

FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO SEEK SUPPORT IN CANADA

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Abstract

This study examines factors influencing international students' help-seeking behaviour in Canada using the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) framework. Semi-structured interviews with 19 international students from diverse backgrounds were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that students exhibited selective, cautious approaches whereby help-seeking preferences are domain-specific and relationally strategic, matching problems to appropriate support sources based on expertise, shared experience, and willingness to help. Our findings demonstrate how TPB operates differently in cross-cultural contexts where students navigate dual cultural frameworks, while also revealing how multiple intersecting identities compound to create unique help-seeking contexts beyond TPB's dimensions. We introduce "strategic non-help-seeking" as a key conceptual contribution: a deliberate, rational, decision-making process whereby students actively choose not to engage with support systems based on careful evaluation of costs, benefits, and contextual constraints. Findings underscore the need for Canadian institutions to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and toward culturally responsive, accessible support systems recognizing international students' diverse, intersecting needs.

Keywords: Canadian higher education, help-seeking behaviour, international students, social support

Résumé

Cette étude examine les facteurs influençant le comportement de recherche d'aide des étudiants internationaux au Canada à l'aide du cadre de la théorie du comportement planifié (TCP). Des entretiens semi-directifs menés auprès de 19 étudiants internationaux issus de divers horizons ont été analysés selon une approche thématique. Les résultats révèlent que les étudiants adoptent des stratégies sélectives et prudentes, leurs préférences en matière de recherche d'aide étant à la fois spécifiques à chaque domaine et fondées sur les relations interpersonnelles. Ils associent chaque type de problème à une source de

soutien jugée appropriée selon l'expertise, l'expérience partagée et la volonté d'aider. Nos résultats montrent que la TCP fonctionne différemment dans des contextes interculturels où les étudiants naviguent entre deux cadres culturels, tout en mettant en évidence la manière dont les identités multiples et croisées créent des contextes uniques de recherche d'aide au-delà des dimensions de la TCP. Nous introduisons la notion de « non-recherche d'aide stratégique » comme contribution conceptuelle clé : un processus délibéré et rationnel de prise de décision par lequel les étudiants choisissent consciemment de ne pas recourir aux systèmes de soutien après une évaluation minutieuse des coûts, des avantages et des contraintes contextuelles. Ces résultats soulignent la nécessité pour les établissements canadiens d'aller au-delà des approches uniformisées afin de développer des systèmes de soutien culturellement adaptés, accessibles et sensibles à la diversité des besoins et aux identités croisées des étudiants internationaux.

Mots clés : enseignement supérieur canadien, comportement de recherche d'aide, étudiants internationaux, soutien social

INTRODUCTION

Canada has emerged as a leading destination for international students through key attractions, including a world-class education system, a richly multicultural environment, promising immigration pathways, inclusive communities, robust post-study work options, and exceptional quality of life (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2024; Li et al., 2025). This appeal has contributed to remarkable growth in international enrolment, with student numbers reaching over one million by 2023, a 63% increase over five years (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2024). International students have become integral to Canada's higher education landscape, contributing significantly to both institutional finances and cultural diversity (Mushfiq, 2023). However, the rapid growth has generated significant challenges for international students, including deteriorating education quality (Brownlee, 2015; Kirby, 2021) and unaffordable education costs (Embark Student Corp., 2023).

Additionally, this growth trajectory masks underlying systemic challenges within Canada's higher education system. For decades, chronic underfunding and stagnated public investment in post-secondary education have forced institutions to rely on international fees to sustain operations (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2024; Dhillon, 2024; Mulligan, 2024). Indian international students alone contributed two billion

dollars to Ontario's college operating revenue in 2023, surpassing the province's higher education budget (Usher & Balfour, 2023). Breznitz (2024) identified fundamental hypocrisy: political leaders praise Canada's higher education system while allowing that system to be financially dependent on international student fees.

These systemic pressures have been compounded by recent policy volatility. In 2024, the government of Canada announced a two-year intake cap and blamed international students for pressuring housing, health care, and other services (Lencioni, 2024). The government initially capped study permits at 485,000 in 2024, then further reduced this cap by 10% in 2025 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024, 2025). This sudden policy shift has created widespread uncertainty and anxiety among current and prospective international students. Nationwide protests by international students signal widespread disillusionment, loss of institutional trust, and a growing sense of marginalization (Pandher & Dhama, 2024).

These changes not only impact individual students but also raise significant questions about the stability and predictability of Canada's international education landscape, emphasizing the need to ensure international students' well-being. While the challenges facing international students in Canada have been presented across various domains—financial, academic, social, and cultural—there remains a critical gap

in understanding how these multifaceted pressures influence their help-seeking behaviour. Existing research has predominantly focused on measuring levels of social support (e.g., Pinamang et al., 2021; Ra & Trusty, 2016) rather than examining the underlying mechanisms that shape students' willingness or reluctance to seek assistance. This gap is particularly significant given that help-seeking behaviour is crucial for student well-being, academic success, and successful integration into Canadian society.

