



## Full Length Research Article

### THE EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ON INTENTION TO SEEK COUNSELLING IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN TAIWAN

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#### ABSTRACT

The population of international students in Taiwan has increased significantly in recent years. The current study adopted Cramer's (1999) model of help-seeking behaviour, which explains the relationships between self-concealment, social support, distress levels, attitudes toward counselling, and intention to seek counselling. The study used cross-cultural samples for the linkage of Cramer's model. In total, 108 international students from a Taiwanese university were surveyed to assess self-concealment, social support, attitudes toward seeking professional help, psychological distress, and intention to seek counselling. Confirmatory factor and bootstrap analyses were used to analyse the data. The results showed that psychological distress and attitudes toward seeking professional help played mediatory roles in the relationship between self-concealment and intention to seek counselling. Schools should seek to increase institutional sensitivity to international students' feelings and provide appropriate resources (e.g., professional psychological help) to increase accessibility to university counselling services for diverse international students.

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#### INTRODUCTION

The Taiwanese government has actively pursued policies to attract greater numbers of international university and postgraduate students to Taiwan, and the number of international students has increased by approximately 10% per year over the past five years, totalling 28,107 in 2014. Most foreign students were from Vietnam, followed by Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, and the United States (Ministry of Education, 2014). This influx of international students has created challenges for university counselling services. While working to expand international student numbers, the government has largely failed to provide support in the form of improved guidance services for these students. The majority of international students in Taiwan face challenges in learning Chinese (Chou, 2009), and experience other issues, including the development of social relationships, adaptation to local weather conditions, and overcoming cultural differences. However, few international students actively seek help for these issues beyond their immediate social circles. Schools have an obligation to prepare culturally competent individuals for productive collaboration with people from different backgrounds (Mori, 2000; Sandhu, 1994; Smith and Schonfeld, 2000), and international students rely on their institutions to

help them to adjust to school life. The fact that international students experience psychological distress, but choose not to seek help, represents a challenge for counsellors and institutions in understanding the factors affecting the problem-solving process and providing improved interventions that encourage individuals to seek appropriate assistance (Vogel and Armstrong, 2010). Cramer (1999) proposed one of the few established help-seeking models, which provided empirical information on the role of the intention to seek counselling and other psychological antecedents in the help-seeking process (Liao, Rounds, and Klein, 2005). In this model, relationships exist between self-concealment and social support, distress, and attitudes toward help. However, the samples used by Cramer to test the theoretical model consisted primarily of White college students. As such, several aspects of the model require re-examination with respect to several issues, including applicability across diverse populations, and the development of a more reliable integrated theoretical model through confirmatory factor analysis. The present study sought to expand on previous research, using a conceptual model with a cross-cultural sample, to understand the intention to seek counselling for psychological problems in international students in Taiwan.

#### Literature review

Model of help-seeking behaviour for psychological problems

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University counselling centres offer a range of services that are underutilized (Deane and Chamberlain, 1994). This is particularly true in international students, who experience numerous problems, such as culture shock and language issues, in adapting to conditions in the host country (Myburgh, Niehaus, and Poggenpoel, 2002; Sümer, Poyrazli, and Grahame, 2008). Foreign students are most concerned with being misunderstood and being unable to express their thoughts or feelings clearly (Ryan and Twibell, 2000).

These challenges could affect foreign students' attitudes toward seeking assistance. Cramer (1999) provided an integrated path model and explained help-seeking behaviour in college students as a function of four psychological factors, including attitudes toward seeking counselling, available social support, distress level, and self-concealment. Specifically, higher levels of self-concealment were shown to correspond to lower social support, higher distress levels, and less positive attitudes toward counselling. In addition, social support was negatively correlated with levels of distress, and positive attitudes toward counselling were correlated with increased intention to seek counselling. However, the sample in this study was primarily White, making the adequacy of Cramer's model in other groups is unknown. For this reason, we sought to identify similarities and differences in the process of help-seeking in international students of different ethnic and national backgrounds in Taiwan within the context of Cramer's model. Psychological factors and intention to seek counselling.

Researchers have yet to use explicit models to evaluate the direct and indirect effects of counselling and acculturation to account for help-seeking behaviours. Two significant studies integrated the results of previous research to identify four main variables related to students' intention to seek counselling: Kelly and Achter (1995) focused on the relationship between self-concealment and students' intention to seek counselling, using a similar to Cramer's study design and variables. Kelly and Achter found the self-concealment and attitude toward seeking counselling variables were the only significant predictors of help-seeking. Cepeda-Benito and Short (1998) found that higher levels of psychological distress, lower levels of social support, and positive attitudes toward counselling significantly predicted greater intention to seek counselling. In addition, the interaction between social support and self-concealment significantly predicted intention to seek counselling; however, self-concealment alone was not a significant predictor.

