

Self-Stigma in Academic Help-Seeking: A Comparative Study of First-Generation and Continuing-Generation University Students

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Abstract

First-generation students (FGS) face unique challenges in their learning journey. Amongst, self-stigma around academic help-seeking is a significant psychological barrier. Students with high self-stigma view help-seeking as a sign of inadequacy, limiting them from accessing support when needed. This study examines differences in self-stigma in academic help-seeking between first-generation and continuing-generation students (CGS) in Hong Kong. Using an online questionnaire, this study collected data from 196 students (67.9% FGS). The results showed that compared to CGS, FGS reported significantly higher levels of self-stigma ($p = .019$, $d = 0.36$). The findings suggest that FGS may face more psychological challenges in their academic journey. Targeted interventions in reducing self-stigmas could encourage all students to utilize resources, and thus, provide equal opportunity for their academic success.

Keywords: *First-generation students; help-seeking; academic problems; self-stigma; equality; equity.*

1. Introduction

First-generation students (FGS) are the first in their families to attend university. Compared with continuing-generation students (CGS), FGS usually face more challenges, placing them in a significantly disadvantaged position across multiple domains. In the academic domain, FGS are often reported to have lower GPAs and degree completion rates (Marquez, 2019). These could be attributed to the limited access to essential academic resources, such as textbooks and technology (Patfield et al., 2022; Bamberger & Smith, 2023). Psychologically, FGS may also experience more stress and anxiety due to financial insecurity (Marquez, 2019). They may also have a greater sense of loneliness and isolation because of the difficulties in connecting with peers and teachers (Veldman et al., 2019; McCallen & Johnson, 2020). In general, FGS often lack knowledge and resources from their families in helping them navigate their higher

education journey. Such a situation may cause heightened anxiety, isolation, and academic pressures, adversely affecting their performance and well-being (Smith & McLellan, 2023; White & Canning, 2023).

Academic help-seeking emerges as a crucial adaptive behaviour in response to the challenges in the learning journey. It enables students to access necessary resources and support when facing academic difficulties. However, students' tendency and decisions for academic help-seeking varies. Previous research showed that various factors, such as age, gender, educational background, socioeconomic status, and psychological factors, might affect students' decisions in academic help-seeking (Bornschlegl et al., 2020) and coping flexibility (Ng & Chen, 2023). Recently, Li and colleagues (2025) studied the academic help-seeking behavior of first-generation college students from rural China. Their findings highlighted that emotional barriers and concerns about the effectiveness of help significantly impact FGS's tendencies to seek help. Students are especially concerned about self-doubt (the lack of self-confidence) and peer judgment (others' opinion) (Li et al., 2025), viewing academic help-seeking as a sign of weakness or incompetence. These are closely related to the concept of self-stigma (the internalized negative beliefs).

The two contributors of self-stigma in academic help-seeking, namely, emotional barriers and perceived social pressures, might vary between FGS and CGS, as FGS may feel additional pressures to prove their academic ability in the higher education setting. As mentioned, FGS already felt isolated and faced difficulties accessing necessary resources throughout their academic journey. If FGS further associates academic help-seeking with weakness or incompetence, such self-stigma might further deter them from seeking academic support (Bornschlegl et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2019), creating a cycle of isolation particularly detrimental for them.

This research specifically aims at investigating the differences in self-stigma in academic help-seeking between FGS and CGS. The research proposes the research question of whether or not generational status will influence students' experiences of self-stigma when seeking academic help. The comparative approach would provide insights into how diverse students experience and cope with self-stigma. An understanding of the potential differences in self-stigma between FGS and CGS could help develop targeted interventions to address each group of students' unique psychological barriers, thus promoting academic success for all students. By examining these differences between FGS and CGS in the Hong Kong context, this research will not only contribute to developing culturally sensitive interventions that effectively address self-stigma and promote help-seeking behaviors but also shed light on other Asian educational contexts that share similar cultural values and academic pressures as Hong Kong.

2. Method

This research employed a quantitative approach using an online questionnaire to investigate the self-stigma of academic help-seeking among university students.

2.1. Participants

A total of 196 university students participated in the study through mass mail and/or campus-wide recruitment. Participants were informed of their rights and provided consent before participating in the study. They were free to withdraw at any time without penalty. The sample comprised both FGS ($n = 133$, 67.9%) and CGS ($n = 63$, 32.1%). About 60.7% were female ($n = 119$) and 39.3% were male ($n = 77$). They were aged from 18 – 24 (mean = 20.70, $Sd = 1.28$). They were invited to complete an online questionnaire in Traditional Chinese. A careful inspection revealed that there was no missing data. The questionnaire consists of the following measures:

Self-stigma of Academic Help-seeking: Participants indicated the extent to which individuals feel self-stigmatized when seeking academic help by a 10-item scale (Winograd & Rust, 2014). Sample item includes “Seeking help would make me feel less intelligent.” The items are anchored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores generally indicating higher levels of stigma associated with seeking academic help. The scale was translated into Chinese and back-translated into English by two different bilingual persons to ensure the equivalence of the content and meaning (Brislin, 1986). The reliability in this research is satisfactory, with Cronbach’s Alpha = .71.

Student Generation Status: Participants identified themselves as FGS or CGS by responding to the question “*Are you a "first-generation college student"? That is, if you are a first-generation college student in your family, your brothers and sisters may have received a college education, but your parents have not received higher education*” Responses were coded as 1 (yes) and 2 (no).

Demographic details: Age and gender were also collected.