Moreover, current literature lacks comprehensive exploration of how intersecting socio-demographic characteristics, such as nationality, academic program, socio-economic status, and cultural background, influence help-seeking patterns among international students (Oh & Butler, 2016). Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more responsive and inclusive support systems that recognize the diversity within the international student population and address their varied needs effectively.

Given this context of systemic challenges, policy volatility, and gaps in understanding help-seeking behaviour, this research examines international students' support-seeking patterns in Canada. Specifically, we investigate:

1. How do psychological, social, cultural, and institutional factors influence international students' willingness to seek support?
2. What are the distinctive help-seeking preferences and barriers experienced by these students within Canadian higher education contexts?

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of international students' help-seeking behaviour in Canada, offering evidence-based recommendations for a more just, equitable, and inclusive educational framework that better supports the well-being and success of international students navigating Canada's complex higher education landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges Faced by International Students in Canada

International students in Canada face multifaceted challenges that significantly shape their academic and personal experiences. These challenges, including linguistic barriers, cultural adaptation difficulties, and financial hardships, create complex stressors that directly influence their help-seeking patterns. Understanding these foundational challenges is essential for examining help-seeking behaviour and developing effective support systems for international student well-being.

Language Barriers and Communication Challenges

Language proficiency emerges as a pervasive obstacle for international students, affecting their ability to fully engage in academic discussions, complete assignments effectively (Cao et al., 2021), and communicate meaningfully with peers and faculty (Iorga et al., 2020). This linguistic struggle extends beyond basic language skills to encompass differences in communication styles, classroom norms, and social practices that further hinder integration (Guo & Chase, 2011). Consequently, these language-related barriers significantly limit students' academic performance and professional development, restricting their ability to demonstrate capabilities and build essential networks during their educational journey (Mushfiq, 2023).

Social Isolation and Acculturation Stress

International students face challenges that extend far beyond language proficiency to encompass broader social and psychological difficulties. As Ryan and Viète (2009) argue, language skills alone do not guarantee social acceptance and integration. Students experience diverse forms of acculturative stress during cross-cultural transitions, including psychological challenges, cultural adaptation pressures (Le & Huyen-Nguyen, 2023; Lee et al., 2018), feelings of isolation and disconnectedness (Bertram et

al., 2014; Ma et al., 2021), a sense of insecurity (Tran & Le, 2024), and insufficient social support (Franco et al., 2019). Guo and Chase (2011) describe this as negative combinations of “isolation, alienation, marginalization, and low self-esteem” (p. 310). These challenges intensify during the students’ initial period in Canada, when simultaneously navigating unfamiliar academic and social environments prove most overwhelming (Le, 2024).

Financial Burdens

Financial difficulties represent the most significant systemic challenge. Statistics Canada (2024) reveals stark tuition disparities: international students pay five times more than domestic students, while international student fees continue growing at rates far exceeding those for Canadian students. This disparity reflects Canadian higher education’s increasing dependence on international tuition revenue. In Ontario, two-thirds of total institutional income comes from non-government sources, placing a disproportionate financial reliance on international students (Usher & Balfour, 2023). Housing costs compound these financial challenges, with 40% of international students reporting difficulties securing affordable accommodation and 13% identifying housing as a “big problem” (Calder et al., 2016, p. 98). These combined pressures of tuition, housing, and living expenses create particularly severe hardships for students from low-income backgrounds or those lacking family financial support (Worae & Edgerton, 2023).

Support Systems and Limitations

The support ecosystem for international students in Canada encompasses multiple interconnected networks, including institutional services, faculty support, family connections, and peer relationships. However, significant gaps in accessibility, awareness, and effectiveness limit their impact, creating barriers that prevent many students from receiving adequate support when needed.

Institutional Services

Canadian universities offer financial assistance through teaching and research assistant positions, bursaries, and emergency funds. However, these systems frequently fail to meet students’ financial realities (Calder et al., 2016; Pinamang et al., 2021). Graduate students working as teaching assistants or research assistants exemplify these challenges when funding is unavailable year-round, creating significant hardships, especially for those from less-affluent countries (Calder et al., 2016). This financial inconsistency poses difficulties for those who rely on this income for essential living expenses. International students encounter additional financial obstacles, including exclusion from domestic scholarships and provincial student loans, plus restricted banking service access, such as strict credit requirements, as well as difficulties in opening credit cards or accessing loans, further restricting their ability to secure financial stability in times of need (Sun, 2020).

While universities offer mental health, academic, and social integration, significant gaps remain in meeting international students’ complex needs. These programs can potentially create a more inclusive support ecosystem (Guo & Chase, 2011) but often fall short in practice. Institutions face multiple challenges in adequately supporting international students (Colyar et al., 2023), including the lack of specifically trained staff to address international students’ unique challenges (Sullivan, 2021; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015) and the absence of comprehensive support systems (Taylor, 2024). Additionally, health and mental wellness services remain insufficient, inadequate, and culturally misaligned, with students lacking access to basic medical care and hesitating to seek mental health support due to stigma and trust issues (de Moissac et al., 2020).

