Social Stigma as a Predictor of Academic Help-Seeking Behavior: Evidence from Indonesian College Students

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ABSTRACT: High academic pressure, social expectations, and performance demands make students vulnerable to psychological disorders. Although seeking academic help is an important adaptive strategy, many students refrain from doing so for fear of being perceived as weak or incompetent. Previous research has focused more on stress factors, literacy, and personality, while the role of social stigma as a direct determinant of academic help-seeking behavior has not been widely explored, especially in the Indonesian cultural context. Therefore, this study aims to determine how social stigma affects academic help-seeking in college students. The research sample was purposive sampling, resulting in 303 participants (53 males and 250 females) who were active students in Sumatera, Java, and Kalimantan, Indonesia, with experiences of unpleasant social stigma. Data collection techniques used the Academic Help-Seeking Scale (AHSS) and the Public Stigma Scale (PSS). Data analysis techniques using quantitative methods with simple regression. The results showed that, simultaneously, public stigma is a predictor and contributes to academic help-seeking.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive academic environment, students face high academic pressures, ranging from demands for achievement and adaptation to the lecture system to social expectations from family and community environments (Omar et al, 2020). The studies show that high academic pressure on students is closely correlated with various mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, burnout, and even the risk of suicide (Nguyen & Phan, 2024). A systematic review in 2023 analysing 52 international studies found that almost all research showed a positive correlation between pressures in the academic process and symptoms of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and even the risk of suicide (Steare et al, 2023). In addition, pressure from parents and high expectations also exacerbate psychological symptoms such as perfectionism, performance anxiety, and stress (Haspolat & Yalçin, 2023; Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2015). These findings confirm that academic pressures that are not appropriately managed can cause various forms of severe psychological disorders in students.

In these situations, and under these pressures, seeking help is an essential adaptive strategy for coping with stress and maintaining students' academic well-being (Hutasuhut & Yarshal, 2025). However, among Indonesian students, seeking help, especially in educational matters, is still relatively uncommon, even though they recognise the importance of such behaviour for academic success (Suryaratri, 2018; Lesmana & Chung, 2024). In addition, research also shows that students are more likely to seek help from peers than from professionals or lecturers, and often only ask for help with instrumental matters such as borrowing references or asking for explanations of

assignments, rather than for deeper psychological issues (Maba, 2021; Chairani & Raudatussalamah, 2024).

The main reason students hesitate to seek help from lecturers or peers is their fear of being judged negatively and labelled as lazy, dependent, or unmotivated. As a result, they choose to hold back even though they actually need support (Oktaria & Soemantri, 2018; Downing, Cooper, Cala, Gin & Brownell, 2020). This mindset among students was revealed by Zhang, Guo, Fu, Yang, Li, and Jiang (2025), who found that students who believe intelligence is something that weakens or is fixed tend to avoid seeking help because they fear being considered incapable or feeling ashamed. In line with that, Fong et al (2021) revealed that students were afraid to ask their friends questions because they were worried about being seen as incapable or not smart enough to understand the lecture material.

These thoughts encourage them to hold back and not ask for help, even though they know that help could improve their understanding. As a result, they miss out on opportunities to deepen their understanding through interaction with lecturers or peers, which could enrich their academic knowledge (Weinstein & Acee, 2013; Qayyum, 2018; Won & Chang, 2024). The study also found that students tend to seek feedback only from people they trust or have a close relationship with, and often avoid additional guidance for fear of being judged negatively (Oktaria & Soemantri, 2018).

The negative perception attached to academic counselling services exacerbates the situation, as many students feel ashamed or afraid of being seen as failures if they seek help there. This makes students reluctant to use guidance services, even though these services can provide important support in overcoming academic problems and improving self-confidence and decision-making skills (Rahmadewi, 2022; Nyang'ara et al, 2024; Kabumle & Abosede, 2024). Research shows that these negative perceptions are often triggered by a lack of understanding about the role and benefits of counselling, a lack of trust in counsellors, and concerns about negative judgment from the surrounding environment (Karunanayake, Chandrapala & Vimukthi, 2020; Musso et al, 2022).

In the study, Qayyum (2018) and Li et al (2025) found that a lack of proactivity in seeking help is a common obstacle experienced by students. In addition, many students feel unsure about their own understanding or assessment, so they are reluctant to ask questions or seek clarification (Li, Hassan & Saharuddin, 2023). The perception of threats to intellectual ability and reputation has also been shown to significantly inhibit students from asking questions to lecturers or teaching staff, leading students to prefer seeking informal help from peers rather than formally approaching lecturers, as they feel more psychologically secure (Laidlaw, McLellan & Ozakinci, 2016; Qayyum, 2018; Li et al, 2025).

