

Article

Academic Help-Seeking Attitudes, and Their Relationship with Emotional Variables

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Abstract: Academic help seeking is a self-regulatory strategy that is closely related to students' school functioning and successful school outcomes. The aim of the present study is to gain greater insight into the associations between help-seeking behavior and attitudes (i.e., emotional costs, perception of benefits, threats and avoidance of academic help seeking), and socio-emotional factors (i.e., functional social support, satisfaction with life, happiness, academic and social self-concept, emotional loneliness and social network). Two hundred and thirty-two students from three public secondary schools (53.9% girls; mean age = 16.61, SD = 2.85) participated in this study by completing the assessment form during school hours. As expected, the results showed significant associations between attitudes toward academic help seeking and socioemotional factors except for (1) perceived emotional cost of academic help seeking and happiness, academic self-concept and social network, (2) threat of academic help seeking and satisfaction with life and social network and (3) avoidance of academic help seeking and social network, in which cases the correlations were not significant. Finally, (1) emotional loneliness was found to be a significant predictor of the perceived emotional cost of academic help seeking, (2) functional social support, academic self-concept, social self-concept and subjective evaluation of the social network were found to be significant predictors of the perceived benefits of academic help seeking, (3) emotional loneliness and academic self-concept were found to be significant predictors of both threat of academic help seeking and avoidance of academic help seeking. The results of this study suggest that psycho-emotional variables play an important role in academic help-seeking strategies and can affect students' final behavior in help seeking.

Keywords: academic help seeking; youth; perceived benefits; loneliness



Citation: Dueñas, J.-M.; Camarero-Figuerola, M.; Castarlenas, E. Academic Help-Seeking Attitudes, and Their Relationship with Emotional Variables. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 6120. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116120>

Academic Editors:
Arantzazu Rodríguez-Fernández,
Arantza Fernández-Zabala and
Eider Goñi-Palacios

Received: 20 April 2021

Accepted: 25 May 2021

Published: 28 May 2021

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1. Introduction

In academia, students must cope with socio-educational situations, subjects, concepts and techniques that may be beyond their capacities, abilities and perceptions. Since they find it impossible to rise to the academic challenges by themselves, they need to seek help. So-called Academic Help Seeking (AHS) is a behavioral strategy that involves controlling one's behavior and interacting socially to obtain help from other people. It is a self-regulated learning and problem-solving strategy [1]. For AHS to be activated, students must have individual metacognitive, behavioral and motivational skills that enable them to analyze their learning process, determine when they need help and select whom to ask for help [2,3]. More specifically, the AHS process begins with metacognition: students identify academic difficulties and become aware that they need help. They then become motivated to seek support and initiate a behavioral response to seek support from someone else [1]. Therefore, seeking help is a complex self-regulated learning process that involves students making key decisions.

AHS enables students to meet academic challenges [4–6] and is conditioned by complex behavioral and emotional responses. Considering this complexity, AHS [7] established various constructs in order to study help-seeking behaviors in students, including help

avoidance and help seeking as a threat. Help avoidance is a non-adaptive strategy in which students intentionally avoid seeking help when necessary [8], thus hampering their performance [9]. For the most part, the perception that seeking help can be a threat involves negative expectations about AHS, because it is believed to affect self-esteem and cause social shame. In these cases, AHS can be considered a threat to socio-emotional aspects [3,10,11]. Academic help-seeking behavior has been related to sociodemographic variables such as gender, although results are by no means conclusive [12]. Some studies report that men are more likely to seek help than women (Amarasuriya et al. [13] and Roessger et al. [14]). In contrast, other studies report that women are more likely than men to seek help and have better attitudes towards seeking help [15,16].

Likewise, behavior and attitudes about seeking academic help have affective and emotional components [17] which can arise during the anticipation stage of learning self-regulation, and can be involved in the final decision to choose to seek help, or not, from other people. Under this premise, such constructs as the emotional costs and benefits of seeking help have been studied. The costs of seeking help include the negative impact on the emotional and affective state of students when they ask questions [18], and the benefits are the positive consequences of AHS in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and the improvement of learning [19,20]. Both constructs have important implications for how students ultimately act. For example, after becoming aware that seeking help would be one way of coping with academic demands, students would then weigh up the cost and benefits of taking this step and make a decision. Therefore, it is decision based on a cost–benefit analysis. Very few studies have analyzed the relationship between the perceived emotional cost of help seeking and emotional variables in young students. In fact, perceived cost has not been explored thoroughly in the empirical literature of the educational sciences, including educational psychology [21]. Even so, the studies that have focused on emotional costs show a relationship with socio-emotional variables. More specifically, the emotional cost of AHS has been linked to effects on learning and academic performance [22,23], on achievement [24], on perceived control [25] and on the assessment of stress and related emotions [26]. The benefits of help seeking have also been studied in terms of socioemotional variables. For example, a study carried out on high school students [17] found positive relationships between the benefits of academic help seeking and adaptive perfectionism, teacher emotional support, and academic efficacy. It also reported a negative relationship between the perceived benefits of academic help seeking and maladaptive perfectionism.