The findings of the above studies were inconsistent. For example, Kelly and Achter (1995) reported that self-concealment led to negative help-seeking attitudes but, paradoxically, contributed to a greater willingness to seek help. Cepeda-Benito and Short (1998) showed that individuals who had sought help more frequently in the past reported a greater tendency toward self-concealment. Cramer's (1999) findings indicated that people who tended to conceal information experienced less social support and greater psychological distress, and held less positive attitudes toward seeking help. In Leech's (2007) study, counselling students were most likely to report being willing to seek counselling if they had a positive attitude toward counselling, low levels of self-concealment, high levels of distress, and low social support. In addition, Vogel and Armstrong (2010) used structural equation modelling to extend Cramer's model and found that self-concealment predicted willingness to seek help

through the mediatory effects of negative social experience and psychological distress. In summary, individuals with a tendency toward self-concealment were more likely to experience psychological distress. This could exert a negative impact on attitudes toward seeking help and social support, but it could also increase willingness to seek help. The current study aimed to review the empirical research on psychological distress, self-concealment, attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help, and social support constructs that serve as the foundation for Cramer's model of seeking professional help for psychological problems. Accordingly, we proposed hypothesis *H1: Self-concealment will be an antecedent to social support, distress, and attitudes toward counselling.* In addition, although previous studies have shown a connection between psychological variables and intention to seek counselling, few have examined potential mediatory effects directly. Therefore, after examining intention to seek counselling in international students, we explored the mediatory effects of self-concealment and other variables on intention to seek counselling. Accordingly, we proposed hypothesis *H2: Social support, psychological distress, and attitudes toward seeking professional help will mediate the relationship between self-concealment and intention to seek counselling.*

## METHODS

Prior to the initiation of the study, the proposed methodology was reviewed and approved by the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was provided by all participants prior to study participation.

### Participants

Study participants included 108 international students from a Taiwanese University. The sample included 42 (38.9%) women and 66 (61.1%) men. Participants' mean age was 26.44 (SD = 4.67) years. Most participants were from Vietnam (55.2%), with smaller numbers from India (5.6%), Indonesia (33.7%), France (1.9%), German (1.9%), the United States (0.9%), and Panama (0.8%). Regarding marital status, 87 (80.5%) were single, 19 (17.6%) were married, and two (1.9%) chose "other."

### Measures

Responses for all instruments used in the study were provided using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The 10-item Self-Concealment Scale developed by Larson and Chastain (1990) was used to measure self-concealment. Higher total scores indicate a greater tendency toward concealment of personal information that one perceives as distressing. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the scale was .89 in Larson and Chastain's (1990) study, with construct validity demonstrated via associations between self-concealment and anxiety, depression, and bodily symptoms (Larson and Chastain, 1990). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the scale was .86 in the present study. The 12-item Social Support Scale, which was adapted from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), was used to assess perceptions of the adequacy of social support from three specific sources: family, friends, and significant others. Higher total scores for social support indicate a greater tendency to exchange resources with family, friends, and significant others to enhance well-being. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the scale were .88 in the

study conducted by Zimet *et al.* (1988) and .91 in the present study. The 10-item Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale (ATSPHS), which was adapted from the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale - Short Form developed by Fischer and Farina (1995), was used to assess overall belief in the value of psychotherapy for help with personal problems, and receptivity to the notion of seeking psychotherapy. Higher total scores indicate favourable attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the scale ranged from 0.82 to 0.84 in the study conducted by Fischer and Farina (1995), with a 1-month test-retest reliability of 0.80. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the scale was .73 in the present study. The Psychological Distress Scale, which was adapted from the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), developed by Kessler *et al.* (2003) to screen for mental disorders and measure psychological distress, was used to measure psychological distress. The scale consists of 10 questions pertaining to nonspecific psychological distress, which measure levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms experienced in the preceding 4 weeks. A higher total score indicates higher levels of psychological distress. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the scale was .93 in the study conducted by Kessler *et al.* (2003) and .94 in the present study, indicating a high degree of internal consistency and reliability. The 20-item Intentions to Seek Counseling Inventory, which was adapted from the scale developed by Robertson and Fitzgerald (1992), was used to measure intention to seek counselling. Scores are summed to provide a total score (ranging from 20 to 100), with higher scores indicating a greater likelihood of seeking professional psychological help for personal problems. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the scale was .92 in the present study and ranged from .84 to .90 in the study conducted by Robertson and Fitzgerald (1992). Table 1 provides definitions of the research variables and details of the reliability of each scale. The reliability levels for all five instruments exceeded .73.