Ideally, students should be able and willing to use academic assistance when experiencing difficulties without feeling ashamed or afraid of negative judgment (Suryaratri, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to create an environment that supports and encourages students to seek academic assistance, making them feel more comfortable and motivated to improve their success (Won et al., 2024). refers to students' efforts to find support in solving problems, challenging academic ones, through interaction with lecturers, peers, or other online academic platforms (Bornschlegl, Townshend, & Caltabiano, 2021). In this context, Cheng and Tsai (2011), dividing the search for academic assistance into three main aspects, which include: First, information searching, which is finding relevant information to solve academic problems; Second, formal query, which involves asking lecturers or mentors who have a deeper understanding of academic issues; and third, informal query, asking for help from peers or unknown experts through forums when facing academic problems.

Although seeking academic help has been proven to have a positive impact on academic outcomes, many students hesitate to do so for fear of being perceived as weak or incompetent (Schlusche, Schnaubert & Bodemer, 2021). Shyness, social anxiety, and uncertainty about who to turn to for discussion are some of the main factors that prevent students from academic help-

seeking (Fong et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Hadad, 2025). Other studies have also shown that students who feel isolated or lack support in their academic environment are more likely to refrain from asking for help, which ultimately harms their academic performance and mental well-being (Friedman & Friedman, 2018). Furthermore, students often do not realise the importance of seeking help to complete assignments or overcome their academic problems. This is exacerbated by social pressure that encourages them to demonstrate academic independence (Brown, Barry & Todd, 2021). The impact of this attitude not only hinders effective learning but also exacerbates academic stress, which can ultimately lower their overall academic performance (Micari & Calkins, 2021).

One psychological factor that prevents students from actively academic help-seeking is negative evaluation or public stigma (Dueñas, Camarero-Figuerola & Castarlenas, 2021). According to Hardinugraha and Zulkaida (2021), the public stigma felt by students regarding their inability to overcome academic problems can cause feelings of shame that prevent them from academic help-seeking. In a study, Wodong and Utami (2023) found that public stigma influences students' attitudes toward seeking help, especially with academic problems. This is exacerbated by social norms that often label individuals unable to complete their tasks as incompetent or lacking dedication, ultimately creating a social circle that does not support academic help-seeking behaviour (Setyaningrum & Asyanti, 2023). As a result, students tend to hide their academic problems to avoid negative judgments from their peers, which can potentially worsen their stress and anxiety. Goswami and Ghosh (2024) State that public stigma can create an unsupportive atmosphere among students, where they feel unsafe to share their academic difficulties. This leads to a decline in positive interactions between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves, which in turn reduces opportunities to receive the support necessary for their academic development.

According to Çiftçi, Jones, and Corrigan (2013), Public stigma is prejudice and discrimination by the general public against individuals, blocking their access to resources, and occurs when society accepts and acts on negative stereotypes. This negative label can result in individuals or groups being ostracised, belittled, or ignored by the community. Çiftçi, Jones, and Corrigan (2013) identified three main aspects that form social stigma, namely: First, stereotypes, which are negative beliefs or generalisations about particular groups. Second, prejudice, which is a negative emotional attitude, such as fear or anger, that arises from stereotypes. Third, discrimination, which refers to actual harmful actions.

Most studies in Indonesia focus on help-seeking related to mental and psychological health, not specifically academic assistance such as assignment consultation, thesis guidance, tutoring, or academic consultation with lecturers. Many studies use independent variables such as mental health literacy (Azedarach, 2022), academic stress (Marfuatunnisa & Sandjaja, 2023), and fear of failure (Endah, Lubis, & Yudiana, 2021), while the role of social stigma as a direct determinant of academic help-seeking behavior has not been widely explored, especially in the context of student affairs in Indonesia. In addition, there are two empirical gaps that need to be filled. First, there is a lack of studies that focus on social stigma as a single exogenous variable on academic help-seeking. Second, there is a lack of research in the Indonesian context that uses analytical strategies to assess the direct effects of public stigma after controlling for relevant confounding variables. There is a lack of research using regression designs to directly prove the effect of social stigma on students' academic help-seeking, with minimal control of other variables. As a result, the direct effect of stigma on academic help-seeking remains unclear.

Study Aim and Hypothesis

This study aims to determine how social stigma affects academic help-seeking in college students. The hypothesis in this study is that social stigma has a significant negative impact on students' academic help-seeking.