Academic help-seeking behavior has also been related to other psychosocial variables that deserve our attention. For instance, perception of competence, which is closely related to self-esteem, also affects a student's intention to seek help from others. Individuals with a higher perception of competence would be less likely to feel their self-esteem is being threatened when they seek help. On the contrary, those with lower levels of perception of competence may opt not to ask for help by avoiding external evaluations [27].

Likewise, interpersonal factors and social interactions have also been found to influence student decisions to ask for help. Factors such as perceived social support, sense of belonging to the class group or satisfaction with friendship can determine academic help-seeking behaviors. For example, in a sample of 670 Japanese high school students Okada [28] found an association between self-determined friendship motivation and academic help seeking, which was also related to satisfaction with academic performance. Won et al. [29] examined the relationship between sense of belonging and academic help seeking in a sample of 307 college students. The results of this study showed that the use of adaptive help-seeking strategies can be predicted by the participants' sense of belonging to their educational center and the extent to which they perceived themselves to be accepted and supported by their teachers and peers. Sense of belonging is closely related to loneliness because the satisfaction with interpersonal relationship in the academic context decreases the risk of student perception of isolation [30], and other negative emotions

such as anxiety, depression or stress [31]. Thus, academic help seeking as a self-regulation strategy is also closely related to student wellbeing.

Current Study

Given the importance of AHS as a self-regulation strategy and its role in motivation and the student learning process, it is important to examine the psychosocial variables related to this student behavior. Specifically, this study aims to address the following research question: Are socio-emotional factors associated with help-seeking behavior and attitudes in young students? For this purpose, we examined the relationship between emotional costs, perception of benefits, threats, and avoidance of academic help seeking with the socio-emotional variables of functional social support, satisfaction with life, happiness, self-conception, and loneliness. Considering the results obtained in related studies, we expected female participants to report higher levels than male participants of the four variables of academic help seeking used. Evidently, girls report higher levels of support seeking, coping [32] and make more requests for academic help [33]. We also hope to find significant relationships between the various variables of seeking academic help and the study variables, because the act of seeking help may require personal characteristics such as self-esteem, academic self-concept and satisfaction with life. However, it may also be related to socio-emotional aspects. To date, few studies have evaluated these relationships. Finally, we hypothesized that functional social support, satisfaction with life, happiness, self-conception and loneliness could be predicted by emotional costs, perception of benefits, threats and avoidance of academic help seeking.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

We used purposeful non-probability sampling by which we selected 232 students (46.1% boys and 53.9% girls). Although the question regarding gender was inclusive, no participants identified with a non-binary gender. The participants were students from three public secondary schools in the province of Tarragona and one in the province of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain) who were enrolled in the third and fourth year of compulsory secondary education (63.8%) and vocational training (36.2%). The age range of the participants was between 14 and 23 years old, with a mean of 16.61 years (SD = 2.85).

2.2. Measures

Perceived emotional cost of help-seeking scale. We used the Spanish version developed by Sánchez Rosas&Pérez [18]. This scale consists of three items, with a Likert-type response scale from (1) do not agree at all to (5) totally agree, and assesses the perception of cost generated by seeking help in the educational context. In our study, reliability was adequate ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Perceived benefits of help-seeking scale [19]. This measure assesses the positive consequences of seeking academic help from an individual perspective. We used the Spanish version that has five items, and five response options ranging from (1) do not agree at all to (5) totally agree [18]. In our sample, reliability was adequate ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Threat of help-seeking scale [5]. This measure assesses the threat to self-esteem of seeking help, using four items and a Likert response scale from (1) do not agree at all to (5) totally agree. We used a validated version for the Spanish speakers by Sánchez Rosas and Pérez [18] and obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.83.

Avoidance of help-seeking scale [19]. The items of this scale refer to cases in which a student needs help, but does not seek it. To analyze this construct, we used an adaptation into Spanish that consisted of five items and was answered using a Likert response scale from (1) do not agree to (5) totally agree [18]. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha obtained was of 0.90.

