

The Relationship Between Perceived Benefits, Barriers, Social Support And Intention To Seek Mental Health Counseling Services Among University Students

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Abstract

Background: Mental health issues are a growing concern among university students worldwide. In Tanzania, the cultural context, awareness, and accessibility of mental health counseling services (MHCS) play a significant role in shaping students' intentions to seek help. Despite the prevalence of the challenges and availability of counseling services, studies reported that utilization of such services is very low. This study investigates how perceived benefits, barriers, and social support influence university students' intentions to seek MHCS.

Methods: This quantitative study employed a correlational research design and was conducted among undergraduate students from two public universities in Tanzania. A sample of 385 students was recruited through an online survey distributed via Whatsapp groups. Data were analysed using descriptive, independent sample t-tests, correlation, and multiple regression analysis.

Results: Majority of participants (84.94%) reported a high level of intention to seek MHCS, while 15.06% had a low level of intention. Gender differences were significant, with female students showing a higher mean intention score ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.02$) compared to male students ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.91$). Perceived benefits ($r = .66$, $p < .001$) and social support ($r = .20$, $p < .001$) were positively correlated with the intention to seek MHCS, whereas perceived barriers showed a significant negative correlation ($r = -.22$, $p < .001$). Multiple regression analysis revealed that perceived benefits were the strongest predictor of intention to seek MHCS ($\beta = .61$, $p = .001$), followed by perceived barriers (negative predictor, $\beta = -.13$, $p = .003$) and social support ($\beta = .11$, $p = .012$).

Conclusion: Enhancing awareness of the benefits of counseling and addressing barriers can significantly promote intention to seek counseling services. Although social support is a smaller predictor, fostering supportive networks remains crucial. These findings provide valuable insights for designing effective mental health support strategies within Tanzanian universities. University administrators and mental health practitioners should focus on increasing awareness about the benefits of MHCS, addressing perceived barriers to access, and fostering a supportive environment to encourage students to seek necessary mental health support. This approach will contribute to better mental health outcomes and overall well-being among university students in Tanzania.

Keywords: Mental Health Counseling Services (MHCS), Intention, Perceived Benefits, Perceived Barriers, Social Support, University Students

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I. Introduction

University life presents unique challenges across cognitive, emotional, social, and moral dimensions, often leading to various pressures and difficulties that can impact students psychologically, socially, physically, and emotionally (Bano, & Iqbal, 2018). While college life provide exciting opportunities for students to expand their social networks, develop independence, and pursue their chosen careers (Daudi et al., 2023), it also poses threats to their mental well-being (Park et al., 2020; Adams et al., 2022). The literature indicates that university life encompasses a range of issues, including personal challenges such as relationship dynamics, bereavement, academic stress, and social adjustments, which can contribute to mental health issues such as stress, depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicidal thoughts (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Mindrup, 2012). Again, multiple studies have shown that depressive symptoms in university students can lead to adverse effects like decreased academic performance and strained relationships (Bird, 2020; Lixy et al., 2022; Goh, 2022). Despite these challenges, students in higher education frequently try to manage their mental health issues independently, with seeking professional assistance typically being their final resort when confronted with psychological difficulties (Hilliard et al., 2022).

Instances of mental health difficulties among university students have been documented across diverse settings for instance Getachew (2020) highlighted those modifications in global educational systems, including the rise in university enrolments and the impact of globalization, technological advancements, and significant cultural shifts, underscore the increased necessity for counseling services within universities. Additionally, literature suggests that formal psychological assistance is more beneficial than informal help (Lennan, 2009) and can enhance students' academic performance and personal development, particularly when provided by qualified professionals (Luremi, 2014). Although counseling services are accessible in universities, their utilization remains limited. Research suggests that the majority of university students opt for familiar support systems like friends, family, and religious figures to tackle their difficulties (Koydemir et al., 2010; Topkaya& Meydan, 2013). Moreover, the low usage of counseling services among university students is connected to their attitudes towards counseling, with perceptions of its effectiveness, value, and suitability influencing their willingness to seek assistance.