Faculty Support

Positive student–faculty interactions can enhance international students’ academic experiences and sense of belonging, though these benefits vary depending on students’ financial resources and academic preparedness (Glass et al., 2015). While some professors offer fi-

nancial aid, or educational or personal support, others maintain a professional distance to avoid ethical dilemmas or accusations of favouritism (Calder et al., 2016). This unpredictability can discourage international students from seeking help, leading them to rely on alternative sources of support. Addressing these disparities requires systemic reform to create predictable and equitable support structures for all students.

Family Connections

Family support, both emotional and financial, plays a vital role in international students' well-being. Family is often preferred over institutional services, despite being an informal source of support (Masri & Khan, 2022). Separation from family can contribute to acculturative stress and emotional difficulties, while staying connected can alleviate stress and promote adjustment (Gebregergis, 2018; Shaheen, 2016). For students in long-term programs or those intending to work in Canada or immigrate there after graduation, family presence in Canada is critical, as strong family and community ties can enhance their ability to engage with Canadian society (ICEF, 2024). However, students may feel pressure to appear resilient and avoid sharing personal challenges with family members, especially academic struggles (Le, 2024).

Peer Relationships

Hendrickson et al. (2011) observe that international students build three types of friendships: co-nationals (or peers with similar cultural backgrounds), who offer emotional and informational support; multinational friends, who provide shared experience; and host-national friends, who help students feel welcomed and integrated. Thomson and Esses (2016) show that peer mentorship programs pairing international and Canadian students can enhance sociocultural adjustment and reduce acculturative stress. Nonetheless, bonds with co-nationals are often stronger, as shared experiences foster understanding and acceptance, thereby reducing isolation (Lashari et al., 2022). Some students, therefore, are reluctant to seek support from local peers, fearing lack of mutual understanding (Guo & Chase, 2011).

In general, the current support ecosystem reveals critical gaps between institutional, faculty, family, and peer resources and student needs. While support networks exist, they are structurally constrained and often leave students with "weak academic support structures" (Pilote & Benabdeljalil, 2007, p. 26) and "little inclination to profit from available resources" (p. 26), further increasing their risk of academic and social exclusion.

Sociodemographic Factors

International students' help-seeking behaviour in Canada is shaped by intersecting sociodemographic factors, including nationality, academic program, socio-economic status, and gender (Buckner et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2024). These factors create distinct patterns in how students access and utilize support services.

Students' satisfaction and integration levels vary by national origin (Merola et al., 2019). Those from India and the Philippines often report more favourable perceptions of institutional resources compared to peers from China, Korea, and Vietnam, likely due to stronger English proficiency and familiarity with Western educational systems (Kim et al., 2024). Cultural norms also shape help-seeking patterns. Asian students, for example, often prefer informal support from friends and family over formal mental health services due to stigma and unfamiliarity with Western approaches (de Moissac et al., 2020).

Socio-economic status adds another layer of complexity regarding access barriers. Students from low-income backgrounds often face greater difficulty accessing support, especially services tied to health care. Financial limitations and confusion around eligibility requirements deter many from seeking help, leading them to rely on support from social communities (Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Negative encounters with institutional staff can further erode trust, reinforcing students' reluctance to disclose personal challenges (de Moissac et al., 2020).

Despite Canada's friendly and multicultural reputation, many international students still encounter discrimination in services and relationships (Worae, 2024). The education system frequently treats international students as

a homogenous, deficient group, holding them individually responsible for their struggles while ignoring broader structural and systemic barriers (Ilieva & Beck, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991, 2012) serves as a comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding human behavioural intentions through three interconnected dimensions: attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. The first dimension refers to an individual's attitudes toward how their behaviour influences a desired outcome. The second aspect encompasses an individual's perception of a particular behaviour, as influenced by the judgement of significant others, including parents, spouses, teachers, or superiors. The last dimension reflects the perceived ease or difficulty in performing the behaviour, including factors that can facilitate or impede performance of the behaviour. The TPB has been successfully adapted across various educational, social, and cultural contexts to predict an individual's behaviour (Bosnjak et al., 2020), making it relevant for studying international students facing unique challenges that influence their help-seeking behaviour.

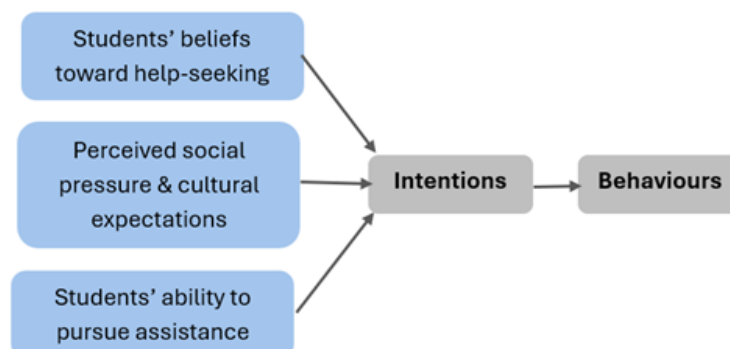
While the TPB originated in quantitative research (e.g., Caputo, 2020; Tung et al., 2021), its conceptual framework has demonstrated significant value in qualitative investigations, par-

ticularly when exploring complex cultural and psychological phenomena that require deep contextual understanding (e.g., Le et al., 2025; Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2005). In this study, TPB works as a framework for data analysis while allowing emergent themes to extend the theory. It also allows researchers to uncover the nuanced mechanisms underlying behavioural intentions that quantitative measures may not capture, particularly in cross-cultural contexts where cultural meanings and expressions of attitudes, norms, and control beliefs vary significantly. Finally, it explores how established dimensions manifest differently across cultural contexts. In the context of international student research, qualitative TPB application is valuable as it reveals how cultural backgrounds influence the formation and expression of attitudes, the sources of normative pressures, and perceptions of behavioural control.