Functional Social Support Questionnaire Duke-UNK-11 [34]. The version validated for the Spanish population was used [35], a questionnaire which quantitatively assesses

perceived social support through 11 items with a Likert-type response scale from (1) much less than I want (5) as much as I want. In our sample, the Cronbach's alpha obtained was of 0.85.

Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) [36]. This scale is a unifactorial questionnaire that assesses the overall judgment that people make about their satisfaction with life. It consists of five items, with five response alternatives, on a Likert scale: (1) Totally disagree, (5) Totally agree. In this study, we use the Spanish version [37], which has adequate psychometric properties, with a reliability of $\alpha = 0.84$. In our sample, we obtained similar results ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) [38]. This scale is an instrument for measuring overall subjective happiness. It evaluates the category of well-being as an overall psychological phenomenon, considering the definition of happiness from the respondent's perspective. The instrument uses four items with a seven-point response scale. We used an adaptation for the Spanish population that has shown adequate reliability [39] and the reliability in our sample was similar to that obtained by the original authors ($\alpha = 0.78$).

Self-concept form A [40]. This form measures several dimensions of self-concept (in this study, the social and academic dimensions). The two dimensions measured contain 12 items, of which six correspond to social self-concept and six to academic self-concept. All items were answered through four response options, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree. The questionnaire was developed, validated and standardized in Spain, and is a classic test to assess self-concept in a Spanish setting [41]. In our sample we obtained the following Cronbach alphas: academic self-esteem ($\alpha = 0.72$), social self-esteem ($\alpha = 0.70$).

UCLA Loneliness Scale [42]. We used the Spanish version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale [43]. It assesses loneliness and it is defined by the authors as an emotional state that occurs when people have not achieved the interpersonal relationships they want. This version consists of 20 items, with a Likert-type response scale from (1) never to (4) forever. The Spanish version has a multifactorial structure [44]. It consists of two factors: emotional loneliness and subjective evaluation of the social network. The reliability of our sample was adequate in the two factors, emotional loneliness ($\alpha = 0.83$) and subjective evaluation of the social network ($\alpha = 0.90$).

2.3. Procedure

We contacted the head of the three educational centers and explained the objective of the study and its procedure. After being given authorization, we asked the parents for written informed consent on behalf of the participants and students to take part on a voluntary basis. This study has been designed under the ethical code of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili [45] (Spain). It also complied with the recommendations of Spanish Organic Law 15/1999 and the Spanish data protection agency, which regulates the fundamental right to data protection under the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Therefore, the participants' right to anonymity and the confidentiality of their particular results was guaranteed. Before participants started to respond to the questionnaires, they were given all the necessary information about the study and instructions on how to respond. The battery of questionnaires was administered collectively in the students' class hours without a time limit.

2.4. Data Analysis

SPSS Statistics version 27.0 for Windows was used to carry out all the statistical analyses. We analyzed the normality of the data and we carried out the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to verify if the data obtained in the study sample fulfilled the statistical assumptions necessary for data analysis (linearity, homoscedasticity, normality and independence). Residual analysis was performed, which allowed us to determine the goodness of fit of the regression obtained. To analyze the assumed normality of the residuals, we used the standardized residual plots and the Durbin-Watson statistic.

The data showed a normal distribution, so parametric analyses were performed. Specifically, descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample, Student's *t*-tests were performed to examine the differences in gender and educational level in all study variables and Cohen's *d* was used to obtain the effect size. We used the following criteria: $0.2 < d < 0.5$ = Small; $0.5 < d < 0.8$ = Medium; $d > 0.8$ = Large [46]. Subsequently, Pearson correlations were performed in the general sample and separated by gender to find the relationships between the variables studied. To interpret the strength of the correlation we used the classifications proposed by Guilford [47]. Finally, a multiple regression analysis was performed with the successive stepwise method to determine the predictive value of the variables perceived social support, life satisfaction, happiness, academic and social self-esteem, emotional loneliness and subjective evaluation of the social network in the perceived emotional cost of help-seeking, perceived benefits of help seeking, threat of help seeking and avoidance of help seeking for the general sample.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for academic help-seeking behaviors and attitudes in the overall sample and in boys and girls separately. As can be seen, girls present significantly higher scores than boys in perceived emotional cost of help seeking, with a medium effect size ($t(169) = -4.47, p < 0.01, \text{Cohen's } d = -0.58$). We also found significant differences between boys and girls in the variable avoidance of help seeking ($t(227) = -1.52, p < 0.01, \text{Cohen's } d = -0.20$), with higher means in girls than boys, but with a smaller effect size. We also performed *t*-tests on educational level, but there were no differences in scales of academic help-seeking behaviors and attitude.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for psychometric variables across overall sample and by sex.