2.2. Data Analysis Plan

To protect participants’ confidentiality, analyses were conducted only on aggregated data. Descriptive statistics were first computed, followed by independent samples t-tests to examine the differences in self-stigma between first-generation students and continuing-generation university students. Levene’s test was conducted to assess the equality of variances between groups of first-generation and continuing-generation students.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Analysis

Regarding self-stigma of academic help-seeking, FGS showed a higher mean score ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .36$) compared to CGS ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .33$). That is, FGS tend to stigmatize themselves when they seek help with their academic problems (see Figure 1).

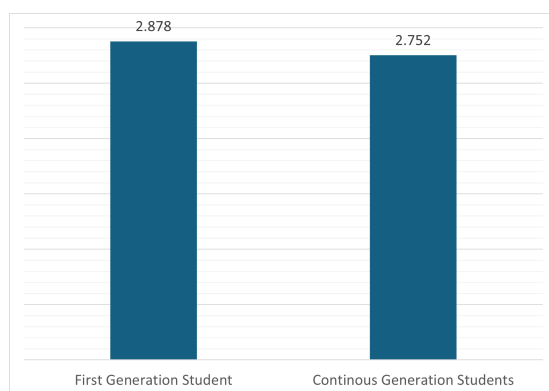


Figure 1. Mean ratings of Self-stigma of Academic Help-seeking.

3.2. Comparative Analysis

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in self-stigma of academic help-seeking between first-generation and continuing-generation university students. Levene's test indicated equal variances ($F = .66$, $p = .418$). The analysis revealed a significant difference between the groups ($t(194) = 2.36$, $p = .019$), with first-generation students reporting higher levels of self-stigma than continuing-generation students. The mean difference of .12 (95% CI $[-.23, -.02]$) represents a small to medium effect size, $d = 0.36$.

These findings suggest that generation status may influence their experience of self-stigma when seeking academic help, with first-generation university students potentially facing greater internal barriers to help-seeking behaviors.

Table 1. Comparison of the mean value of FGS and CGS's self-stigma.

Type of Student	Mean of Self-stigma
First Generation Students (FGS)	2.878
Continuous Generation Students (CGS)	2.752

4. Discussion

The present study examined differences in academic help-seeking self-stigma between first-generation and continuing-generation university students in Hong Kong. Our findings revealed that FGS experience significantly higher levels of self-stigma when seeking academic help compared to their CGS peers, with a small to medium effect size. Our findings align with existing research that FGS faced more challenges in attaining higher education (Terenzini et al., 1996; Padgett, 2012) but further highlighted a psychological challenge.

Our findings highlighted that FGS faced a higher self-stigma level in academic help-seeking. Such a psychological barrier may deter their willingness to seek necessary academic help and negatively impact their academic performance (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). Together with other documented challenges, such as academic preparation gaps and cultural adjustment difficulties (Gable, 2021), the decision not to seek academic help may trigger a downward cycle that hampers their academic performance and overall university experience (Bamberger & Smith, 2023).

The fact that FGS has a higher level of self-stigma than CGS could be attributed to several deep-rooted factors in FGS's unique background and experiences. Firstly, possibly because they were the first in their families to achieve a pioneering role in higher education, they may have internalized beliefs about their academic ability and independence (Patfield et al., 2021). Seeking help might harm their self-confidence. Besides, as FGS often navigate their life university life without parental guidance (which was based on direct college experience) (Atherton, 2014), seeking help might also make them feel vulnerable.

While the difference in self-stigma between FGS and CGS is significant, the small to medium effect size ($d=0.36$) suggests that other factors also shape students' tendencies toward academic help-seeking (Bornschlegl et al., 2020). Our findings not only suggest generation status as a crucial factor (Winograd & Rust, 2014) but also highlight that other factors may also play a role, thus highlighting that academic help-seeking behavior is a complex phenomenon.

The current research also brings some practical implications for higher education to create a more inclusive education environment. The higher education sector is serving an increasingly diverse student population, and our findings reveal that different students have different psychological needs. Targeted interventions that specifically address self-stigma among first-generation students would help normalize their help-seeking behavior. These may include social support, peer mentoring programs, and equipping frontline staff, such as faculties and counselors, with an awareness of FGS's heightened self-stigma, so that they can deliver academic support with more sensitive and inclusive approaches (Fong et al., 2023). These measures could help FGS to overcome their reluctance to seek help.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the current research suggested that FGS have a higher self-stigma in academic help-seeking, hinting that they might be more reluctant to seek academic help and less engaged in academic support, and hence, created a challenge that potentially hindered FGS's academic success. In general, our research highlighted that parents' education level could impact on the second generation's psychological characteristics.

There are several limitations that shed light on future research. Considering the sample, the current study collected samples only from a single institution, future research could collect more diverse samples to improve the generalizability. Besides, the current study only adopts a cross-sectional research design. Future research with a longitudinal design could further establish causal inferences about the relationship between generation status and self-stigmas and changes in students' academic journey (Langensee et al., 2024). Additionally, future research could also investigate the potential mediators, such as cultural values, family attitudes towards education, and previous academic experiences, to understand the mechanism underlying the differences in self-stigma (Choi et al., 2019). Future research and practical interventions to minimize self-stigma and encourage students to seek academic help could create a more supportive environment for students' success (Ng & Lam, 2022).

Creating inclusive and supportive environments that cater to varied individual preferences could enhance learning experiences and foster greater academic success (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). This is especially important as the prevalence of educational technology has reduced the difficulty of differentiated learning (Huang, 2023; Lam et al., 2021), and that technology-enriched medium can enhance learning outcomes (Eom, 2023) and enrich learning experiences (Ng & Lam, 2022), even in the face of uncertainty (Lam & Ng, 2023; Fingrut & Ng, 2023). Adopting tailored pedagogical approaches with educational technology can be a solution to promote equitable outcomes in education.

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