Mental health challenges significantly impact an individual's intention to seek counseling services, with attitude serving as a critical mediator between perceived benefits, barriers, social support, and intention to seek counseling services (Pheko et al., 2013). When university students believe in the positive outcomes or advantages associated with seeking mental health counseling services such as improved emotional well-being, better coping skills, and enhanced academic or personal functioning they are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards seeking help. Conversely, when university students encounter obstacles or challenges that they perceive as barriers to accessing mental health counseling services, such as concerns about stigma, confidentiality, cost, lack of time, or negative past experiences with counseling, they are less likely to seek help, even if they recognize the potential benefits of counseling (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2015; Lixy et al., 2022; Bird, 2020).

Counselling's significance is evident in Tanzania's educational policies at national and institutional levels. The 2014 Education and Training Policy emphasize enhancing counseling services across all educational stages. Furthermore, the Higher Education Development Programme 2010-2015 and the Tanzania Commission for Universities (2019) promote the provision of counseling services in all Tanzanian higher education institutions to support students and the broader university community. On other hand, a study conducted by Rushahu (2022) among university students in Tanzania highlighted a growing occurrence of mental health problems and disorders within this population. Despite the availability and awareness of counseling services in universities, many students who require mental health treatment or psychological support do not actively seek assistance from professional counselors, potentially resulting in negative mental health consequences. Previous research indicates that although Tanzanian universities provide counseling services for students, the use of these services is minimal (Aroko, 2014; Munyu et al., 2016a; Onditi et al., 2019). This emphasizes the underutilization of counseling services despite the high prevalence of mental health issues among university students.

However, while there is considerable research on the factors affecting help-seeking behaviors for mental health issues, there is limited understanding of how perceived benefits, barriers, and social support collectively influence university students' intention to seek mental health counseling services, and the mediating role of attitude in this relationship. Investigating these relationships can guide the development of targeted interventions and support programs to encourage mental health counseling services among university students in Tanzania.

Objectives

- i. To assess the level of intention to seek mental health counseling services among university students.
- ii. To examine the relationship between perceived benefits, barriers, social support and the intention to seek mental health counseling services among university students.
- iii. To determine the prediction of perceived benefits, barriers and social support on university students' intention to seek mental health counseling services among university students.

The Concepts Of Mental Health Counseling Services And Intention

Mental health counseling services constitute a therapeutic approach aimed at assisting clients in addressing emotional and psychological challenges. This involves engaging with a professional health counselor or therapist who offers support, guidance, and coping mechanisms to help individuals manage their symptoms and enhance their general welfare. Mental health counseling services are crucial for every university student, providing relief and optimism during times of struggling to maintain positive emotional well-being. Additionally, therapy can aid university students in developing cognitive and behavioral patterns to prevent mental illness (Cornally& McCarthy, 2011). Intention is described as an individual's preparedness to engage in a specific behavior, indicating their level of readiness for voluntary action (Boyd et al., 2011). A higher intention enhances the likelihood of the behavior being performed, whereas a lower intention reduces the

probability of carrying out those behaviors. In this study, the intention to seek mental health counseling services among female university students is presented as the dependent variable, while perceived benefits, barriers and social supports are depicted as independent variables. Therefore, it can be proposed that if students perceive low levels of control over their behavior such as believing in external factors like time constraints or financial limitations may hinder their ability to seek counseling. Thus, they may perceive greater barriers to access counseling services. Conversely, if students perceive high levels of control, they may be more confident in their ability to overcome barriers and therefore perceive fewer obstacles to seeking counseling.

Perceived Benefits and Intention to Seek Mental Health Counseling Services

Numerous studies have highlighted a diverse array of perceived benefits linked to the utilization of mental health counseling services by university students (Pham et al., 2020; Kim & Zane, 2016; Li et al., 2018; Vogel et al., 2007). These studies indicate a positive association between perceived benefits and the inclination to seek mental health counseling services among university students. Consequently, individuals who perceive greater advantages from counseling are more inclined to express intentions to seek assistance for mental health concerns. The study by Kim & Zane (2016), which was conducted among Asian American and White American students, reported that university students prefer to seek counseling services because it helps them reduce anxiety problems. Other participants reported that they feel supported by counsellors when they express their mental health problems. Additionally, Eisenberg et al. (2009) reported that students who perceived counseling as beneficial was more likely to endorse intentions to seek help for mental health concern. Pham et al. (2020) conducted a study among Vietnam College students to understand mental health and the perceived benefits of help-seeking. Their results revealed that college students seek counseling services because it helps them gain self-understanding and provides coping strategies to better manage academic stress. It was found that perceived benefits significantly predicted intentions to seek counseling services among college students, even after controlling for stigma and other barriers.

