

Cross-Cultural Examination: The Interplay of Self-Esteem and Academic Help-Seeking Among British and Chinese Students

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ABSTRACT

Academic help-seeking is a key self-regulatory strategy, yet engagement varies with cultural and contextual influences, including self-esteem and study-abroad experience. This study examined associations between self-esteem and academic help-seeking among British and Chinese postgraduate students studying at home or abroad. Of 115 participants, 99 were included after data cleaning. Participants completed self-esteem, help-seeking attitudes, and help-source preference scales. Group comparisons and correlations showed that British students reported higher self-esteem and preferences for family support, whereas Chinese students studying abroad reported the lowest self-esteem and Chinese students studying at home were more likely to seek instructor help. Self-directed resources were preferred across groups. Self-esteem was positively associated with constructive help-seeking and negatively associated with perceived threat. Results also support culturally responsive interventions, including pre-departure orientation, peer mentoring, and accessible digital support. Future longitudinal and mixed-method research is recommended to examine causal pathways and contextual influences over time.

Keywords: Academic Help-Seeking, Cross-Cultural Differences, Higher Education, International Students, Self-Esteem

Cite this article as: Shih, H. Y. (2026). Cross-Cultural Examination: The Interplay of Self-Esteem and Academic Help-Seeking Among British and Chinese Students. *International Journal of Higher Education Pedagogies*, 7(2), 18-36. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijhep.v7i2.1424>

1. Introduction

Academic help-seeking is a key self-regulatory strategy in which students actively seek assistance to overcome academic challenges. This behaviour has been widely studied in education and psychology, with early research recognising it as a positive indicator of student engagement and problem-solving (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981, 1985). More recent studies emphasise its role in promoting academic achievement and persistence, particularly among higher education students (Fong et al., 2023; Karabenick, 2004; Martin-Arbo et al., 2021; Ryan & Shin, 2011). However, students' willingness to seek help is influenced by individual factors, with self-esteem being a critical predictor (Balwant, 2018; Bimerew & Arendse, 2024; Lawson & Lawson, 2020; Nadler, 1983; Newman, 2002).

Self-esteem, defined as an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth (Shavelson et al., 1976), is often shaped by cultural influences. Research indicates that individuals from individualistic cultures (e.g., the UK and the US), generally report higher self-esteem than those from collectivist cultures (e.g., China) (Cai et al., 2011; Heine et al., 1999; Lee et al., 2010; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). In individualistic societies, self-esteem is often derived from personal achievement and autonomy, while in collectivist societies, self-esteem is more relational and tied to maintaining harmony and meeting group expectations (Sedikides et al., 2003). Studies further suggest that East Asian individuals may demonstrate a form of modesty-driven self-evaluation, which can result in lower self-esteem scores on Western

measures (Cai et al., 2011). Understanding these differences is essential, as self-esteem plays a critical role in influencing behaviours like academic help-seeking, which require public acknowledgment of difficulties and perceived competence.

Academic help-seeking is particularly sensitive to cultural values, including independence in individualistic cultures and social harmony in collectivist contexts. Students from collectivist cultures often perceive seeking help, especially from teachers or unfamiliar peers, as a potential threat to their social image or a sign of incompetence (Lee & Ciftci, 2014). For example, research has shown that Chinese students are less likely to seek academic help compared to their Western counterparts due to concerns about “losing face” or being perceived as inadequate (Ning et al., 2022; Yan & Berliner, 2011). In contrast, students from individualistic cultures view help-seeking as a proactive and positive strategy for achieving academic success (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Zhao et al., 2005).

This cultural dichotomy is particularly evident among international students, who face additional barriers such as language difficulties, unfamiliar academic systems, and limited support networks while studying abroad (Heng, 2018; Volet & Ang, 1998). Additionally, international students often rely on in-group support networks, seeking help from peers who share their cultural background rather than from host-nation students or faculty (Page et al., 2019; Volet & Ang, 1998). Although in-group support provides a sense of comfort, it may limit students’ ability to engage fully with the academic resources available in their new environment (Hofstede, 2001; Straker, 2020). As Chinese students increasingly pursue higher education abroad, it becomes crucial to understand how their self-esteem and cultural background influence their help-seeking behaviours and whether their experiences studying abroad differ from those of domestic students.

