

**PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL
HELP-SEEKING ATTITUDE
OF ASIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN JAPAN**

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Abstract

As globalization advances, the world's international student population has continuously risen. Among this enlarged population, numerous students face adjustment problems after realizing unfamiliarity with the host culture at certain points in their sojourns, which often trigger severe psychological distress. Previous studies conducted in the U.S. university settings have pointed to the underutilization of mental health resources by international students as one of the primary risk factors for the betterment of psychological health. Up to the present, however, there is very limited research carried out in places other than leading countries of North America and the British Commonwealth on the topics of international students' mental health. Different from the predominant research settings of existing research, this article attempts to clarify the distinction in professional help-seeking willingness between Japanese domestic students and international students from other Asian regions who were enrolled in a Japanese university, performing an independent Two-sample Z-test analysis. The result of the findings showed that both Japanese domestic students and Asian international students scored below average in willingness to seek professional help from mental health providers. It also demonstrated that the degrees of local students' help-seeking willingness did not significantly differ from those of international students. Implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Asian international students, Japanese university, mental health, professional help-seeking willingness, underutilization

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Introduction

As international trade and cultural exports become more active and frequent between countries in the era of globalization, international student mobility has as well steadily escalated for the past few decades. Over five million students were enrolled in degree programs overseas in 2017, and this figure is expected to amount to around eight million by 2025 (UNESCO, 2018). As of 2019, the U.S. ranked first as the country that holds the largest number of international students among all countries rated, followed by the U.K., China, and Canada (Studee, 2019).

In the U.S., the population of foreign students has consistently grown over the last few decades along with an upward global trend, and it reached its peak of 109 million during 2018-2019 (Statista, 2020). These foreign students bring tremendous financial benefits to the American economy by paying their tuition and spending living expenses. Being conscious of the enormous financial contributions to the American economy and education, U.S. higher education institutions strive to attract overseas students as many as possible to stay competitive and adjust to global challenges (IIE, 2019). However, in spite of the steady and increasing influx of international students, these students are confronted with many difficulties related to the adjustment to a strange environment and host culture. It should be noted that stress experienced during adjustment and acculturation could develop into psychiatric symptoms (Mori, 2000).

Yet, even if international students experience severe psychological problems resulted from a set of cultural stressors, they tend to avoid receiving professional mental health services. In the U.S. college settings, professional counseling services are underutilized by international students compared to their domestic counterparts (Hwang et al., 2014; Zheng & West-Olatunji, 2016). In the study of Brownson and colleagues (2014), international students were less likely to utilize professional services than other university student groups when they had similar rates of current suicidal ideation and experiences. These findings suggest that international students' tendency of underutilizing counseling services is a critical barrier in improving mental health. If their mental health is left untreated and not improved, it may lead to a cessation of academic program and dropout (Hjorth et al., 2016), which could ultimately cause poor retention and loss of tuition for universities. As an effort to prevent such phenomena from occurring and to better serve this population, school authorities and education officials are urged to thoroughly examine foreign students' unique underuse patterns of professional services and come up with efficient and secure alternatives.

Up to date, earlier research has been conducted exclusively on international students studying in Western English-speaking countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. Particularly, foreign students of Asian descent living in Western countries have been a primary subject of research (Li et al., 2014). However, the mental health of international students residing in countries of the Asia

region has been relatively neglected. Thus, drawing upon secondary data including Asian international students in Japan (Nguyen et al., 2019), this study seeks to explore their utilization trends for counseling services and compare results to those of previous works. It is expected that expanding the contextual boundaries will add new perspectives to the existing perceptions of international students' help-seeking behavioral patterns and create the possibility of new research directions.

In this study, the main focus is on defining the difference in willingness to seek professional help between Japanese local students and foreign students from other parts of Asia in an international college in Japan. There have been plenty of studies showing a marked gap between American domestic students and Asian international students in the U.S. with regard to the perception and utilization of mental health services (Hwang et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2014; Xiong & Yang, 2021). The objective of this investigation is to find out if results inconsistent with existing literature are observed; that is, the minimal or no gap in utilization intentions between two student groups, possibly due to analogous cultural codes between Japan and other Asian countries. Based on the established objective and aim of this research, a hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H_0 = The mean professional help-seeking willingness of local students is not significantly different from the mean professional help-seeking willingness of Asian international students ($\mu_L = \mu_I$).