In examining international students' willingness to seek support, we adapted TPB's three core dimensions to capture the unique complexities of cross-cultural help-seeking behaviour (Figure 1). Attitudes toward help-seeking encompass international students' evaluative beliefs and evaluation of the benefits and drawbacks of seeking support. Subjective norms reflect the social pressures and cultural expectations that influence help-seeking decisions. Perceived behavioural control examines students' beliefs about their capability to successfully seek and obtain support. Through qualitative analysis, this research highlights how TPB dimensions shape behavioural intentions and reveals system-specific factors to inform tailored interventions.

Figure 1

The Adapted Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991, 1992)



METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with international students from various Canadian institutions. This research method aligns with our objective of investigating international students' help-seeking behaviour, as it offers insights into the "interviewee's subjective perspective on a particular phenomenon" (McGrath et al., 2018, p. 1002). This study received approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Board.

All authors bring first-hand experience as international doctoral students who experience similar challenges faced by study participants and researchers who published extensive research on international students (Le & Pham, 2022; Le, 2023; Hou et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2025). This shared positionality enabled us to build trust and create interview environments that resembled peer conversations, allowing participants to share their experiences without fear of judgement, particularly when discussing sensitive topics like institutional barriers, personal dignity, or financial struggles.

International students who are currently living and studying in Ontario colleges and universities were eligible to participate in this study. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. These methods involve identifying initial participants who, in turn, recommend others who meet the study's eligibility criteria (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Given the focus on international students' willingness to seek support, purposive and snowball sampling allowed us to intentionally select participants who held relevant experiences (Beauchemin & González-Ferrer, 2011). Recruitment began with outreach to personal networks and social media platforms like LinkedIn. We targeted individuals within the desired demographic.

The study sample comprised 19 international students from diverse backgrounds (see Table 1). All interviews were conducted online via Zoom, with each session lasting 30–45 minutes. We explored participants' social engagement patterns, problem-solving strategies, and help-seeking resources. Samples of interview questions include "How often do you seek help

from your family? What made you decide to/not to ask for help from your family?" and "Have you ever solved a problem on your own here? Why did you manage to solve the problems on your own? Can you share a specific situation when you managed to solve problems on your own?"

The facilitation and defined work protocol among the three researchers contributed to the credibility of the research process. All researchers participated in participant recruitment. We documented contacts made through both snowball sampling and public calls and confirmed recruitment details within the team. Each researcher conducted interviews with participants they recruited through snowball sampling to facilitate smoother communication. For participants recruited publicly, interviews were distributed evenly among the researchers to ensure a balanced workload. Each researcher transcribed their own interviews, with transcripts reviewed by the other two team members to enhance accuracy. Most interviews were conducted in English; when a shared native language existed, they were held in that language and professionally translated and transcribed.

The data analysis employed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step thematic analysis framework, utilizing a mixed deductive-inductive approach. Initially, a deductive analysis was guided by the TPB framework, establishing three primary themes: students' beliefs toward outcomes of help-seeking behaviour, students' perceived social pressure and cultural expectations, and students' ability to pursue assistance. Subsequently, an inductive approach allowed for emergent themes to surface. Authors 1 and 2 independently coded all transcripts to generate initial codes, then collaboratively refined the codebook. When disagreements arose, they engaged in detailed discussion to understand the reasoning behind different interpretations, consulted the original interview transcripts for context, and reached consensus through collaborative negotiation. In the second round, they coded together to enhance intercoder reliability and balance theoretical framework with emerging insights. Ongoing discussions helped identify patterns and unique perspectives, ensuring nuanced analysis of the interview data.