While extensive research has explored academic help-seeking behaviours among Western undergraduate students (e.g., Karabenick, 2001, 2004), there remains a significant gap in studies focusing on postgraduate and international student populations, particularly within the UK. Moreover, limited research has examined the extent to which self-esteem influences academic help-seeking behaviours among Chinese students studying domestically, Chinese students studying abroad, and British students. While research highlights barriers that international students face (Bimerew & Arendse, 2024), few studies directly compare them to domestic UK students. Additionally, prior research suggests that Chinese students exhibit lower interpersonal openness than British students, which may influence their willingness to seek academic support (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). To address these gaps, this study aims to investigate how self-esteem influences academic help-seeking across these student groups.

1.1. Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to examine how self-esteem influences academic help-seeking behaviour among postgraduate students, with a particular focus on cross-cultural variations. By comparing Chinese and British students in different academic contexts, this study aims to determine whether cultural background or the experience of studying abroad plays a greater role in shaping academic help-seeking behaviours.

1.2. Main Research Question

“To what extent does self-esteem influence academic help-seeking behaviour among postgraduate students, and how do cultural and contextual factors mediate this relationship?”

Cultural issues will be analysed, along with self-esteem and help-seeking in the academic context.

1.3. Hypotheses

Based on the existing literature, the present study proposes four main hypotheses:

- H1: Chinese students will report lower self-esteem than British students.
- H2: Different groups will prefer different help-seeking sources (e.g., British students will be more likely to seek help from peers).
- H3: Higher self-esteem will be positively associated with a greater likelihood of seeking academic help.
- H4: The relationship between self-esteem and help-seeking behaviour will differ across the three groups.

2. Method

2.1. Design

The study adopted a quantitative research design and utilised an online survey, an approach recognised as efficient for collecting data from postgraduate populations (Bryman, 2016; Burns, 2000). A cross-sectional design was employed, which is commonly used in comparative cross-cultural research to examine differences in behavioural and psychological variables without requiring experimental manipulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The independent variable was nationality, classified into three levels: British students studying at home, Chinese students studying at home, and Chinese students studying abroad. The dependent variables included self-esteem, measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES, Rosenberg, 1965), and help-seeking behaviour, assessed through scales for attitudes toward help-seeking and preferences for help sources.

2.2. Participants

A total of 115 postgraduate students (53 males and 62 females) participated in the study. After data cleaning and the removal of incomplete responses or statistical outliers, the final sample consisted of 99 participants. Among them, 34 were British students studying at home, 33 were Chinese students studying at home, and 32 were Chinese students studying abroad in the UK. Participants were aged between 19 and 38 years ($M = 25.3$, $SD = 3.7$). Consistent with prior cross-cultural research (Volet & Ang, 1998), participants were recruited from psychology-related programmes to support comparability across educational contexts.

British and Chinese students studying in the UK were recruited through convenience sampling using postgraduate student mailing lists at a UK university. Chinese students studying at home were recruited through snowball sampling via personal networks at two Chinese universities. Snowball sampling is often used in cross-cultural studies to overcome recruitment challenges when targeting specific subgroups (Hofstede, 2001), yet it may also limit the representativeness and generalisability of the findings.

2.3. Instruments

The survey included three psychometric scales and a demographic questionnaire. The use of established or previously adapted instruments was intended to support comparability across groups. Because cross-cultural comparisons may be affected by language, cultural interpretation and response style, the scale scores were interpreted cautiously. Where Chinese versions were used, semantic equivalence was considered during translation and review; however, the study did not include full multi-group measurement invariance testing, so the findings should be treated as exploratory rather than definitive evidence of cultural differences in the underlying constructs.

2.3.1 Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure participants' global self-esteem, using a 4-point Likert scale (0 = strongly disagree to 3 = strongly agree). For Chinese participants, a validated Chinese version of the RSES was used to reduce potential language related measurement bias (Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Shen & Cai, 2008). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency in the present sample, with Cronbach's alpha values of .846 for the Chinese sample and .850 for the British sample. However, as formal multi-group measurement invariance testing was not conducted, cross-cultural mean differences in self-esteem should be interpreted carefully.