METHODS

Design

This study uses a quantitative approach with a predictive correlational design. This approach was chosen because it aims to examine the effect of social stigma on academic help-seeking behavior among university students. The researcher went through several structured stages in this study, namely: first, the researcher identified the problem and conducted a review of relevant theories; second, the researcher developed the measuring instruments used to collect data and conducted validity and reliability tests; third, the researcher prepared informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of respondent data as a form of complying with research ethics principles; fourth, the data collected was analyzed using regression statistical analysis to determine the strength and direction of the role between variables, as well as to make predictions based on these role patterns; fifth, writing the research report.

Participants

This study used purposive sampling based on specific characteristics, resulting in 303 participants (53 male and 250 female) who were active students in Sumatera, Java, and Kalimantan, Indonesia. All participants were selected based on inclusion criteria, namely individuals who had experienced unpleasant social stigma in an academic context and who expressed their willingness to participate voluntarily by filling out an informed consent form before data collection was conducted.

Instruments

Data collection techniques are carried out using an instrument. Before use, a reliability test was carried out on all scales to be used. The reliability test used the standards determined by Azwar (2012), which State that if the Cronbach's alpha correlation results are closer to 1, then this can be interpreted as reliable.

The Academic Help-Seeking Scale (AHSS) was developed by the author based on three aspects of the theory proposed by Cheng and Tsai (2011), namely information searching, formal query, and informal query. The AHSS consists of 16 statements, comprising five favourable items and 11 unfavourable items. Some examples of statements on the AHSS are: "I would like to ask anyone who can help me with my academic work" and "I do not want to discuss academic issues with other people". Item coefficients in the range of .306 to .524 and the reliability coefficient of the AHSS is .813, which means that the AHSS meets the validity and reliability requirements.

The Public Stigma Scale (PSS) was developed by the author based on three aspects of the theory proposed by Çiftçi, Jones, and Corrigan (2013): stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. The PSS consisted of 16 statement items, comprising 10 favourable items and six unfavourable items. Some examples of statements on the PSS were: "I think people with academic problems tend to be unreliable," and "I believe that someone with academic problems can be a good friend.". Item coefficients in the range of .846 to .934 and the reliability coefficient of the PSS is .992, which means that the PSS meets the validity and reliability requirements.

Data Analysis

Hypothesis testing was carried out using quantitative simple regression methods. Previously, classical tests were carried out, including normality and linearity as prerequisites. The scale to be used has also been tested for validity and reliability. The study also conducted tests using the Independent Sample T-Test and One-Way ANOVA to examine differences in the levels of each variable based on gender, major, and residence. Data processed with IBM SPSS Statistics 27 for Windows software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The classical test results as a prerequisite for simple regression indicate that the normality of residual test shows K-SZ = .076 (p > .05), meaning the data is usually distributed. The linearity test shows the results of F deviation = 1.496 and Sig. Value = .000 (p<.05), which means the data shows a linear trend.

Data Description

In this study, the authors also conducted a descriptive analysis of the research variables. The aim was to obtain an overview of the distribution of the research variables. The descriptive distribution of data from the research variables can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Data

Variable	Hypothetical					Empirical				
	Max	Min	Mean	SD	Med	Max	Min	Mean	SD	Med
Public Stigma	64	16	40	8	40	62	22	42,24	8,33	42
Academic Help-Seeking	64	16	40	8	40	62	22	42,67	9,44	44

Information:

Max : Maximum total score   Min : Minimum total score   *Mean* : Mean
SD : Standard Deviation   Med : Median

Furthermore, the authors grouped the subjects into two categories, namely lower and higher. The purpose of categorisation is to place individuals into groups positioned in stages along a continuum based on the measured attributes (Azwar, 2012). Categories were determined based on the subjects' total scores on the scale presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Categories

Variable	Lower		Higher	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Public Stigma	143	47.2	160	53.8
Academic Help-Seeking	200	66	103	34

Based on the categorisation results, public stigma was dominated by subjects in the higher category, with 160 subjects or 53.8%. Meanwhile, academic help-seeking was dominated by subjects in the lower category, with 200 subjects or 34% of the total.

Hypothetical testing

Table 3. ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	3537.365	1	3537.365	45.549	<.001[b]
Residual	23375.632	301	77.660		
Total	26912.997	302			

The Anova test results showed that F=45.549 and a significance value of .001 (P<0.05). This means that public stigma is a predictor of academic help-seeking simultaneously and significantly.

Table 4. Summary of Research Hypotheses Testing Result

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Sig. F Change
1	.363[a]	.131	.129	8.812	.001

Table 4 shows that public stigma is both a predictor and a contributor to academic help-seeking, accounting for 13.1% of the influence; the remaining influence is due to other variables not examined in this study.

