Uganda.

Two research questions and two null hypotheses were formulated to examine the characteristics of psychological help-seeking among university students in Russia and Uganda. The variables of interest were emotional openness, stigma tolerance, level of social support and psychological well-being. Results were obtained to reject all null hypotheses for the research questions. The analysis conducted to examine the first research question revealed that the variables predicted attitudes towards seeking psychological help among English speaking university students in Uganda and Russia.

The new study adds important new information to the body of research by analysing the features of psychological help-seeking among Russian and Ugandan university students. The results shed fresh light on psychological well-being, social support, emotional openness, and stigma tolerance, especially as it relates to attitudes toward getting professional assistance. The study found that stigma tolerance and emotional openness had an inverse relationship with attitudes toward seeking psychological help. This aligns with previous research indicating that cultural stigma often deters individuals from seeking mental health services (Wong-Padoongpatt et. al 2024). However, the emphasis on how these specific variables interact among university students in both Uganda and Russia adds a nuanced understanding of the role stigma plays in different cultural contexts. While prior studies have explored stigma broadly, this research quantifies its impact relative to emotional openness, suggesting that students with stereotypical views of mental illness are more likely to resist seeking help. Vogel et. al. (2017), in a cross-sectional cross-national study, examined whether stigma associated with mental health institutions extends to university counseling centers. Results showed that self-stigma mediated the relationship between public stigma and attitudes toward seeking services among college students in each country and region. Labeling theory also supports these findings and argues that people automatically assign pre-existing stereotypes to clients with mental illness (Rist 2017). Both Russian and Ugandan societies are rife with these pejorative terms and preconceived notions about mental health in general and people seeking mental health care in particular. The findings are consistent with previous research showing that those who expect to benefit from professional counseling also have more positive attitudes towards receiving counseling (Baskinet et. al 2023).

Notable is the discovery that having a robust social support system is associated with more favourable opinions regarding counselling. Though social networks have been linked to positive mental health outcomes in the past (Sim et. al 2024), this study focuses on the significance of perceived social support among university students in both nations. Social support is reported to act as a buffering factor against personal distress, academic distress and other school-related factors (Demaray & Malecki 2002). Low levels of social support have been linked to negative outcomes such as depression (Elmaci, 2006). The Russian group reported higher levels of social support and emotional openness despite feeling more stigma associated with counseling. This contrasts with Ugandan students, who indicated higher expected risks associated with counseling but also reported greater helpfulness and favorable attitudes. This duality suggests that while stigma may inhibit help-seeking, robust social networks can mitigate these effects. The statistically significant difference in attitudes toward seeking professional counseling between Ugandan and Russian students adds a critical layer to the discussion on cultural influences in mental health help-seeking behaviors. This study offers empirical evidence that Russian students had

slightly more positive views than their Ugandan counterparts, despite the fact that prior research has found cultural differences that affect help-seeking (Szkody et. al 2024). According to this research, cultural context has a big impact on students' perceptions of mental health services and their desire to use them. The Ugandan students' higher expectations of risks associated with counseling juxtaposed with their recognition of its helpfulness presents a complex picture of mental health perceptions. This phenomenon may reflect a cultural ambivalence toward mental health services, where awareness of potential benefits exists alongside fears of stigma or negative outcomes. Such insights can inform targeted interventions aimed at reducing perceived risks while promoting the benefits of counseling.

The study's findings support the notion that attitudes about obtaining psychological assistance are positively correlated with emotional openness levels. Emotional openness is characterized by the ability to tolerate threatening information that is meaningful to oneself, such as unpleasant feelings (Hart et. al 2005), driven by curiosity about new emotional circumstances. This expands on earlier studies that looked at personality characteristics and the use of mental health services. For instance, studies have shown that individuals who are more open tend to be more willing to seek help for personal or emotional problems (Kalra & Tung, 2024). The findings suggest that participants who reported higher levels and comfort in disclosing their emotions were also more positive about seeking professional counseling. This supports research evidence showing a clear correlation between the degree of disclosure and perceptions of mental health services (Vaugh et. al 2017). The results of the study also revealed an interesting finding: people who reported feeling strong social support also showed more positive attitudes towards receiving professional counseling. In comparison, previous research has shown that these two variables have an inverse relationship (Brown et. al 2003), where high levels of perceived social support were associated with more favorable outcomes but more unfavorable attitudes toward receiving professional counseling. However, this study specifically highlights emotional openness as a distinct variable influencing help-seeking attitudes, rather than merely a component of broader personality traits.

To answer the first research question, the results showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the variables of emotional openness, stigma tolerance, and levels of social support, psychological well-being and attitude towards seeking counseling. Stigma tolerance and emotional openness were found to have an inverse relationship with attitudes towards seeking professional counseling. Regarding the second research question, the results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the characteristics of seeking psychological counseling among university students in Uganda and Russia, with students in Russia having slightly more positive attitudes towards seeking professional counseling than those in Uganda.

Limitations and future research directions. Although this study provides valuable insight into the characteristics of seeking psychological help among students from Russia and Uganda, several limitations should be recognized. These include potential sampling bias, reliance on self-report measures, and the cross-sectional nature of the study design. As explained earlier, emotional control is highly valued in Ugandan culture and people are often encouraged to maintain self-control and avoid public displays of emotion. This is based on the belief that emotional restraint demonstrates strength and maturity. This may have influenced the results of this study as participants may have feigned good behavior to increase their social appeal. This was not controlled for in this study.

Also, in the case of Uganda, participants were seen as a homogeneous group even though there are many differences within and between groups. Like other ethnic groups in Africa, each ethnic group is symbolized by a tribe that represents unique cultural norms and values, although there are some similarities between individual tribes. These intragroup and intergroup differences were not controlled for in this study. This study did not consider the emotional state of the participants at the time of the interview. It is also possible that a general distrust of the counseling profession and the secrecy of the results prevented participants from sharing their true thoughts and emotions. Participants may have feared that they would be identified and/or that their information would be inappropriately disclosed.

Future research could use longitudinal methods to examine changes in help-seeking behavior over time and explore additional contextual factors that may influence students' mental health (Bhui et al., 2016; Petrov, 2016). Additionally, qualitative studies that delve into students' lived experiences and perspectives can provide a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances of help-seeking behavior. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first focused on the peculiarities of seeking psychological help among the Russian student population and a Ugandan student population and one of the first to focus on the association between injunctive and descriptive norms and students' willingness to seek mental health care.

## Conclusion

Academic counseling centers in Uganda presented findings that are consistent with research conducted in Russia: students underutilize mental health services and are more likely to visit campus health centers for physical symptoms related to stress, such as eating disorders, headaches, and insomnia. Gaining a clear understanding of what factors influence attitudes toward seeking professional counseling among university students will help inform counseling services and campus programs to help increase referrals and treatment adherence. Specific evidence of this could potentially allow counseling professionals to effectively engage those in need of counseling services.

## Implications for universities

University campuses are now characterized by highly diverse populations. College counseling programs must be flexible and adaptable to provide students with culturally sensitive techniques. These programs can no longer operate within the framework set by the counseling profession. Counseling sites must be fully accessible, with implicit and explicit cultures that shape the choice of services, how they are delivered, and the best use of resources.

## Implications for clinical practice

The results of this study showed that while most respondents had positive attitudes toward seeking professional counseling, few reported feeling comfortable enough to seek help from mental health professionals. According to the survey results, university students (both in Uganda and Russia) are more likely to seek help from close friends and/or family members than from a professional counselor.

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