2.3.2 Attitudes Toward Help-Seeking Scale

The Attitudes Toward Help-Seeking Scale was adapted from Payakachat et al. (2013). It assessed students' perceptions of help-seeking through three subscales: perception of help-seeking as threatening, general attitudes toward help-seeking and perceived faculty helpfulness. Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). For participants completing the survey in Chinese, the items were translated using a forward-back translation procedure to support semantic equivalence (Meadows et al., 1997). The English version was first translated into Mandarin, then independently back-translated into English, and the original and back-translated versions were compared for meaning before the Mandarin version was finalised. The overall scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of .832 for the Chinese sample and .779 for the British sample. The general attitudes subscale, however, showed low reliability (Cronbach's alpha <.60) and was therefore excluded from inferential analyses rather than being treated as a reliable composite score. This decision was made to reduce measurement error, but it also narrows the scope of the help-seeking attitudes examined (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Future studies should report item-level diagnostics and consider additional reliability and validity checks when scales are used across languages.

2.3.3 Help-Seeking Source Scale

This scale was developed with reference to Melrose (2006), Kitsantas and Chow (2007), Mahasneh et al. (2012) and Atik and Yalçin (2011). It measured students' preferences for seeking academic help from different sources: instructors, peers, family members, and self-directed methods, such as online resources or class materials. Participants rated their likelihood of seeking help from each source using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = extremely unlikely to 7 = extremely likely). Given the increasing role of digital learning environments, self-directed sources were included to reflect current trends in academic help-seeking research (Puustinen & Rouet, 2009). For participants completing the survey in Chinese, the translated items followed the same forward-back translation approach used for the attitudes toward help-seeking measure. However, as formal measurement invariance testing was not

conducted, cross-cultural comparisons of help-seeking source preferences should be interpreted cautiously.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected via an online survey distributed by email. Online surveys are widely employed in cross-cultural research because they facilitate efficient data collection from geographically dispersed populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). British and Chinese students studying in the UK were recruited through university mailing lists and accessed the survey through an embedded link. Completion time was approximately 15 minutes. For Chinese students studying in China, the researcher initially contacted students at two Chinese universities, who subsequently disseminated the survey to their classmates through personal networks, following a snowball sampling approach.

2.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participants' demographic characteristics and mean scores for self-esteem, help-seeking source preferences, and attitudes toward help-seeking. One-way ANOVAs were used to test for significant group differences in self-esteem, help-seeking source preferences, and attitudes toward help-seeking across the three groups. Before conducting the ANOVAs, assumptions were checked. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values, which fell within the acceptable range of ± 1 (Pallant, 2020), and Levene's test was used to assess homogeneity of variance ($p > .05$). Tukey's HSD tests were used for post hoc comparisons following significant omnibus ANOVAs. Partial eta-squared values were calculated and reported as effect sizes for ANOVAs. Pearson's correlation analyses were conducted to examine relationships between self-esteem and help-seeking variables, including analyses conducted separately by group. Exact p-values and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for the reported correlations. Because several related ANOVAs and correlations were conducted, findings were interpreted cautiously, particularly for the subgroup correlations.

3. Results

3.1. H1: Group Differences in Self-Esteem with British Students Reporting Higher Self-Esteem than Chinese Students

A one-way ANOVA tested whether self-esteem differed across the three groups. There was a significant main effect of group on self-esteem $F(2, 96) = 20.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$. Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons indicated that Chinese students studying abroad ($M = 16.69, SD = 3.17$) reported significantly lower self-esteem than British students studying at home ($M = 21.88, SD = 3.51$), $p < .001$. Chinese students studying at home ($M = 18.12, SD = 3.60$) also scored significantly lower than British students, $p < .001$. However, the difference between Chinese students studying abroad and Chinese students studying at home was not statistically significant. Nevertheless, Chinese students studying abroad reported the lowest mean self-esteem among the three groups.