### Measurement model

The parameters for the model were estimated using the maximum-likelihood method proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). As recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999), three fit indices were used to assess the models' goodness of fit: the comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). CFI values of .90 or higher are required to ensure that misspecified models are not accepted. RMSEA values of 0.08–0.10 and 0.05–0.08 indicate an adequate fit and a good fit, respectively (MacCallum *et al.*, 1996). However, more recently, consensus has been reached regarding a cut-off value of .06 (Hu and Bentler, 1999) and stringent upper limit of 0.07 (Steiger, 2007). SRMR values range from 0 to 1.0, and models with a good fit obtain values of < .05 (Byrne, 1998; Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2000). However values as high as 0.08 are deemed acceptable (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

### Structural model to assess mediatory effects

MacKinnon *et al.* (2002) recommended using the procedure developed by Sobel (1982) to assess the indirect effect of the exogenous variable on the endogenous variable through the mediatory factor, in determining the significance levels of indirect effects. In general, bootstrap methods can be used to determine the significance of statistical estimates (Efron and Tibshirani, 1993). In addition, it was necessary to report the 95% CI for the significance of the mean indirect effect in the bootstrap results (Shrout and Bolger, 2002). If the CI includes

zero, the indirect effect is nonsignificant at the .05 level. Therefore, after testing the structural models, the bootstrap procedure was used to determine whether indirect effects were statistically significant. We followed the recommendations of Shrout and Bolger by forming 1,000 bootstrap samples ( $N = 108$ ) from the original data set via random sampling with replacement, and used AMOS 6.0 to re-estimate the path coefficients for the model 1,000 times. The structural model was assessed via the maximum-likelihood method, using AMOS 6.0.

### Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed with informed consent forms after receiving official authorization to collect student data. Students were allowed approximately 30 min to complete the anonymous English questionnaire. In addition, confirmatory factor analysis and bootstrap analysis were performed to analyse questionnaire responses, to determine optimum measurement and a theoretical model. Sobel tests were used to assess the significance of mediatory effects (Preacher and Leonardelli, 2003).

## RESULTS

### Correlations between variables

Most correlations between the independent latent variable (i.e., self-concealment), mediatory latent variables (i.e., attitudes toward seeking professional help and psychological distress), and dependent latent variable (i.e., intention to seek counselling) were statistically significant (Table 2). In addition, self-concealment, psychological distress, and intention to seek counselling were positively correlated with each other.

### Measurement model

Initial assessment of the five measurement models resulted in a relatively good fit to the data. The CFI value for five measurements exceeded .90, while the RMSEA and SRMR values were < 0.08 (Table 3).

### Structural model to assess mediatory effects

The results showed a good fit between the model and the data, scaled  $\chi^2$  (38,  $N = 108$ ) = 61.53,  $p < .05$ , CFI = .95, incremental fit index = .95, SRMR = .069. All of the structural paths were significant, with the exception of those from self-concealment to social support and social support to psychological distress (Figure 1). This suggests that the two direct paths did not make a significant contribution to the model's goodness of fit. A review of the other fit indices showed goodness-of-fit index, CFI, and incremental fit index values of .917, .950, and .947, respectively. The product of the two standardized path coefficients and the relative strength of the mediatory effects are shown in Table 4. As expected, the two mediatory effects were statistically significant. Psychological distress and attitude toward seeking professional help were significant mediators of the association between self-concealment and intention to seek counselling. This finding provided partial support for our hypothesis that social support, psychological distress, and attitudes toward seeking professional help would be significant mediators of the relationship between self-concealment and intention to seek counselling.