H_1 = The mean professional help-seeking willingness of local students is significantly greater than the mean professional help-seeking willingness of Asian international students ($\mu_L > \mu_I$).

Method

Participants

A total of 268 undergraduate and graduate students – 247 and 21 respectively – in an international university in Japan were selected for the current study. Ages in this sample ranged from 17 to 31, with a mean age of 20.87. As for the gender ratio, the sample was comprised of 98 males (36.57%) and 170 females (63.43%). Of 268 students, 201 students were international, with 67 being domestic. For international student participants, their place of origin was broadly classified into four regions that include East Asia (EA), South Asia (EA), South East Asia (SEA), and other areas (Others).

Materials

The present study employed secondary data collected between October to December 2018 to explore the public health of international and domestic students in a Japanese university, such as acculturative stress, social connectedness,

depression, and help-seeking behaviors (Nguyen et al., 2019). The investigators implemented an internet-based survey to collect data utilizing four standard measurements that consisted of Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994), Social Connectedness Scale (SCS) (Lee & Robbins, 1995), Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) (Spitzer et al., 1999), and General Health Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) (Wilson et al., 2005). At the onset of the project, the survey questionnaires were sent electronically to 669 international and domestic students but eventually ended up being completed by 268 students with a response rate of 40.05%.

The questionnaire used in this original dataset contained 51 multiple-choice items that were composed of 25 categorical and 26 numerical variables. This questionnaire was split into three main sections, which were demographic information, mental health conditions (acculturative stress, social connectedness, depression), and help-seeking behaviors. The coefficient alphas for each question set of acculturative stress, social connectedness, and depression were 0.95, 0.95, and 0.81. The internal consistency for the items of help-seeking behavior was 0.77.

Since the current research was designed for a comparative analysis of help-seeking behavior between two university student groups, one question from the GHSQ was drawn, which was stated: “If you were having a personal or emotional problem, how likely is it that you would seek help from a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, social worker, counselor)?”. The question was rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Extremely unlikely) to 7 (Extremely likely).

Statistical Procedure

Two-sample Z-test analysis was used to identify the professional help-seeking trend of Asian foreign students attending a Japanese university. The Z-statistic was utilized to determine whether the mean scores of help-seeking willingness for international and local students were significantly different from one another. The computed Z-value was compared to the critical value at 5% level of significance, which is the default cutoff normally used, to determine whether to reject or accept the null hypothesis.

Results

The results of the Z-test are summarized in Table 1. Overall, it was observed that Asian international student respondents reported less willingness to utilize professional mental health services than Japanese domestic student respondents. The mean score of professional help-seeking willingness for international students (2.89) was smaller than that of professional help-seeking willingness for domestic students (3.13).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Two-Sample Z-Statistic for Study Variables

Variables	Number of students (<i>n</i>)	Mean (<i>M</i>)	Standard deviation (<i>SD</i>)	Test statistic (<i>z</i>)
Willingness to seek professional help of local students	67	3.13	1.87	-0.95
Willingness to seek professional help of Asian international students	201	2.89	1.82	
Total	268	3.01	1.85	

Note. Likert scale ranges from 1 to 7. The observed Z-value was compared to the critical value of ± 1.96 at the 5% significance level.

The observed value of *Z* was -0.95, and it was compared with the corresponding critical values, ± 1.96 , at a significance level of 0.05. It was found that the calculated Z-value fell outside the critical region (-1.96 to +1.96). Therefore, as per the decision rule concerning the rejection region that had been set up prior to the test, the null hypothesis was accepted. That is to say, at 5%, there was not enough evidence to support the claim that the mean level of professional help-seeking willingness for local students is significantly higher than the mean level of professional help-seeking willingness for Asian international students ($z = -0.95$, $p > .05$, two-tailed).