Variable	Overall Boys Sample (N = 107)		Girls (N = 125)	<i>t</i> (<i>p</i>)
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Perceived emotional cost of help seeking	8.31 (3.98)	7.11 (3.37)	9.33 ** (4.17)	-4.40 (<0.01)
Perceived benefits of help seeking	16.45 (4.76)	16.53 (4.84)	16.39 (4.71)	0.22 (0.94)
Threat of academic help seeking	9.82 (4.24)	9.82 (4.03)	9.82 (4.42)	0.006 (0.40)
Avoidance of help seeking	12.33 (5.35)	11.75 (4.69)	12.81 ** (5.83)	-1.52 (<0.01)

** $p = 0.01$.

The correlations between the study variables are shown in Table 2. First, the variable perceived emotional cost of academic help seeking was negatively and significantly related to the variables functional social support ($r = -0.27, p < 0.01$), happiness ($r = -0.24, p < 0.01$) and social self-concept ($r = -0.28, p < 0.01$). These relationships are considered to be small. It is also positively and significantly related to the variable emotional loneliness ($r = 0.40, p < 0.01$). This relationship is moderate. Second, the variable perceived benefits of academic help seeking were positively and significantly related to the variables functional social support ($r = 0.33, p < 0.01$), satisfaction with life ($r = 0.23, p < 0.01$), happiness ($r = 0.29, p < 0.01$), academic self-concept ($r = 0.32, p < 0.01$) and social self-concept ($r = 0.29, p < 0.01$). The perceived benefits of academic help seeking were also significantly related to the variables emotional loneliness ($r = 0.25, p < 0.01$) and subjective evaluation of the social network ($r = -0.18, p < 0.01$). Third, the variable threat of academic help seeking was negatively and significantly related to the variables functional social support ($r = -0.23, p < 0.01$) and academic self-concept ($r = -0.25, p < 0.01$) and positively and meaningfully related to emotional loneliness ($r = 0.29, p < 0.01$), with a small effect size. Finally, the variable avoidance of academic help seeking was negatively and significantly related to the variables functional social support ($r = -0.25, p < 0.01$), happiness ($r = -0.22, p < 0.01$), academic self-concept ($r = -0.25, p < 0.01$) and social self-concept ($r = -0.25, p < 0.01$), and positively and meaningfully related to emotional loneliness ($r = 0.33, p < 0.01$). This correlation is considered to be small.

Table 2. Pearson's correlations between attitudes toward academic help seeking and the rest of the variables for the overall sample.

Variables	Cost	Benefits	Threat	Avoidance
Functional social support	−0.27 **	0.33 **	−0.23 **	−0.25 **
Satisfaction with life	−0.13 *	0.23 **	−0.09	−0.14 *
Happiness	−0.24	0.29 **	−0.18 **	−0.22 **
Academic self-concept	−0.01	0.32 **	−0.25 **	−0.25 **
Social self-concept	−0.28 **	0.29 **	−0.14 *	−0.25 **
Emotional loneliness	−0.40 **	−0.25 **	0.29 **	0.33 **
Social Network	0.03	−0.18 **	−0.01	0.02

Note. Cost = Perceived emotional cost of help seeking; Benefits = Perceived benefits of help seeking; Threat = Threat of help seeking; Avoidance = Avoidance of help-seeking; Social Network = Subjective evaluation of the social network. * $p = 0.05$. ** $p = 0.01$.

Stepwise regression analyses were performed using the program SPSS. All the scales and subscales with significant correlations were introduced into the regression equation as potential predictors of the perceived emotional cost of academic help seeking, perceived benefits of academic help seeking, threat of academic help seeking and avoidance of academic help seeking. The regression results are shown in Table 3. First, the variable emotional loneliness explained 15% of the variance of the perceived emotional cost of academic help seeking in the overall sample ($F = 42.87$, $p < 0.01$). Second, the variables functional social support, academic self-concept, social self-concept and subjective evaluation of the social network explained 20% of the variance of the perceived benefits of academic help seeking ($F = 14.72$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, the variables emotional loneliness, and academic self-concept explained 13% of the variance of the threat of academic help seeking ($F = 17.22$, $p < 0.01$), and 14% of the variance of the avoidance of academic help seeking ($F = 20.03$, $p < 0.01$). The VIF values range from 1.00 to 1.12. For their part, the tolerance values are close to 1, so a lack of multicollinearity is assumed [48,49]

Table 3. Multiple regression to predict attitudes toward Academic Help Seeking.