**Table 1. Definitions of research variables and scale reliability**

Variable	Definition	Source(s)	Reliability
Self-concealment	A tendency to hide individual information about tormenting or negative information from others.	Larson and Chastain (1990)	.86
Social support	Perceived or actual, instrumental and/or expressive provisions supplied by the family, friends, and significant other.	Zimet et al. (1988)	.91
Attitude toward seeking professional help	Belief in the value of psychotherapy for assistance with personal and emotional problems and receptivity to the notion of seeking psychotherapy.	Fischer and Farina (1995); Shea and Yeh (2008)	.73
Psychological distress	Unpleasant feelings or emotions that impact one’s level of functioning.	Kessler et al. (2003).	.94
Intention to seek counseling	An individual’s willingness to seek counseling for problems that are common in a college population, including relationship difficulties, depression, and personal worries.	Robertson and Fitzgerald (1992); Vogel et al. (2007)	.92

**Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between composite variables**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-concealment	2.39	.62	—				
2. Social support	3.71	.78	.02	—			
3. Attitude toward seeking professional help	3.20	.74	.34***	.36***	—		
4. Psychological distress	2.59	.93	.37***	-.14	.17	—	
5. Intention to seek counseling	2.59	.93	.55***	-.16	.36***	.58***	—

Note. N = 108; \*\*\*p < .001

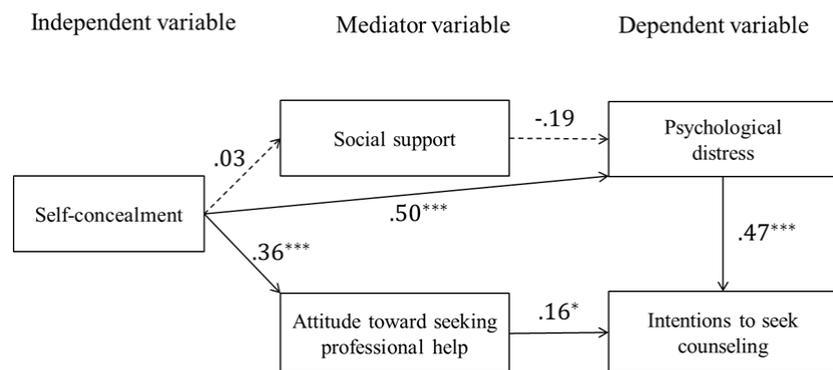
**Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analysis**

Instrument	$\chi^2$	RMSEA	GFI	CFI	IFI	SRMR
1. Self-concealment	32.759 ( $p > .05$ )	.063	.911	.971	.972	.0571
2. Social support	56.503 ( $p > .05$ )	.038	.923	.989	.989	.0532
3. Attitude toward seeking professional help	8.350 ( $p > .05$ )	.079	.973	.965	.967	.0461
4. Psychological distress	33.187 ( $p > .05$ )	.069	.944	.986	.986	.0284
5. Intention to seek counseling	173.849 ( $p < .05$ )	.064	.856	.939	.941	.0679

**Table 4. Bootstrap analysis of the magnitude and statistical significance of indirect effects**

Independent variable	Mediating variable	Dependent variable	B standardized indirect effect	Sobel test	p value (Two-tailed probability)
Self-concealment	Psychological distress	Intention to seek counseling	(.50) × (.47) = .24	2.86**	0.0041940
Self-concealment	Attitude toward seeking professional help	Intention to seek counseling	(.36) × (.16) = .06	2.30*	0.02130420

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01



Note: Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. N = 108.  
\*p < .05, \*\*\*p < .001

**Figure 1. Structural model of intention to seek counseling in international students**

**DISCUSSION**

Can Cramer’s (1999) model be extended to an international student population in Taiwan?

The current study sought to extend Cramer’s (1999) model and identify mediatory variables that could form the basis of counselling interventions for international students.

With respect to direct effects, the results showed that self-concealment was positively associated with psychological distress and attitude toward seeking professional help. Regarding indirect effects, psychological distress and attitude toward seeking professional help (but not social support) were expected to mediate the effects of self-concealment and intention to seek counselling. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were partially supported. Some findings were consistent with Cramer’s conclusion that individuals were more likely to seek

counselling when distress was high and attitudes toward counselling were positive; distress is greater when individuals conceal personally distressing information from others, and individuals who conceal information often hold a positive attitude toward seeking professional help. Self-concealment is more important in the intensification, rather than relief, of psychological distress. The proposed structural model differs slightly from Cramer's model, however. For example, distress was greater when social support networks were impaired. The results were slightly inconsistent with Cramer's model.