These findings support Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that British students reported higher self-esteem than Chinese students, while Chinese students studying abroad reported the lowest mean level of self-esteem. This pattern is consistent with previous research suggesting that students from more individualistic cultural contexts often report higher self-esteem on

Western self-report measures than students from more collectivist cultural contexts (Heine et al., 1999; Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

3.2. H2: Different Groups Will Prefer Different Sources of Help and Exhibit Different Attitudes toward Help-Seeking

For help-seeking sources, a series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted to test whether preferences for help-seeking sources differed among the three groups. Significant differences were found in participants' preferences for seeking help from instructors, $F(2, 96) = 19.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$, and family members, $F(2, 96) = 8.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$. The group difference for peer help-seeking was not statistically significant, $F(2, 96) = 2.80, p = .066, \eta^2 = .06$, and there was no significant group difference for self-directed help-seeking. As several help-seeking outcomes were examined, the non-significant peer finding was not interpreted as evidence of a reliable group difference.

Post-hoc comparisons indicated that Chinese students studying at home reported the highest preference for seeking help from instructors ($M = 6.33, SD = .78$), followed by British students ($M = 5.59, SD = 1.18$) and Chinese students studying abroad ($M = 4.63, SD = 1.29$). Chinese students studying at home were significantly more likely to seek instructor help than British students ($p < .01$) and Chinese students studying abroad ($p < .001$). For family help-seeking, British students reported the highest preference ($M = 3.82, SD = 1.51$), compared with Chinese students studying at home ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.37$) and Chinese students studying abroad ($M = 2.38, SD = 1.70$). British students were significantly more likely to seek help from family members than Chinese students studying at home ($p < .05$) and Chinese students studying abroad ($p < .05$).

There were no significant differences in preferences for peer or self-directed help across groups. However, self-directed help, such as online resources or class materials, emerged as the most frequently preferred source across all groups, consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of digital learning resources (Chu & Tsai, 2009; Puustinen & Rouet, 2009).

For attitudes toward help-seeking, significant differences were also observed in participants' perceptions of help-seeking as threatening, $F(2, 96) = 122.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .72$, and perceived faculty helpfulness, $F(2, 96) = 65.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .58$. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that Chinese students studying at home perceived help-seeking as significantly more threatening ($M = 3.88, SD = .47$), than British students ($M = 1.77, SD = .39, p < .001$) and Chinese students studying abroad ($M = 2.02, SD = .85, p < .01$). Chinese students studying at home also reported significantly lower perceived faculty helpfulness ($M = 2.99, SD = .45$) than British students ($M = 4.15, SD = .50$) and Chinese students studying abroad ($M = 4.01, SD = .38$). These results indicate that Chinese students studying at home perceived help-seeking as more threatening and faculty as less helpful than the other two groups. Overall, the results support Hypothesis 2, suggesting that nationality was associated with both help-seeking source preferences and attitudes toward help-seeking. Chinese students studying at home, in particular, showed the strongest preference for instructor help and the highest perceived threat associated with help-seeking, consistent with research on face-saving and modesty in collectivist cultures (Kurman, 2003).

3.3. H3: Self-Esteem Will be Positively Related to Academic Help-seeking Behaviour

Pearson's correlations were used to examine the association between self-esteem and help-seeking behaviour. Results indicated significant positive correlations between self-esteem and

preferences for seeking help from instructors, $r = .265$, 95% CI [.071, .439], $p = .008$; family members, $r = .263$, 95% CI [.069, .438], $p = .009$; and self-directed methods, $r = .266$, 95% CI [.072, .440], $p = .008$. Self-esteem was also negatively correlated with perceiving help-seeking as threatening, $r = -.227$, 95% CI [-.406, -.031], $p = .024$. These correlations were statistically significant, although the effect sizes were small. Because several related correlations were conducted, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. These findings support Hypothesis 3 and align with previous studies suggesting that higher self-esteem may be associated with lower perceived threat when seeking help (Karabenick, 2004; Karabenick & Knapp, 1991).

3.4. H4: The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Help-Seeking Will Vary Across the Three Groups

To examine whether the relationship between self-esteem and help-seeking differed across groups, separate Pearson's correlations were conducted for each group. Among Chinese students studying abroad, self-esteem was negatively correlated with perceiving help-seeking as threatening, $r = -.389$, 95% CI [-.650, -.047], $p = .028$. This indicates that Chinese students studying abroad with higher self-esteem were less likely to perceive help-seeking as threatening.