Testing the Difference in Levels
Based on Gender

In this difference test, researchers grouped research subjects based on gender and conducted a difference test on public stigma and academic help-seeking using an Independent Sample T-Test because there were two sample groups. The the results of the difference test presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Difference in Levels Based on Gender

Variable	Gender	Mean	Levene's Test	Sig.	Description
Public Stigma	Male	41.94	32.290	.001	There are Differences
	Female	42.30			
Academic Help-seeking	Male	50.02	37.929	.001	There are Differences
	Female	41.11			

Based on the above test results table, the significance value for both variables are .001 (P<0.05). These results indicate that there are differences between men and women in terms of public stigma and academic help-seeking. Based on the mean values, it is evident that female subjects experienced the highest level of public stigma, while male subjects experienced a lower level. Meanwhile, in terms of academic help-seeking, male subjects experienced a higher level than female subjects.

Based on Major

In the difference test based on majors, the author grouped them into exact and non-exact majors.

Table 6. Difference in Levels Based on Major

Variable	Major	Mean	Levene's Test	Sig.	Description
Public Stigma	Exact	42.37	13.105	.001	There are Differences
	Non-exact	41.73			
Academic Help-seeking	Exact	42.16	.202	.653	There are no Differences
	Non-exact	44.65			

The results show that there is a difference between exact and non-exact majors in terms of public stigma, as evidenced by a significance value of .001 (P<0.05), with the highest level of public stigma found in exact majors and a lower level of public stigma in non-exact majors. Meanwhile, academic help-seeking obtained a significance value of .653 (P>0.05), which means that there is no difference between majors.

Based on Residence

In this difference test, researchers grouped research subjects based on domicile and conducted a difference test using One-Way ANOVA because there were three groups.

Table 7. Difference in Levels Based on Residence

Variable	Residence	Mean	F	Sig.	Description
Public Stigma	Sumatera	41.80	1.713	.182	There are no
	Java	43.92			Differences
	Kalimantan	44.14			
Academic	Sumatera	41.06	23.408	.001	There are
Help-seeking	Java	46.85			Differences
	Kalimantan	53.95			

There is a difference between regions in academic help-seeking, as indicated by a significance value of .001 (P<0.05). The highest level of academic help-seeking is in Kalimantan, followed by Java, while the lowest level is in Sumatera. Meanwhile, public sigma obtained a significance value of .182 (P>0.05), which can be interpreted as no difference.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that public stigma contributes to and positively correlates with influencing students' academic help-seeking. The results of this study are consistent with the research of Aparna and Vijayan (2024), which also found a positive correlation between perceived stigma and academic help-seeking. However, these results are inconsistent with the findings of most other studies, which found that stigma, whether perceived publicly or personally, is negatively associated with intention and academic help-seeking. This means that the higher the stigma, the lower the tendency for individuals to seek help. (Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein & Zivin, 2009; Nearchou et al., 2018; Maeshima & Parent, 2020; Conceição, Mesquita & Gusmão, 2023). Research in general also shows that public stigma towards students' academic problems tends to be an obstacle in seeking help, especially in the academic field (Clement et al., 2014).

Theoretically, this explanation aligns with Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma as an attribute that greatly discredits a person in the eyes of society, leading stigmatised individuals to experience discrimination and social rejection. This indicates that public stigma towards seeking help can create psychological barriers for individuals to access sources of support, both formal and informal (Tyler & Slater, 2018). A study conducted by Tan et al (2025) shows that students with high perceptions of stigma tend to internalise shame, which ultimately inhibits proactive behaviour in seeking academic or psychological solutions. In the context of public stigma, this theory emphasises that society collectively labels individuals who are considered different or who fail to meet social norms negatively, causing these individuals to fear negative judgments and ultimately be reluctant to seek help, including in an academic context (Link & Phelan, 2006; Bos et al., 2013).

However, despite the significant effect of public stigma, its contribution (13.1%) indicates that this factor is not the only significant determinant. This reinforces the view that academic help-seeking is multidimensional and influenced by a combination of psychological, social, and contextual factors. In addition to public stigma, several other factors play an important role in influencing academic help-seeking, including self-perceptions of academic competence, motivation, professional commitment, and preferences for working independently. (Qayyum, 2018; Won et al., 2019; Xie & Xie, 2019; Li et al., 2025). Demographic factors such as gender, cultural background, and previous experience in seeking help also influence academic help-seeking (Bornschlegl et al., 2020; Martín-Arbós et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2023).