Dependent Variable	Best Model	R^2_a	β	t	p	Tolerance	VIF
Perceived emotional cost of help seeking	Emotional loneliness	0.16	0.40	6.54	<0.001	0.91	1.00
	Functional social support	0.10	0.22	3.32	<0.01		
Perceived benefits of help seeking	Academic self-concept	0.16	0.20	3.20	0.002	0.89	1.12
	Social self-concept	0.19	0.16	2.45	0.015		
	Subjective evaluation of the social network	0.20	−0.14	−0.240	0.017		
Threat of help seeking	Emotional loneliness	0.08	0.26	4.19	<0.001	0.99	1.01
	Academic self-concept	0.13	−0.22	−3.50	0.001		
Avoidance of help-seeking	Emotional loneliness	0.10	0.30	4.76	<0.01	0.99	1.01
	Academic self-concept	0.14	−0.22	−3.45	0.001		

4. Discussion

The present study's primary purpose was to examine the relationship of the emotional costs, perception of benefits, threats and avoidance of seeking academic help with the variables functional social support, life satisfaction, happiness, self-conception and loneliness. The results showed significant differences according to sex on some scales.

Specifically, girls presented higher scores in the perceived emotional cost of help seeking and avoidance of help seeking, which is consistent with previous studies that show that girls are more likely to have negative attitudes towards seeking help [13,14]. However, these differences are not entirely clear because some studies have found contradictory results [12]. These discrepancies may be due to the influence of sociocultural variables on gender. Future studies should analyze these differences in depth.

The results revealed significant, negative relationships of the variables functional social support, social self-concept and satisfaction with life with the perceived emotional cost of help seeking. However, the strongest relationship was with the variable emotional loneliness. In fact, in the regression analysis, it was the only variable that entered the equation. Specifically, emotional loneliness explains 16% of the variance of the perceived emotional cost of help seeking. We are unaware of empirical studies that have analyzed the relationship between these two variables, although it is consistent with the relationship reported in the literature. In greater detail, people with difficulty establishing affective relationships experienced more negative emotions such as sadness and loneliness and fewer positive emotions such as happiness and life satisfaction [50]. Therefore, lonely teenagers and young students may experience difficulty seeking academic help due to the emotional costs. People who experience loneliness have difficulty connecting with other people and consequently suffer from social isolation [51]. This explains our results in the adolescent and young population. Therefore, the perception of the emotional cost may prevail over the benefits of seeking help. In adolescence, the levels of loneliness increase due to the increased importance of acceptance from other adolescents [52].

The results indicated that the variables functional social support, academic self-concept, social self-concept and subjective evaluation of the social network are predictors of the perceived benefits of help seeking. These data coincide with previous studies that have found that help seeking is related to social support and psychosocial variables [53,54]. Functional social support was the variable that most predicted the perceived benefits of help-seeking scores, which indicates that, for adolescents and young people, perceiving a supportive social network is of the utmost importance if they are to perceive benefits from help seeking in educational settings. It is a significant finding and may help school counselors and educational psychologists establish intervention and prevention plans. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have found a relationship between perceived social support and other help-seeking attitudes [55].

Another of our results showed that the variables emotional loneliness and academic self-concept can predict the variables threat of help seeking and avoidance of help seeking. First, emotional loneliness is the variable that contributes most to the two regression models, which is consistent with previous studies. In fact, several studies have concluded that seeking help can be considered a threat to socio emotional aspects [3,10,11]. However, few studies have analyzed the role of emotional loneliness in the threat of help seeking. In the light of our results, adolescents and young people who experience emotional loneliness are more likely to perceive a threat when seeking help. This can aggravate these students' emotional and academic situations. Future studies should focus on how to help lonely students not to perceive seeking help as an academic and emotional threat.

Our study has some limitations. First, the emotional variables used have traditionally been related to each other, which makes them share variance; consequently, the prediction levels in this study were low. Future studies should replicate these data in order to clarify the relationship between the variables studied. This could provide the information required to design programs to promote educational aid at different levels. Second, our sample is socio-demographically heterogeneous so the results may change in populations with different sociodemographic characteristics. Future studies, then, should focus on different populations. Third, our methodological design was based on emotional variables and did not include psychosocial or individual variables. Considering that academic help seeking encompasses different attitudinal, emotional and behavioral factors, future studies should analyze the mediation between different types of variable.

Author Contributions: J.-M.D. contributed to the design of the study, carried out part of the statistical analyses, supervised the research, wrote most of the article and formulated the research question. M.C.-F. helped to disseminate the questionnaires and wrote part of the article. E.C. wrote part of the article, supervised the work and revised the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Ajuts “Nexes”, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, announcement (2019).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not available.

Informed Consent Statement: Not available.

Data Availability Statement: The data that supported the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical concerns.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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