Among Chinese students studying at home, self-esteem was positively correlated with perceiving help-seeking as threatening, $r = .384$, 95% CI [.047, .643], $p = .027$. This suggests that, for this group, higher self-esteem was associated with stronger perceptions of help-seeking as threatening. Among British students, self-esteem was positively correlated with self-directed help-seeking, $r = .407$, 95% CI [.080, .655], $p = .017$, indicating that British students with higher self-esteem were more likely to rely on self-directed help-seeking strategies. Other group-specific correlations were not statistically significant.

These results suggest that the relationship between self-esteem and help-seeking is context-dependent. British students showed a pattern linked to self-directed help-seeking, whereas Chinese students showed different patterns depending on whether they were studying at home or abroad. For Chinese students studying at home, higher self-esteem was associated with greater perceived threat around help-seeking, which may reflect cultural concerns related to "face" and maintaining a positive academic image (Ning et al., 2022; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zheng, 2000). However, because these were subgroup analyses with relatively small group sizes, and because several correlations were examined, the findings should be interpreted cautiously as exploratory rather than definitive evidence of group-specific effects.

4. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between self-esteem and academic help-seeking behaviour among British and Chinese postgraduate students, focusing on the influence of cultural background and study-abroad experience. The findings indicate that self-esteem and help-seeking vary across cultural and study contexts, but the results should be interpreted cautiously due to the exploratory sample size, the cross-sectional design and the absence of formal measurement invariance testing.

4.1. Self-Esteem Differences Across Groups

The results showed that British students reported significantly higher self-esteem than both Chinese groups. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that individuals from more individualistic cultural contexts often report higher self-esteem than individuals from

more collectivist cultural contexts (Heine et al., 1999; Paterson et al., 2007; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). This pattern may reflect cultural differences in self-evaluation: British students may be more accustomed to educational and cultural norms that encourage self-expression, autonomy and positive self-evaluation, whereas Chinese students may be more influenced by modesty norms and self-critical forms of self-appraisal (Cai et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2010; Kurman, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

A notable finding was that Chinese students studying abroad reported the lowest mean self-esteem among the three groups. This contrasts with research suggesting that studying abroad can strengthen confidence through increased autonomy, language development and cross-cultural exposure (Benson et al., 2013). One possible explanation is that international students may face challenges adapting to a foreign academic and social environment, including unfamiliar academic expectations, language barriers and reduced local support networks (Bodycott, 2015; Heng, 2018). The short duration of many taught postgraduate programmes, such as one-year Master's programmes, may also limit students' opportunities to adapt fully to a new cultural and educational system, to overcome cultural barriers, develop linguistic competence, and gain self-confidence in academic contexts (Bodycott, 2015). Post-pandemic changes in higher education may also have further intensified these adjustment challenges, particularly where students experienced reduced opportunities for in-person learning, social interaction and integration (Asare et al., 2021; Chandra, 2021; Li & Lalani, 2020). Thus, interventions targeting short-term study-abroad students are important for supporting confidence, academic adjustment and adaptive help-seeking.

4.2. Preferences for Help-Seeking Sources and Attitudes Toward Help-Seeking

The results suggest that there are significant group differences in help-seeking source preferences and attitudes toward help-seeking. Chinese students studying at home were more likely to seek help from instructors compared to their British counterparts, reflecting the traditional emphasis in Chinese educational systems where instructors are often viewed as authoritative sources of academic knowledge and guidance (Shwalb & Sukemune, 1998). In contrast Chinese students studying abroad were less likely to seek help from instructors. This may reflect the challenges international students can experience when navigating an unfamiliar academic system, including language barriers, uncertainty about academic expectations and concerns about appearing less competent (Chen et al., 2020; Heng, 2018; Swain, 2014). Post-pandemic disruptions, including the shift to online learning, have further complicated this dynamic by limiting face-to-face interaction with instructors (Li & Lalani, 2020; Mok et al., 2021). This highlights the need for universities to implement additional support mechanisms, such as virtual office hours or one-on-one mentoring programmes, to make help-seeking more accessible for international students.

British students reported a stronger preference for seeking help from family members than both Chinese groups. This suggests that informal and personal support networks may play a more prominent role for British students in this sample (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Hofer et al., 2009). Although peer help-seeking was not statistically significant, this finding should not be overinterpreted. Self-directed help, such as using online resources or course materials, was commonly preferred across groups. This is consistent with research showing the growing importance of digital and self-directed academic support in higher education (Chu & Tsai, 2009; Dhawan, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020; Makara & Karabenick, 2013; Puustinen & Rouet, 2009).