Table 1
 Summary of Demographic Information

Pseudonyms	Nationality	Marital Status	Levels of Education	Length of Residence	Family in Canada
Dao	Vietnamese	Single	Undergraduate	N/A	N/A
Khiem	Vietnamese	N/A	Doctoral	N/A	Yes
Huong	Vietnamese	Single	Undergraduate	N/A	N/A
Vinh	Vietnamese	Single	Diploma/College	N/A	No
Hanh	Vietnamese	Single	Master's	N/A	N/A
Jasmine	Indian	N/A	Diploma/College	N/A	N/A
Anna	Indian	Single	Diploma/College	N/A	No
Greg	Indian	Single	Diploma/College	N/A	No
Dakila	Ecuador	N/A	Diploma/College	came to Canada at 18 years old	No
Adesh	Nepal	N/A	Diploma/College	N/A	N/A
Kendy	Philippines	N/A	Diploma/College	N/A	N/A
Edna	Philippines	Married	Diploma/College	N/A	Yes
Kanaka	Indian	Married	Doctoral	2 years	Yes
Carlos	Peruvian	Single	Doctoral	2 years	No
Samir	Burundi	Married	Doctoral	1 year	No
Priyanka	Indian	Single	Doctoral	2 years	No
Chinedu	Nigeria	Married	Doctoral	2 years	Yes
Sam	Indian	Married	Master's	N/A	Yes
Luna	Ukrainian	N/A	Doctoral	N/A	N/A

Note. "N/A" indicates that the information was not mentioned by a participant during the interview.

FINDINGS

Our analysis revealed that international students' help-seeking behaviour aligns with the three core dimensions of the TPB framework while also extending beyond this theoretical framework. The findings are organized around students' beliefs toward outcomes of help-seeking behaviour, their perceived social pressure and cultural expectations, their perceived ability to pursue assistance, and factors that emerged beyond the TPB framework. These findings highlight the complexity of international students' help-seeking experiences and the influence of contextual factors not fully captured by the theory.

Students' Beliefs Toward Outcomes of Help-Seeking Behaviour

Students' help-seeking behaviour is shaped by their perception of potential benefits. They critically assess the usefulness of the resources before engaging in the behaviour; as Edna noted, "I don't ask for help until I know it helps." Students seek help selectively based on careful evaluation: "I often carefully consider suggested solutions and only continue with those that are actually helpful to me" (Dao), or because "they might have new and useful perspectives" (Khiem). Others seek help based on perceived domain-specific challenges: "If I experience emotional or personal problems, I ask for opinions from friends and siblings. For academic issues, I often go for my teachers" (Luna). For these reasons, students are hesitant to seek support if they do not see clear advantages, as Anna explained: "I do not pursue assistance from my co-national friends. Some are good for not judging me. Others sometimes take advantage of me." Students' critical evaluation shows that help-seeking behaviour is formed through rationality, rather than merely emotional responses. However, students may dismiss valuable resources if they have limited experience to assess their worth or overvalue familiar support systems that may not be optimal. This finding also reveals that attitudes are dynamic, not fixed, shaped by accumulated experiences and beliefs.

Perceived Social Pressure and Cultural Expectations

Subjective norms significantly influence students' readiness to seek support. When deciding whether to seek help, students tend to base their decisions on three social and cultural pressures and expectations: willingness and availability, shared interests and commonalities, and expertise matching.

Willingness and availability refer to the extent to which individuals within students' social networks are inclined to provide support. Students prefer reaching out to those they see as responsive and supportive: "I want someone who is willing to help. I know they can help, and they will help" (Khiem); "Whenever I need help, they would not hesitate to jump in" (Dakila); "My friend would respond immediately whenever I call him" (Carlos). Such readiness helps ease students' concerns about being a burden: "If someone sees me and discovers that I'm in a situation which requires help, it's up to them to decide whether to help" (Samir).

Another key factor is the evaluation of shared interests and commonalities between students and their social networks. Students feel more comfortable with peers who share their experiences: "If you are a PhD student, you can understand how difficult it is" (Samir); "My friend comes from the same PhD community, so they are always willing to support me" (Carlos). In contrast, students often avoid domestic peers due to perceived differences in lived experience, cultural norms, language, and potential miscommunication: "Canadian students are not interested in making friends" (Sam); "I might upset them due to different languages and culture" (Evan); "Someone who is not familiar with our situation may not fully understand it" (Samir).

Expertise matching involves aligning students' needs with the capabilities of potential helpers. Many avoid asking family or friends back home due to limited understanding of life in Canada: "They don't know all the answers" (Luna).

Students' Ability to Pursue Assistance

Students' perceptions of their likelihood of success in accessing support systems significantly influence their sense of perceived behavioural control, which impacts their willingness to seek help. Many viewed institutional policies as inequitable, especially when compared to those benefiting domestic students or permanent residents.

Study permit restrictions often leave them feeling excluded and disadvantaged, sentiments that were commonly expressed by participants pursuing doctoral degrees. Most doctoral participants expressed frustration with funding barriers, highlighting that many opportunities are restricted to permanent residents or citizens: "When you even go for them, they ask, 'Do you have your permanent resident [status]?' Those are the big major barriers" (Chinedu). As Samir similarly explained,

Although Canada is a rich country, it doesn't motivate international students. Most opportunities are for Canadians. On the one hand, it's understandable. But on the other hand, it is not, because most of those international students, at the end of their studies, serve Canadians and the government of Canada.

Some students perceived institutional support systems as symbolic, rather than substantive assistance. Carlos, for example, described a lack of active support from their university, which they described as a "long-distance relationship" between students and institutional resources. Similarly, as Chinedu experienced,

[Name of organization] will not support your status as an international student. If you go to other organizations, like a Catholic institute, they say, "Our mandate is for refugees, and not for international students." So, you are left on your own at that point to start looking for, they will ask, okay, once you finish, just try to get your PR [permanent residency] and then come back to us.