The positive relationship between self-concealment and attitude toward seeking professional help in international students in Taiwan was stronger relative to that observed in White students. Saving face is a universal phenomenon, but the meaning of the concept differs between cultures. People's need to save face in social interactions is significant, and this has been shown to be particularly evident in Asian populations (Nguyen and Belk, 2013). In contrast, in the United States, the concept of saving face is akin to prestige. It concerns individuality, free choice, and self-orientation (Li and Su 2006). In China, saving face is collective and a matter of obligation and other-orientation (Li and Su 2006). The study sample was predominantly Vietnamese, and high levels of self-concealment observed in Asian students could be related to shame and loss of face, which are common values in East Asian cultures (Ho, 1991). Avoidance of loss of face is a means of maintaining social roles and integrity. Self-concealment could be viewed as a means of hiding personal information to avoid asking for assistance and experiencing loss of face, to prevent anxiety in friends and family. Therefore, Asian students studying abroad are more likely to hide their emotions and avoid seeking professional help.

#### **No associations between social support and self-concealment and psychological distress**

The results showed that there were no associations between social support and self-concealment and psychological distress. The sample's mean score in the Social Support Scale was 3.71, indicating that support from family, friends, and significant others was perceived as above average. Asian societies tend to be collectivist and discourage public expression of sadness, as it could cause anxiety in others (Tsai, 2012). Therefore, Asians tend to repress negative feelings (Russell and Yik, 1996), and view them as a source of personal and family shame (Kleinman and Kleinman, 1985). The sample was heavily skewed toward Asians, who receive social support, but do not express their emotions flexibly and find it difficult to show their feelings, due to the influence of culture and nationality. Attitude toward seeking professional help exerts a mediatory effect on psychological distress in the association between self-concealment and intention to seek counselling. Psychological distress and attitudes toward seeking professional help are forms of subjective perception. The results showed that these two variables mediated the relationship between self-concealment and intention to seek counselling. Counselling centre staff could use this to increase international students' awareness of their emotional states and provide appropriate resources, enhancing their intention to seek counselling. Most human behaviour is purposive and regulated by forethought, resulting in individuals being able to motivate themselves and guide their actions via forethought and self-regulative standards (Bandura, 1989). According to Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, social support could

be considered to affect individual behaviour. Bandura demonstrated that certain factors, such as individual characteristics, the behaviour of others, and the environment, could influence human behaviour.

This self-regulating system represents a process that is affected by bidirectional and interdependent relationships between behaviour, environment, and personal experience. Notably, no direct relationship was observed between self-concealment and social support in the current study, and social support did not mediate the relationship between self-concealment and psychological distress. In addition, Heaney and Israel (2008) posited that the perception of social support and problem-solving resources provided by "individual coping resources" or "organizational and community resources" extended life experience, and allowed people to feel as though they were in control. Heaney and Israel also indicated that individual coping resources included "problem-solving," "getting new contacts and information," and "perceived control," and organizational and community resources included "community empowerment" and "community competence." That is, individuals and their social communities provided social support, and the role of severity varied between individuals. In the current study, self-concealment, which is a personal factor, did not exert a significant impact on social support. Therefore, future studies should focus on identifying key individual and community factors that influence help-seeking behaviour. Furthermore, most international students in Taiwan have little access to social capital within their schools, because of language and cultural barriers. In addition, many students (particularly those from Southeast Asia) spend a considerable amount of their schedule working part-time to earn money, which limits their ability to develop strong social networks on campus (Chou, 2009). Therefore, institutions should encourage international students to spend more time in university organizations. Jenkins and Galloway (2009) reported that cultural adjustment problems experienced by international students were relatively minor, but language problems explained large proportions of the variation in student, faculty, and staff responses. Therefore, counselling should be made available for international students in a language that maximizes their ability to communicate their problems clearly.

#### **Limitations**

The current study was subject to some important limitations. The vast majority of study participants (93%) were from Vietnam, limiting the generalizability of the results to other populations. Therefore, future studies should explore help-seeking behaviour in other populations, to provide appropriate personalized assistance. Moreover, self-report measures were used in the study, and the results could therefore have been susceptible to common method bias and inflation of correlations because of the influence of confounding factors such as momentary mood or attitudes toward questionnaire completion. Although structural equation methods were used to assess causal models, the data were not longitudinal and did not provide evidence of causal relationships. Therefore, future studies should include regular follow up to track development over time.

#### **Conclusion**

In this study, we adapted Cramer's (1999) model of help-seeking behaviour, to examine the relationships between self-

concealment, social support, attitude toward seeking professional help, intention to seek counselling, and psychological distress in international students. The findings should stimulate further debate regarding the refinement of school guidance services, to improve accessibility for these students. The results showed that attitude toward seeking professional help and psychological distress mediated the relationship between self-concealment and intention to seek counselling. Therefore, schools should strengthen international students' awareness of indications of the need for psychological guidance and provide greater access to appropriate resources (e.g., counselling, psychological help, or psychotherapy).

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