Significant group differences were also found in attitudes toward help-seeking. Chinese students studying at home perceived help-seeking as more threatening than British students

and Chinese students studying abroad. This finding is consistent with the concept of face-saving, where asking for help may be perceived as exposing weakness, lack of competence or failure to manage academic challenges independently (Ning et al., 2022; Wang & Zhang, 2004; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Chinese students studying at home also reported lower perceived faculty helpfulness than the other two groups, which may reflect differences in teacher-student relationships, classroom interaction norms or expectations around academic support.

Overall, these findings suggest that help-seeking is shaped not only by cultural background, but also by study context. Universities should therefore avoid assuming that all international or Chinese students experience help-seeking in the same way. Support should be culturally responsive and clearly explained, with low-pressure opportunities for students to ask questions, access academic guidance and use digital resources. Peer mentoring, structured office hours and explicit discussion of help-seeking as a normal part of learning may help reduce perceived threat and make academic support more accessible.

4.3. Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Help-Seeking Behaviour

The results showed that self-esteem was positively correlated with preferences for help-seeking from instructors, family members, and self-directed sources. These associations were small but statistically significant. However, because several related correlations were conducted, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. This suggests that students with higher self-esteem were more willing to use constructive academic help-seeking strategies, including approaching instructors, drawing on family support and using independent resources. The positive relationship between self-esteem and instructor help-seeking is consistent with previous research suggesting that students with higher self-esteem may feel less threatened by asking for help and may be more likely to view help-seeking as a useful learning strategy rather than as a sign of weakness (Karabenick, 2004; Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Newman, 2002).

Self-esteem was also positively associated with self-directed help-seeking. This may indicate that students with higher self-esteem feel more confident using independent problem-solving strategies, such as consulting online resources or course materials. This finding is relevant in contemporary higher education, where students increasingly use digital and self-directed resources to manage academic challenges.

Self-esteem was not significantly related to peer help-seeking. This may suggest that peer help-seeking is shaped less by individual self-esteem and more by social and cultural factors, such as trust, in-group relationships, perceived peer competence or comfort interacting with classmates from similar or different cultural backgrounds (Ryan & Shim, 2012; Volet & Karabenick, 2006).

Finally, self-esteem was negatively correlated with perceiving help-seeking as threatening. This indicates that students with higher self-esteem were less likely to view seeking help as a risk to their competence or social standing. This finding supports previous research showing that self-esteem can act as a protective factor against negative self-judgment and external criticism (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991). However, because the study was cross-sectional, these associations should not be interpreted causally. The findings suggest that self-esteem is related to academic help-seeking, but they do not show whether higher self-esteem leads to more adaptive help-seeking, or whether positive help-seeking experiences may strengthen self-esteem over time.

4.4. Differences in the Self-Esteem–Help-Seeking Relationship Across Groups

The results indicated that the association between self-esteem and help-seeking behaviour varied by nationality and study context. Among British students, higher self-esteem was positively associated with self-directed help-seeking. This suggests that British students with higher self-esteem may have felt more confident relying on independent problem-solving strategies, such as using online resources, class materials or their own reasoning. This pattern is consistent with the value placed on autonomy and independent learning in many Western higher education contexts (Hofstede, 2001; Ryan & Shim, 2012; Tessler & Schwartz, 1972).

For Chinese students studying at home, higher self-esteem was positively associated with perceiving help-seeking as threatening. This suggests that, within this group, students with higher self-esteem may have been more concerned that asking for help could be seen as a sign of weakness or incompetence. This pattern is consistent with the consistency hypothesis, which suggests that individuals may avoid help-seeking when it threatens their preferred self-image (Tessler & Schwartz, 1972). It may also reflect cultural concerns around maintaining “face” and preserving a positive academic image (Kurman, 2003; Ning et al., 2022; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zheng, 2000). In this context, even students with higher self-esteem may avoid seeking help if they believe it could damage their reputation or social standing.