Dakila also stated, "I have never sought help from the school staff for any jobs." While information about support services is often widely disseminated, participants indicated that passive information sharing does not ensure utilization. Khiem's experience illustrates this gap: "I rarely reach out to ask for help, even though they do send out a lot of information. I don't know why, maybe it is just because I never used it." This suggests that, without active encouragement or personalized outreach from institutions, students may not be motivated to engage with available services. Consequently, some students reported feeling disconnected from institutional support, which over time may diminish their confidence and willingness to seek help when needed.

However, not all experiences were challenging. Some participants expressed appreciation for institutional support and actively sought help when needed. Edna shared, "I am willing to seek help from student services on campus."

Factors Beyond the TPB

Our data reveals various factors beyond the TPB, including sociodemographic characteristics and personalities that significantly influence students' help-seeking behaviour. Firstly, financial status plays a pivotal role in shaping students' willingness. Luna's financial stability, thanks to scholarships, reduces her need to seek support. As she describes, "the scholarship covers pretty much tuition fees and campus cost, so I never ask for money from my family." Other students, however, shared the opposite sentiment, highlighting financial challenges during specific periods: "PhD students like me study a lot during summer, hindering our opportunities to earn some money, so I usually ask my family for help during this time" (Nancy).

Secondly, marital status affects help-seeking behaviour. Married students in this study cited relying on their partners or families, rather than seeking external support. For example, as Sam shared, "I don't look for help because I have my husband here. I can ask him anything." This emphasizes how spousal support can somehow fulfill emotional and practical needs. Similar-

ly, Edna explained, “Our family just transferred into a new apartment. I am currently a full-time mom, so we sought help from our family in the Philippines to rent the place.” Her experience illustrates how transnational family networks can provide essential assistance during times of transition. Carelis, a single participant, shared, “I do not seek help from my family. I just don’t want them to be worried for me. I have a circle of four friends, one best friend. I seek help from them maybe three times a week.” This reflects a different dynamic, where emotional support is sought from close friends, rather than family, for participants who are not married, often out of a desire to maintain independence or avoid causing concern. These approaches to seeking help suggest that marital status influences not only the sources of support students turn to, but also the emotional considerations behind those choices.

The findings reveal how multiple identities intersect, creating unique help-seeking experiences. Students facing combined challenges, such as being international, financially constrained, and linguistically limited, compounded barriers that cannot be understood by examining three TPB dimensions. This intersectional lens highlights how structural inequalities shape behavioural intentions. The identity factor also shows that students who most need support, those facing multiple challenges, are least able to access support systems effectively.

Most international students exhibit strong self-efficacy, preferring to address challenges independently before seeking external assistance: “I normally solve problems on my own by searching online resources. If something is out of my control, I will go for external support” (Sam). As Hanh similarly shared, “When I face stress, I prefer practising self-care and self-reflection.” Cultural values around dignity and privacy also create barriers to help-seeking: “I feel ashamed when asking for help from others as they might judge my deficiency” (Greg). Samir also emphasized the way personal dignity is tied to keeping struggles private: “Due to personal dignity, I’m not willing to ask for help. I would rather seek support from someone outside my community to avoid judgement.” Students must navigate both their home culture’s attitudes toward help-seeking

and the host culture’s norms, requiring nuanced strategies to preserve dignity while accessing support. Recognizing these factors provides a nuanced understanding of the barriers and enablers beyond the scope of the TPB.

DISCUSSION

This research explores factors influencing international students’ willingness and preferences in seeking support. Our analysis reveals a complex interplay of psychological, social, and systemic factors that shape their help-seeking behaviour. Critically, our findings introduce the concept of “strategic non-help-seeking”; a deliberate, rational decision-making process whereby international students actively decide if they should engage with certain support systems based on careful evaluation of costs, benefits, and contextual constraints. This reframes what existing literature often characterizes as “reluctance,” or “barriers” to help-seeking as adaptive behavioural strategies in response to misaligned institutional systems. While the TPB provides a robust framework for understanding students’ attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, our findings extend this theory in significant ways. First, we demonstrate that the TPB’s three dimensions operate differently in cross-cultural contexts, where students navigate dual cultural frameworks, their heritage culture’s attitudes toward help-seeking, and the host culture’s norms. Second, we identify intersectionality as a critical missing dimension in TPB applications, showing how multiple identities (international status, socio-economic position, cultural background, linguistic proficiency, visa precarity, etc.) compound to create unique help-seeking experiences that cannot be understood through examining single-identity categories or TPB dimensions alone. Third, our findings reveal that perceived behavioural control extends beyond individual capability to encompass structural constraints embedded in immigration policies, institutional practices, and systemic power imbalances that fundamentally shape whether help-seeking is even viable.