Perceived Barriers and Intention to Seek Mental Health Counseling Services among University Students

Perceived barriers encompass the obstacles or challenges that individuals perceive as hindering their access to mental health counseling services. The impact of perceived benefits on help-seeking intentions may be attenuated by perceived barriers, such as stigma, cost, and accessibility (Vogel et al., 2007). Research conducted by Eisenberg et al. (2009) and Shear et al. (2019) highlighted various obstacles faced by university students that hinder their access to professional mental health services. These barriers include a lack of confidence in counselors, societal stigma surrounding mental illness, limited mental health literacy, and challenges in accessing mental health services. Among these impediments, a lack of trust in counselors and the presence of stigma towards mental illness emerged as the primary factors contributing to students' reluctance to seek professional assistance.

Similarly, studies suggest that stigma plays a significant role in shaping university students' willingness to seek mental health counseling, creating obstacles that deter individuals from accessing the necessary support. The apprehension of facing stigma can dissuade university students from seeking professional assistance for mental health issues, resulting in delays or avoidance of counseling that may adversely impact their overall well-being and academic performance (Lally et al., 2013; Andoh-Arthur et al., 2015). Moreover, research conducted by El-Hachem et al. (2023) revealed that certain university students express heightened concerns regarding the preservation of confidentiality regarding their personal information and mental health issues. Furthermore, in a cross-sectional study carried out by Malanzi et al. (2023) involving university students in Zambia, certain participants voiced significant reservations regarding the proficiency of on-campus counselors, a sentiment that is understandable. Owing to a scarcity of qualified mental health counselors, many student advisors, including teachers, were required to offer psychological counseling alongside their responsibilities in student affairs. However, the majority of these student advisors had received limited training in mental health and psychological counseling.

Perceived Social Support and Intention to Seek Mental Health Counseling Services among University Student

Perceived social support from friends, family members, peers, and other significant individuals can significantly influence the intention to seek MHCS. For instance, university students who perceive mental health support from their parents and friends are less likely to seek counseling services from professionals, while university students who do not perceive mental health counseling services from their social support are more likely to seek the services from professionals. Studies shows that some university students prefer to seek counseling service from professionals since they are not open to speak with their family members about my mental health problems, Andoh-Arthur et al. (2015). This is to say university students who perceive greater social support are more likely to feel encouraged and supported in seeking mental health counseling services.

Hunt and Eisenberg (2009) asserted that social support from peers, family members, and campus resources may also influence help-seeking intentions.

Additionally, in the study of Lian (2020), participants reported that they are not ashamed by their family and friends when they decide to seek out counseling for any relationship difficulty, and instead, their family helps them in getting counseling for their mental health concerns. On the other hand, the study of Pheko et al. (2013) and Chen et al. (2016) indicated that social support stops students from seeking counseling services. For example, students have a habit of concealing their mental health problems and seek support from their friends or family rather than qualified psychological counseling. Students reported that they would seek help from their religious leaders if they experience mental health problems. And they are comfortable to discuss with their friends whenever they feel anxiety

Knowledge Gap to the Current Study

The literature reviewed highlights that while university students generally understand the importance of mental health counseling services; they continue to face significant mental health challenges (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2015; Bird, 2020). Studies indicate that the perceived benefits, barriers, and social support are closely linked to students' intentions to seek mental health counseling. However, most existing studies tend to focus primarily on attitude as the main predictor of the intention to seek mental health counseling, largely overlooking the roles of perceived benefits, barriers, and social support. Additionally, many of these studies are conducted in contexts outside of Tanzania, making it challenging to generalize their findings to Tanzanian university students due to cultural and contextual differences. This study purposes to address these gaps by examining how perceived benefits, barriers, and social support influence the intention to seek mental health counseling services among university students in Tanzania.

II. Materials And Methods

Design and Setting

The study employed a cross sectional research design, The selection of this design was guided by the nature of the research problem, the study's purpose and objectives, as well as the specific methods employed for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2018). This study was conducted in two regions within Tanzania, where two public universities were chosen to recruit participants for the study. The selection of these universities was based on their high enrolment rates of over 5000 students, ensuring a diverse range of undergraduate degree programs. Additionally, both universities were required to offer counseling services aimed at addressing students' mental health issues. The study comprised undergraduate students from the two designated public universities in Tanzania.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The sample size for both universities was determined using the methodology outlined by Cohen et al. (2018), which considers the confidence level and sampling error. According to this approach, for a population size between 5,000 and 7,000, with a sampling error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%, the recommended sample size is 365. Given an expected population size exceeding 5000 students, the sample size was specifically derived through a simple random sampling procedure.