In contrast, among Chinese students studying abroad, higher self-esteem was negatively associated with perceiving help-seeking as threatening. This suggests that Chinese students abroad with higher self-esteem may have felt more comfortable seeking support and less likely to interpret help-seeking as a threat. This pattern may reflect exposure to a different academic environment in which help-seeking is more openly framed as a normal and proactive part of learning (Heng, 2018). It is also possible that students who adapt more successfully to the host academic culture develop greater self-efficacy and resilience, which may reduce reluctance to seek help (Benson et al., 2013).

Overall, these contrasting findings suggest that the self-esteem–help-seeking relationship may be context-dependent. British students showed a pattern linked to autonomous help-seeking, while Chinese students showed different patterns depending on whether they were studying at home or abroad. However, these subgroup findings should be interpreted cautiously because the sample sizes within each group were relatively small, the study was cross-sectional, and several correlations were examined. In addition, students may adapt to host-culture academic norms at different rates (Berry, 1997; Nguyen et al., 2019). Further research using larger samples and interaction-based regression models would be useful to test whether study context moderates the relationship between self-esteem and academic help-seeking.

5. Implications and Applications

The findings of this study provide key implications for enhancing student support systems within UK higher education, particularly in the context of increased internationalisation and post-pandemic challenges. The finding that Chinese students studying at home perceived help-seeking as more threatening highlights the need for culturally sensitive interventions. In cultural contexts where maintaining “face” and protecting academic image are important, help-seeking may be viewed as a threat to personal competence, self-worth or social image (Ning et al., 2022; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zheng, 2000). UK universities should address this stigma by offering informal, low-pressure help-seeking opportunities, such as peer mentoring programmes, small-group discussions, structured question opportunities and confidential one-to-one consultations with academic advisors or tutors. These approaches may help reduce students’ fears of judgement and make help-seeking feel safer, more private and more normalised within academic life.

For Chinese students transitioning to UK higher education, pre-departure orientation and induction programmes can help prepare students for an academic environment where proactive help-seeking is often encouraged. The finding that Chinese students studying abroad reported the lowest preference for instructor help suggests that international students may need clearer guidance on how and when to approach academic staff. Orientation workshops should introduce students to UK academic norms, including office hours, feedback discussions, tutor support and the expectation that asking for clarification is a constructive part of learning rather than a sign of weakness (Heng, 2018). These programmes should also encourage students to establish social support networks early, as peers and mentors can play a crucial role in helping students adapt to a new academic and cultural environment (Swain, 2014). Providing ongoing support beyond orientation, such as follow-up sessions and personalised academic guidance, is particularly important because adaptation to a new academic culture is often gradual (Berry, 1997; Bodycott, 2015).

Self-esteem was associated with students' willingness to seek help, suggesting that confidence-building interventions may support more constructive help-seeking behaviour. The positive correlations between self-esteem and seeking help from instructors, family members and self-directed sources indicate that students with higher self-esteem may be more likely to use available academic support and less likely to perceive help-seeking as threatening (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Tessler & Schwartz, 1972). Workshops focused on self-efficacy, academic resilience, feedback use and assessment confidence could help students develop a stronger sense of competence, which may encourage them to seek academic support when needed (Ryan & Shim, 2012). In the post-pandemic context, where concerns about student wellbeing and academic confidence have increased, these initiatives should be accompanied by clear signposting to wellbeing, counselling and pastoral support where appropriate (Chirikov et al., 2020).

The increased reliance on digital learning tools during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has also reshaped students' help-seeking behaviours. In this study, self-directed help, such as consulting online resources or course materials, was commonly preferred across groups. This suggests that universities should continue to develop accessible digital support services, including recorded guidance, online academic skills resources, frequently asked questions, virtual office hours, online tutoring and digital peer-support platforms (Cheng, 2025; Dhawan, 2020; Yang & Stefaniak, 2023). Providing curated online resources, such as instructional videos, interactive course materials and academic guides, can further enhance students' ability to access support independently (Chu & Tsai, 2009). Digital solutions may be particularly beneficial for students who feel hesitant to seek help face-to-face due to language barriers, cultural discomfort or fear of judgement. However, digital support should complement, rather than replace, interpersonal academic support.