In this study, the author also conducted tests based on gender, major, and domicile, which showed differences consistent with the results of the study by Ruiz et al (2022) and Omari et al (2023). The gender-based test shows that there are differences between men and women, both in terms of public stigma and academic help-seeking. The level of public stigma among women is higher than among men, because female students are considered weak, incapable, and incompetent (Pingani et al., 2016). However, the level of stigma can vary depending on social status

and personal experience (Desbrow et al., 2024). Contrary to the stigma, male students seek academic help more frequently than female students because they have a more positive and open attitude toward seeking help, particularly from peers (Kessels & Steinmayr, 2013).

In tests based on majors, differences were found only in public stigma. Exact majors had higher levels of public stigma than non-exact majors. Several major factors that caused exact majors (STEM) to receive higher public stigma in the academic process of students were the existence of an academic environment that was considered threatening, negative stereotypes, and gender and racial bias and discrimination, where students, especially female students and minority groups, often face gender and racial stigma, such as the assumption that they are less competent or unsuitable in the exact sciences, which triggers feelings of rejection, stereotype threat, and decreased self-confidence (Casad et al., 2018; Leaper & Starr, 2018). An environment dominated by masculine norms, a lack of representation of minority groups, and experiences of harassment or bias from faculty and peers reinforce stigma and make students feel alienated (Settles, O'Connor & Yap, 2016; Rainey et al., 2018).

In the regional comparison test, the results showed no difference in public stigma. However, there was a difference in academic help-seeking, with the highest level coming from Kalimantan, followed by Java, and the lowest from Sumatera. The level of academic help-seeking among students is partly influenced by aspects of domicile and culture, such as reading habits, participation in cultural activities, and parental support, which have been shown to positively affect academic help-seeking (Yu, Liu, & Guo, 2022; Yang, 2023). However, this influence may also vary between regions due to differences in access, traditions, and educational values (Gaddis, 2013; Jin, X., & Jiao, 2022). In addition, habitus or attitudes, dispositions, and expectations shaped by the social and cultural environment also become important mediators between cultural capital and academic achievement, so that students from regions with a strong educational culture tend to have higher academic help-seeking (Vaughan, 2020; Wang & Wu, 2023).

University culture and social environment, such as motivation, healthy competition, and teacher-student relationships, also play a significant role in shaping this (Bayar & Karaduman, 2021). Family economic factors, availability of educational resources, and social support in the surrounding environment can either strengthen or weaken the influence of culture and domicile on academic performance (Yang, 2023). Therefore, differences in academic help-seeking between regions such as Kalimantan, Java, and Sumatera can be explained by variations in family cultural capital, habitus, school culture, and access to educational resources.

Implications

This study has implications for the practical and theoretical importance of public stigma in academic help-seeking. In practical terms, this research has a direct impact on parties who interact with students in an academic environment, particularly students themselves, lecturers, counsellors, and campus institutions. The results of this research contribute to the development of theory in the fields of social psychology and educational psychology, particularly in understanding the dynamics of public stigma and academic help-seeking.

Limitations and Further Research

The limitation is that not all participants met expectations. This was due to the researchers' limited ability to reach participants, especially in various regions. However, this study opens up new directions for research in educational and social psychology, revealing many findings that were not previously explained in similar studies. The researchers suggest adding mediator/moderator variables such as self-efficacy, perfectionism, or social anxiety to deepen the mechanism of social stigma influence and in addition, conducting exploratory qualitative studies to explore students' personal narratives about social dilemmas in seeking academic help and applying a cross-cultural

approach to see how the context of collectivist vs. individualistic values affects the relationship between public stigma and academic help-seeking.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that public stigma has a significant influence on academic help-seeking among students. This study confirms that the dilemma of public perceptions of academic help-seeking reflects a social culture that still prioritises the image of competence over learning needs. Therefore, shifting from the fear of being perceived as incompetent to the courage to grow together is an important step in creating a healthy, collaborative higher education environment focused on the academic well-being of students.

The practical implications of this study highlight the importance of campus-based interventions that focus on reducing social stigma towards seeking academic help, for example through psychosocial education programs, mental health literacy training, and campaigns to normalize seeking help among students and educators. From a policy perspective, the results of this study encourage universities to integrate inclusive psychological and academic support policies as part of their student welfare improvement strategies. Thus, shifting from fear of social stigma to the courage to seek academic support is not only an individual action, but also a strategic step towards creating a healthy, collaborative higher education ecosystem that is oriented towards student academic welfare.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

All authors contributed significantly to this study. Nugroho, I.P. was responsible for the conceptualization, study design, data collection, and manuscript drafting. Haq, M.S. contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and literature review refinement. Thalia, R. provided critical revisions, theoretical validation, and supervised the overall research process. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the research.

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