In short, the mean value of Asian international students' willingness to receive professional services was found to be lower than the mean value of Japanese local students'; yet, the difference between the group means was not statistically significant.

Discussion

While international students' presence at U.S. universities provides valuable opportunities for cultural and intellectual exchange, this population is at risk for significant acculturative stress, mental health issues, and unwillingness to seek therapy (Prieto-Welch, 2016). The present study used an independent Z-test analysis to examine if there were significant differences in professional help-seeking attitudes between Japanese domestic students and international students from other Asian countries in a Japanese university.

On the whole, it was disclosed that the mean professional help-seeking willingness of local students was slightly higher than the mean of Asian international students, though both marked below the midpoint of the scale (3.5). Also, the results of the Z-test analysis showed that the difference between the two groups of students was not statistically significant. From these findings, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in willingness to seek help from a mental health

professional when encountering a personal or emotional problem between Japanese domestic students and international Asian students. It is presumed that such findings might result from being in a culturally homogeneous region where people share similar views and perceptions of psychotherapy; but, additional systematic inquiries are needed to validate this assumption.

These findings pose several significant implications. Firstly, it was a new attempt to research international students in a location that has received little attention in prior investigations, East Asia (or Japan). Considering that numerous existing research studies have been conducted largely in the U.S. targeting at East Asian international students and have obtained similar findings (Chen et al., 2020; Masuda et al., 2009; Xiong & Yang, 2021), this work holds significance in that it contributed to widening the contextual domain and the purview of international students' behavioral patterns. Secondly, to the researchers' knowledge, the present inquiry was the first known study to undertake a direct comparison between local students and international students from similar cultural backgrounds. It casts new light on the possibility of a potential impact of the perceived cultural similarity upon levels of acculturative stress and help-seeking attitude.

Still, there are a few limitations to the current investigation. First, the university where study participants were recruited is known for the multicultural environment, with half of the registered students and faculty being international. It should be noted that the selected institution may have a relatively high-level understanding of foreign students on account of the distinctive nature of multicultural context and that the levels of international students' help-seeking willingness might have differed if the same research had been undertaken at another non-multicultural university. Second, the average length of stay in Japan for international students included in this study was as short as around two years. It is believed that the level of psychological distress derived from socio-cultural maladjustment could vary substantially by the length of residence (Wilton & Constantine, 2011). If a sample with a broader spectrum of stay periods had been drawn, the research measures would have been more solid and valid.

As directions for future studies, varied research methodologies and designs should be attempted to strengthen the validity and reliability of the current findings. Part of that attempt involves replicating the current project aiming at the population groups with more various cultural backgrounds in varying cultural environments. In future, it would be strongly encouraged that the population groups and host countries, which have been overlooked thus far, are included (e.g., American international students in European countries or European international students in Asian countries). In addition, there will be a need to vary statistical test criteria, such as a significance level. Whether or not the difference will result in statistically significant between samples is determined by the sample size, selected level of

significance, and variability of the variable (Bourne, 1987). For later studies, various attempts to allow a variation on these factors will be essential.

It is hoped that this manuscript serves as a facilitator of better comprehending the worldwide trends in mental health services of international students; and moreover, that the accumulation of quality and accurate data collected in more diverse cultural settings will lead to the development of effective health care systems most adequately responsive to their perceived needs and issues in their respective environments, ultimately resulting in the successful academic life and personal growth as well as optimum mental health.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to scrutinize the professional help-seeking attitudes of international and domestic students in a higher education institution in Japan. It was revealed that both groups of students recorded below the scale's midpoint in the item asking about their help-seeking willingness. Further, this study confirmed that a significant difference in the willingness did not exist between the two student groups. It is the researcher's belief that being able to be accurately aware of the attributes and patterns of international students' help-seeking behaviors while taking respective cultural contexts into account is a practical approach to help them achieve successful cultural settlement and psychological wellness.

Conflict of Interest

I declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. I received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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