Recruitment of Participants and Questionnaire Administering

Participants were recruited by convenient sampling based on their year of studies and their major. The questionnaires distributed through whatsapp group and integrated group among the selected class and field of study. The researcher created the online platform (goggle form) which was shared into student's whatsapp group to full fill the questionnaires.

Procedures

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To ensure that participants consented to the study, they were required to click on an agreement option within the Google Form. Prior to gathering data, the researcher conveyed the study's objectives and benefits to all participants through their Whatsapp groups. Participants were clearly informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could opt out at any stage without any repercussions. Participants were guaranteed of their right for confidentiality and anonymity. In that concern, they were conversant not to reveal their names and identifiers wherever in the questionnaires. The exercise of filling in the questionnaire was done online and once full filling the questionnaire the participants click to submit the document.

Measures

Intentions to Seek Counseling Services: This variable was measured using the adapted scale of the Intentions to Seek Counseling Inventory (ISCI) introduced by Cash et al. (1975) and adapted by Hammer & Spiker (2018). The ISCI is the most widely used instrument for measuring psychological help-seeking intentions. Intention was measured using 10 items, with response choices ranging from 1 (Very likely) to 5 (very unlikely).

Perceived Benefits for Counseling Services; this variable was measured using the adapted Perceived Benefits of Counseling Scale (PBCS). The PBCS is specifically designed to measure individuals' perceptions of the benefits of counseling. This concept was measured using 8 items, with answer options reaching from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

Perceived Barriers to Counseling Services: Perceived barriers were measured by adapting the scale of the revised version of the self-report Barriers to Mental Health Services Scale (BMHSS) by Pepin et al. (2015). This self-report scale assesses perceived barriers to seeking mental health treatment, including counseling services. This concept was measured using 10 items, with response selections ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

Perceived Social Support for Counseling Services: Perceived social support was measured using the adapted Social Support-Friends and Family Scale (PSS-Fr and PSS-Fa) by Procidano & Heller (1983). This concept was measured using 15 items adapted from the scale. Response options range from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 was employed. The data was accurately cleaned and verified to ensure that all responses were correctly entered into the software. Data presentation and summarization were facilitated through the use of graphs and tables. Descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, were predominantly used to analyze the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants and their experiences in seeking mental health counseling among university students. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to assess the strength and direction of associations between perceived benefits, barriers, social support, and intention to seek counseling services. Multiple regression employed to assess the unique contributions of each independent variable in predicting the dependent variable (intention to seek counseling services), while controlling other variables.

III. Results

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

The study collected background information of participants based name of university, year of study, as well as age for each respondent. A total of 385 questionnaires were distributed and collected from participants. Table 1 provides a summary the respondents' characteristics.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants' Social Demographic Characteristics (n=385)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%) (N=385)	Mean
Universities	University 1	236	61.3	1.39
	University 2	149	38.7	
Total		385	100%	
Sex	Male	164	42.6	1.57
	Female	221	57.4	
Total		385	100%	
Age Group	Less than 20	10	2.6	2.1948
	20-24 Years	307	79.7	
	25-29 Years	51	13.2	
	Above 30	17	4.4	
Year of study	First Year	108	28.1	2.21
	Second Year	120	31.2	
	Third Year	125	32.5	
	Fourth Year	32	8.3	
Total		385	100%	

Source; Field data, May, 2024

Level of Intention among University Students

The first objective was to evaluate the extent to which university students intend to seek mental health counseling services (MHCS). The hypothesis proposed was that "university students exhibit a high level of intention to seek MHCS." The scoring interpretation classified intentions on a scale where (1 to 3.50) represented a high level of intention, and (3.51 to 5.00) represented a low level of intention to seek counseling services. According to the cross-tabulation results, the majority of the participants, approximately 327 students (84.94%), demonstrated a high level of intention to seek MHCS. In contrast, a smaller group of 58 students (15.06%) showed a low level of intention to seek these services.

Intention to seek MHCS in terms of Gender

Moreover, the analysis of Independent sample t-test was conducted to compare gender difference in seeking intention for their mental health concern. The results directed that the mean score of seeking intentions of female students was high ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.02$) than that of the male students' ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.91$). This inferred that female students are very likely to seek counseling in circumstances where they encounter mental health problems than their male counter parts. Table 2 below summaries the results from independent sample test.