A key conceptual contribution of this study is reframing international students’ limited en-

gagement with formal support systems not as reluctance, deficiency, or lack of awareness, but as strategic non-help-seeking, a deliberate, rational decision-making process. Students exhibit sophisticated evaluation mechanisms, carefully weighing potential benefits against risks before pursuing assistance. This strategic approach reflects students' accumulated experiences with support systems, their assessment of institutional responsiveness, and their calculation of social and emotional costs associated with help-seeking. Rather than representing cultural deficits or individual barriers, strategic non-help-seeking emerges as adaptive behaviour in contexts where formal support systems tend to be perceived as inaccessible, ineffective, or culturally misaligned. The strategic dimension becomes particularly evident when students articulate clear decision-making criteria based on anticipated outcomes. Students seek help selectively based on domain-specific needs, such as emotional, financial, or academic. This selectivity demonstrates rational resource allocation, rather than generalized avoidance. Similarly, students actively avoid support sources they perceive as potentially exploitative. Strategic non-help-seeking also manifests in students' preference for self-reliance and independent problem solving. Most participants exhibited strong self-efficacy, viewing autonomy as a valued approach. This pattern reflects not an inability to seek help, but calculated decisions about when external support becomes necessary. Students preserve limited social capital, maintain dignity, and avoid potential judgement by solving problems independently when feasible. These findings challenge deficit narratives that position international students as unwilling or unable to seek appropriate help, instead revealing how students exercise agency within constrained circumstances (Le, 2024).

A central finding of this study is the profound cultural misalignment between institutional support systems and international students' needs, worldviews, and help-seeking frameworks. This misalignment operates at multiple levels and represents perhaps the most significant barrier to effective support provision in Canadian higher education. This result is supported by previ-

ous studies (e.g., Colyar et al., 2023). Literature points to a need for more training for staff and faculty outside of International Student Centres to better understand and support international students' experiences. While staff at International Student Centres are often familiar with the specific challenges international students face, there remains a disparity between these centres and other university services, such as academic advising, career planning, and health services, which may not be as attuned to international students' unique needs (Mushfiq, 2023; Sullivan, 2021).

Students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds fundamentally shape their comfort levels and willingness to seek support. Cultural differences create hesitation, particularly when accessing services such as student counselling, where counsellors typically do not share similar cultural backgrounds or understanding, leading to feelings of misunderstanding and cultural misalignment (Ang & Liamputong, 2008). In many non-Western cultures, discussing personal struggles with strangers contradicts deeply held values of privacy, family loyalty, and collective face-saving. Western counselling models, which prioritize individual disclosure and emotional expression, may feel culturally inappropriate to students from cultures that emphasize emotional restraint, hierarchical respect, and indirect communication. For instance, students from collectivist cultures, such as Vietnam, may view seeking professional mental health support as shameful. The cultural concept of "saving face" makes formal help-seeking particularly fraught, as it can be perceived as public admission of inadequacy. This aligns with recent research showing that cultural expectations around family honour and achievement create additional layers of stress that prevent students from accessing support that might alleviate that stress (Baghoori et al., 2022; Mandell et al., 2022).

Furthermore, at institutions where culturally responsive counselling services are less developed or missing, international students may experience a sense of otherness and marginalization within the institutional environment. When students perceive that support services

are based on Western cultural frameworks, they question whether these services can genuinely address their culturally specific challenges. As one participant noted about potential support, “someone who is not familiar with our situation may not fully understand it” (Samir). Consistent with the findings of Andrade (2006), institutional policies and support systems can fail to adequately meet the needs of this growing population, and student affairs staff might not fully understand their diverse needs. This cultural mismatch in service delivery not only limits help-seeking behaviour but also represents a broader institutional issue to recognize and accommodate the diverse cultural paradigms international students bring to Canadian campuses.

Subjective norm factors, including availability, willingness, expertise, and reliability of support networks, significantly shape help-seeking patterns. Students consistently prioritize seeking support from peers with shared experiences, typically co-national or international friends who better understand their challenges. This preference aligns with previous research (Ng et al., 2017; Rahming, 2019) and reflects students’ assessment that experiential understanding matters more than geographical proximity or institutional affiliation. In contrast, students rarely turn to Canadian peers due to perceived differences in experience and privilege (Guo & Chase, 2011). This avoidance stems from legitimate concerns about mutual understanding, shaping students’ subjective norms about from whom it is acceptable and productive to seek support. The pattern reveals how social integration and help-seeking intertwined. Students who feel marginalized or perceive domestic students as uninterested are unlikely to view them as viable support sources. The willingness, availability, and expertise of potential helpers emerged as critical factors. Students prefer reaching out to individuals they perceive as responsive, supportive, and knowledgeable. Such perceived readiness helps ease concerns about being burdensome, a significant consideration for students already navigating feelings of otherness and precarity. Conversely, students actively avoid seeking help from those they perceive as unwilling or unavailable, including fam-

ily members back home who lack contextual understanding of life in Canada. The evaluation of the alignment between their needs with helpers’ capabilities extends beyond formal credentials to include lived experience, cultural competency, and practical knowledge. This finding aligns with previous studies finding international students resilient and resourceful (Esses et al., 2018; Le, 2024).