Table 2; Intention to seek MHCS in terms of Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Female	164	1.8427	.91625	.075	.784
Male	221	2.0796	1.02478		

Source; Field data , May 2024

The findings suggest a notable difference in the intentions to seek mental health counseling services between female and male university students, with female students showing a higher tendency. This is to say, the higher intention among female university student to seek counseling services suggests that mental health support services might be more attuned or accessible to them, or that females might have a greater perceived need or lower stigma associated with counseling services (Daudi et al., 2023; Brown, 2011) . Thus, this highlights the need for gender-specific approaches in promoting mental health services and addressing potential barriers faced by male students.

Relationship between Perceived Benefits, Barriers, Social Support and Intention to seek MHCS among University Students

The second objective examined the relationship between perceived benefits, barriers, social support and intention to seek MHCS among female university students. First, the descriptive statistics was performed to calculate the mean for the four variables. The results showed that mean for Intention was (1.98, S.D=.99), Mean for Perceived benefits was (1.78, S.D=.85), Mean for Perceived barriers was (2.45, S.D=1.22) and mean for Social support was (2.39, S.D=.73).

Second, Bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to determine the association amongst the study variables. It was hypothesized that "there is a significant relationship between Perceived benefits; barriers; social support and intention to seek mental health counseling services among university students". The correlation results indicated that perceived was positively significantly related to intention to seek MHCS ($r = .66$, $p < .001$), and social support was positively significantly correlated to intention to seek MHCS ($r = .20$, $p < .001$). On the other hand results shown a significant negative relationship between perceived barriers and intention to seek MHCS ($r = -.22$, $p < .001$). Basically, all variables showed a significant relationship. The results are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3; Relationship between Perceived Benefits, Barriers, Social Support and Intention to seek MHCS among University Students

		Perceived Benefits	Perceived Barriers	Social Support
Intention	Pearson Correlation	.660**	-.218**	.201**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001	.001
	N	385	385	385

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source; Field data May, 2024

The Prediction of Perceived Benefits, Barriers and Social Support on Intention to seek MHCS among University Students

The third objective aimed to investigate how perceived benefits, barriers, and social support influence university students' intentions to seek mental health counseling services. The hypothesis stated that "perceived

benefits, barriers, and social support significantly predict the intention to seek MHCS." To address this objective, a multiple linear regression analysis was employed. This analysis assessed the impact of the independent variables (perceived benefits, barriers, and social support) on the dependent variable, which is the intention to seek MHCS. In the regression model, perceived benefits, social support, and perceived barriers were treated as the predictors, while the intention to seek mental health counseling was the outcome variable being examined. The results are summarized in table 4 below.

Table 4;Regression Analysis of the Prediction of Perceived Benefits, Barriers and Social Support on Intention

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	Adjusted R Square	F
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
Perceived benefits	.711	.047	.611	.001	.448	104.791
Perceived barriers	-.101	.034	-.125	.003		
Social support	.144	.057	.106	.012		

Source; Field data, May 2024

From the table above the multiple regression outcomes shows that the model is significant ($F = 104.791$) and (the Adjusted R Square = .448). Therefore the result shows that, perceived benefits, social support and perceived barriers are all statistical significant predictors and influence for intention to seek MHCS. On other hand the results indicate that perceived benefits are the strongest predictor of the intention to seek MHCS among university students, with a standardized beta coefficient (β) of .61 and a p-value of 0.001. This suggests a highly significant and positive relationship between the perceived benefits of counseling and the intention to utilize these services. Perceived barriers to seeking MHCS emerged as a negative predictor with a standardized beta coefficient (β) of -.13 and a p-value of 0.003. This indicates a significant inverse relationship, where higher perceived barriers correlate with lower intention to seek counseling. Social support was found to be the lowest predictor among the three factors, with a standardized beta coefficient (β) of .11 and a p-value of 0.012. This indicates a modest but significant positive relationship between social support and the intention to seek MHCS.