A critical finding that extends beyond TPB’s original framework is how multiple identities intersect to create unique help-seeking experiences that cannot be understood by examining single identity categories or TPB dimensions alone. Students facing combined challenges, such as being international, financially constrained, and visa-precious, experience compounded barriers that create fundamentally different help-seeking contexts than students facing fewer simultaneous challenges. Intersectionality, therefore, reveals how structural inequalities become embedded in help-seeking behavior. Students’ temporary immigration status, for example, fundamentally shapes their perceived behavioural control. Many participants noted that their temporary status under a study permit placed them in an inferior or uncertain position compared to permanent residents or citizens. This experience of marginalization echoes the structural disparities outlined in the literature, where international students shoulder a disproportionate financial burden due to the funding models of Canadian higher education institutions (Calder et al., 2016; Usher & Balfour, 2023). The compounding nature of these barriers means that students who most need support are precisely those least able to access it effectively.

CONCLUSION

The study explores multifaceted factors influencing international students’ support-seeking behaviour in Canada during a period of significant policy volatility and systemic challenges. The study reveals complex interplay between students’ evaluation of benefits, cultural expectations and pressures, perceived ease or difficulty in accessing support, and intersecting

sociodemographic characteristics. These factors significantly shape help-seeking behaviour, providing crucial groundwork for understanding international student experiences in contemporary Canadian higher education. Our study also uncovers several new insights about international students' help-seeking behaviour. First, the introduction of strategic non-help-seeking as a conceptual framework challenges deficit narratives prevalent in international student literature. Rather than positioning international students as reluctant, culturally inhibited, or lacking awareness of available support, this framework recognizes their agency and rational decision making within constrained circumstances. This reframing shifts analytical focus from individual characteristics to systemic factors that make non-engagement the logical choice. Second, there is a profound cultural misalignment between institutional support systems and international students' needs, worldviews, and help-seeking frameworks. Third, help-seeking preferences are domain-specific and relationally strategic. Students demonstrate sophisticated matching of problems to appropriate support sources based on expertise, shared experience, and willingness to help, rather than simply preferring co-nationals or avoiding institutional services categorically. Fourth, intersecting identities create unique help-seeking contexts. Students facing multiple simultaneous challenges experience qualitatively different help-seeking realities than those examining single-identity categories would suggest, with those most in need of support being least able to access it effectively.

Our findings have significant implications for both theoretical understanding and practical support provision. Theoretically, this study extends TPB by demonstrating how its three dimensions, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control operate differently in cross-cultural contexts where students navigate dual cultural frameworks. We show that the TPB alone does not fully capture help-seeking among populations experiencing structural marginalization, visa precarity, and cultural displacement. Intersectionality emerges as a necessary additional dimension for understanding how multiple identities and constraints com-

pound to shape behavioural intentions and actual behaviour. Our findings acknowledge the valuable support services that Canadian institutions have developed for international students, many of which have demonstrated positive impact. Nonetheless, further efforts are needed to advance from standardized and one-size-fits-all approaches to more culturally responsive, structurally accessible support systems that recognize diverse and intersecting needs. As Canada introduces the New International Student Program to protect international students from exploitation within the system (Government of Canada, 2024), this study contributes timely evidence about vulnerabilities that international students endure and their adaptive coping strategies. Our findings align with Canadian universities' stated goals to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion.

To translate these findings into meaningful changes, institutions should develop multi-tiered, domain-specific support systems, such as academic enhancement programs providing discipline-specific support, or career development services tailored to international students' unique employment barriers, including workshops on credential recognition and Canadian workplace culture. Institutions should also hire multicultural counselling staff who share cultural backgrounds and linguistic capabilities with major international student populations; develop peer support models that leverage co-national connections, recognizing that students consistently prefer seeking help from those with shared experiences; and create culturally specific support groups (e.g., groups for South Asian students, Chinese students, African students) where participants can discuss challenges in culturally familiar frameworks without explaining cultural context. At the policy level, institutions should advocate flexible work authorization policies and create emergency financial assistance funds specifically for international students' cyclical challenges. By understanding international students' preferences, barriers, and strategic decision making around help-seeking, institutions can develop support systems that address their diverse needs, enhance access to essential resources,

and facilitate their overall integration and success, supporting academic and intellectual development and nurturing students' emotional, spiritual, and holistic well-being.

While this study provides valuable insights into international students' help-seeking behaviour in Canada, there remain several limitations. The sample primarily represented students from Asia and Africa, and our demographic data collection was limited. Future research should expand geographical and demographic representation by including perspectives from Latin American, European, Middle Eastern, and other under-represented regions to understand how help-seeking patterns vary across diverse international student populations. Additionally, systematic collection of comprehensive socio-demographic data would enable more nuanced understanding of intersecting factors. Future research should also employ longitudinal designs to track how help-seeking behaviour and perceptions of support systems evolve across students' academic journeys. This would reveal whether strategic non-help-seeking intensifies over time or whether students eventually develop effective help-seeking strategies. Comparative studies examining differences between undergraduate and graduate students, or between various institutional contexts (colleges versus universities), would also enrich understanding of how structural factors shape support-seeking patterns.

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