IV. Discussion Of The Results

The results from this study found significant differences in the inclination to seek counseling services based on students' gender, with female students showing a higher likelihood of seeking counseling compared to their male peers. These findings are consistent with previous research (Morgn et al., 2003; Chandrasekara, 2016; Daudi et al., 2022), which also indicated that female students are more motivated towards seeking counseling services than males. The greater propensity of female students to seek counseling could be attributed to several factors; males often perceive themselves capable of managing their mental health issues independently (Chandrasekara, 2016); traditional gender norms associate seeking emotional assistance with failure and low self-esteem in males. Studies suggest that females are more fortified to seek support and are more likely to recognize others who have sought assistance, whereas males often embrace negative attitudes towards counseling due to fears of deviating from masculine norms that emphasize toughness (Owen, 2022; Kamunyu et al., 2016b).

However, this study contradicts findings by Amarasuriya et al. (2018), which suggested that females were less motivated towards professional counseling services and preferred informal help-providers. Furthermore, it contrasts with Andoh-Arthur et al. (2015), who found no significant gender differences in intentions to seek counseling. Moreover, studies by Boyd et al. (2011) and Broglia (2017) indicate that males are more likely than females to seek psychological support for personal and emotional issues. These findings illustrate that gender differences in seeking counseling services may vary across different contexts and settings.

Furthermore, the results of this study showed a positive significance relationship between perceived benefits and intention to seek mental health counseling services. This means that university students who perceive the advantages of using counseling such as it provide coping skills, reduce anxiety problems, help with relationship difficulties, help with stress related to academic pressures, help with addiction challenges, and enhance their emotional well-being are more possible to have stronger intention of using counseling services in forthcoming. These findings are imperative as they offer the empirical evidence suggesting that perceived benefits may play a critical role in regard to the use counseling services among university students (Mesidor & 2014; Yu et al., 2015).

These results are similar with various study conducted by (Ning et al., 2022; Topkaya, 2015) which indicted that perceived benefits was relating to intention to seek counseling services. Furthermore, the findings of this study are similar with a study by Goh (2022) who conducted a study on significant predictors of intention to seek counseling services among university students in Singapore. The study decided that there is a positive significant relationship between perceived benefits and intention to seek a professional counseling.

Nevertheless the results of this study showed a positive significance relationship between perceived social support and intention to seek mental health counseling services. This implies that university students who perceive their significant people such as parents, friends, religious leaders and other important people are more likely are more likely to have stronger intention of seeking counseling services in future. This result also matches with the previous studies of (Albachechwe&Antehum, 2018; Vogel et al., 2007; Aldalaykeh et al., 2019). The findings from these studies revealed that perceived social support was among psychosocial factors that determine the intention to seek counseling services among university students.

On the other hand these findings of this study have shown a negative significant relationship between perceived barriers and intention to seek mental health counseling services. This implies obstacles and challenges such as stigma, lack of confidentiality, cost (time and money), negative past experiences with counseling services and lack of awareness about counseling services were negatively correlating with their intention. The significant negative relationship between perceived barriers and the intention to seek mental health counseling services indicates that the more obstacles students perceive, the less likely they are to seek help. This finding emphasizes the need for universities to actively work on reducing these barriers to encourage more students to utilize mental health services.

These results are similar with previous studies which proved that the presence of barriers is the most factors may affect people's intentions to seek counseling for their mental health. For instance, studies conducted by (Yin- Fah, 2016; Shahwan et al, 2020; Amarasuriya et al., 2028) revealed that perceived barriers such as past experiences, lack of awareness, stigma and negative attitude was significant relating with intention to seek mental health counseling services among university students. Studies goes far by explaining that many university students find harder to seek counseling services since they are scared of being identified by their fellow students as they are having mental health problems thus, it is perceived as hindrances to seeking mental health counseling services (Andoh-Arthur et al.,2015; Bird, 2020).

Furthermore, the results from regression analysis indicate that all predictor variables, specifically perceived benefits, perceived barriers and social support were significantly predicted students' intention to seek counseling services. This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which suggests that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are necessary for forming intentions to engage in a particular behavior (Ajzen, 2002).The regression model revealed that perceived benefits of mental health counseling services (MHCS) were the strongest predictor of intention to seek counseling, with a standardized beta coefficient (β) of .61 and a p-value of 0.001. This highly significant positive effect indicates that students who perceive greater benefits from MHCS are more likely to intend to use these services, suggesting that participants in the study view seeking counseling as advantageous. This finding is consistent with previous research (Goh, 2022; Bohon et al., 2016; Nam et al., 2015; Pham et al., 2020).

Conversely, perceived barriers emerged as a significant negative predictor of intention to seek MHCS, with a standardized beta coefficient (β) of -.13 and a p-value of 0.003. This suggests that higher perceived barriers are associated with a lower likelihood of intending to seek counseling services, indicating that participants facing challenges in seeking psychological help are less likely to intend to use these services. This finding aligns with other studies that have similarly found perceived barriers to be a significant predictor of intention to seek counseling (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Bohon et al., 2016; Andoh-Arthur et al., 2015; Mesidor & Sly, 2014). However, it contrasts with Woods' (2013) study, which did not find perceived barriers to significantly predict intentions to seek mental health counseling services. Daud et al. (2022) suggested that issues such as knowledge about mental health services, affordability, social support, and service availability may influence perceived barriers.

Lastly, social support was found to be a significant positive predictor, though with a smaller effect size, having a standardized beta coefficient (β) of .11 and a p-value of 0.012. This indicates that greater perceived social support is associated with a higher intention to seek MHCS, albeit less strongly compared to perceived benefits and barriers. These findings are aligning with other studies (Aldalaykeh et al., 2019; Mak & Davis, 2014; Mesidor & Sly, 2014; Mo & Mak, 2009). However, they contradict Bohon et al.'s (2016) study, which found that significant social support to be not a strong predictor of intention to seek counseling services. Perhaps, in the present study, social support did not exert as much influence on intention to seek MHCS as perceived benefits due to societal changes brought by institutions like universities, which have diminished the influence of traditional institutions such as family and community on behaviors. Trafimow and Fishbein (2005) noted that in such environments, normative pressure may only strongly predict intentions when individuals have confidence in the advice of significant others.

Implications

The findings of the present study have several implications. Firstly, male students reported a lower average score in their intention to seek counseling services compared to female students. Males are often socialized to perceive seeking external assistance as indicative not of weakness but of strength and confidence.

Therefore, government policies and mental health service providers should address this barrier by educating the community about the benefits of counseling services for both genders. Encouraging individuals to seek help when facing difficulties should be promoted as a sign of strength rather than weakness. This approach could potentially inspire males to seek counseling services more readily and thereby enhance their intention to seek help.

Secondly, perceived benefits significantly predicted the intentions to seek mental health counseling services. This finding underscores the importance of students recognizing and valuing the benefits of MHCS. When students believe that counseling can positively impact their mental health, they are more likely to seek these services. This has practical implications for promoting MHCS by highlighting its effectiveness and potential positive outcomes to increase student engagement

Thirdly, Perceived barriers have shown a negative prediction on intention. This implies addressing and reducing barriers to accessing MHCS is crucial. The barriers include stigma, cost, lack of confidentiality, negative past experience, accessibility, or a lack of awareness about available services. Interventions should focus on minimizing these obstacles to enhance students' likelihood of seeking help. This could involve educational campaigns to reduce stigma, increasing funding for accessible counseling services, and ensuring students are well-informed about how to access support.

Although social support plays a lesser role compared to perceived benefits and barriers, it still positively influences students' intentions to seek counseling. This suggests that having a supportive network can encourage students to pursue MHCS. Therefore, fostering a supportive environment on campus, where friends, family, and faculty actively encourage and support students in seeking mental health care, is essential.

V. Conclusion

This study has expanded our understanding of Tanzanian university students' intentions to seek mental health counseling services. Additionally, it has advanced the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in predicting intentions related to seeking counseling services. Since the findings from this study highlight the critical role that perceived benefits, barriers, and social support play in influencing university students' intentions to seek mental health counseling services. The strong positive impact of perceived benefits suggests that enhancing awareness and understanding of the advantages of counseling could significantly increase student engagement with MHCS. Conversely, addressing and mitigating perceived barriers is essential to remove obstacles to access. Finally, although social support plays a smaller role, fostering a supportive network remains a valuable strategy in promoting help-seeking behavior among students. These insights provide valuable guidance for university administrators and mental health practitioners in designing and implementing effective mental health support strategies Tanzanian Universities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could further explore;

- I. The specific types of perceived benefits and barriers that most significantly influence intention and behavior to seek counseling services.
- II. The role of demographic factors (for example, gender, cultural background) in moderating the relationships between perceived benefits, barriers, social support, and help-seeking intentions.
- III. Longitudinal studies to assess how these predictors and their impacts on intention and behavior to seek counseling services evolve over time.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest relevant to the content of this article.

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