The findings also suggest that cultural and contextual differences shape help-seeking behaviour in complex ways. Chinese students studying at home showed the strongest preference for instructor help, which may reflect the more teacher-centred and hierarchical nature of some Chinese educational contexts (Shwalb & Sukemune, 1998). However, Chinese students studying abroad showed a different help-seeking pattern, including lower preference for instructor help, suggesting that study context may influence how students perceive and use academic support. Faculty members in the UK should therefore be trained to recognise diverse help-seeking preferences and avoid treating international or Chinese students as a single homogeneous group. Inclusive teaching practices, clear expectations and supportive classroom environments can help normalise help-seeking and make students feel more comfortable reaching out for assistance (Makara & Karabenick, 2013).

Given the observed differences between Chinese students studying at home and those studying abroad, it is important to monitor how help-seeking attitudes evolve over time. Longitudinal research could provide valuable insight into whether students become more confident in using academic support as they gain experience in UK higher education. Mixed-method approaches, including interviews or focus groups, could also help uncover the psychological, cultural and social factors influencing students' decisions to seek help. Regular student feedback can inform continuous improvements to support services, ensuring that universities respond to emerging challenges in post-pandemic and internationalised higher education (Hampton et al., 2017; Li & Lalani, 2020).

In summary, UK universities should develop inclusive, flexible and culturally responsive support systems that meet the needs of both domestic and international students. Reducing help-seeking stigma, strengthening academic confidence, clarifying support pathways and expanding accessible digital resources can promote more adaptive help-seeking and support students' academic success and wellbeing.

6. Limitations and Recommendations

Although this study provides valuable insights into cross-cultural differences in self-esteem and academic help-seeking, several limitations should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships between self-esteem, cultural background, study context and help-seeking behaviour. The findings show associations between variables, but they cannot establish whether self-esteem influences help-seeking, whether help-seeking experiences influence self-esteem, or whether both are shaped by wider contextual factors. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how students' self-esteem and help-seeking behaviours change over time, particularly among international students adapting to a new academic and cultural environment (Berry, 1997; McWhorter & Castillo, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias, modesty norms and differences in response style. This is particularly relevant in cross-cultural research, where students from different cultural contexts may interpret rating scales or self-evaluative statements differently (Schmitt & Allik, 2005). To address this limitation, future research could incorporate mixed methods, such as qualitative interviews, focus groups, or observational studies, to gain deeper insights into students' lived experiences and behaviours. Combining quantitative surveys with qualitative data would help validate the findings and uncover contextual factors that may not be captured through self-reports alone.

Although established or adapted measures were used, formal measurement invariance testing was not conducted. Therefore, cross-cultural mean differences should be interpreted cautiously, as the study cannot confirm that the scales measured the same constructs in exactly the same way across groups. The help-seeking measures were adapted for the present study, and although forward-back translation was used to support semantic equivalence, the study did not include the full range of procedures expected in a larger cross-cultural validation study, such as cognitive interviewing or confirmatory factor analysis. The exclusion of the general attitudes toward help-seeking subscale due to low reliability also narrowed the scope of the attitudes examined. Future studies should conduct more detailed reliability and validity checks, including item-level diagnostics, measurement invariance testing and, where possible, confirmatory factor analysis.

The sample size, while sufficient for preliminary statistical analyses, may not generalise to all postgraduate students in the UK or China. The relatively small subgroup sizes and the use of

convenience and snowball sampling limit the generalisability of the findings. Recruiting participants from a broader range of universities, disciplines, and geographical regions would enhance the generalisability of the results. Future studies should also consider relevant covariates, such as age, gender, academic programme, English language confidence, length of stay abroad, previous international experience and acculturative stress. In the present study, these covariates were not included in a MANCOVA or regression model because the subgroup sizes were small and adding multiple covariates would have produced unstable estimates. Larger samples would allow researchers to use regression or MANCOVA models to test whether cultural background, study context and individual characteristics interact in shaping help-seeking behaviour.

Another important consideration is the post-COVID-19 context, which has significantly altered students' access to academic support and their preferred modes of help-seeking (Hampton et al., 2017; Dhawan, 2020; Asare et al., 2021). Digital learning and hybrid models have become integral to higher education, and future research should explore how the shift to online environments continues to shape help-seeking behaviour. Investigating how digital tools can complement traditional support systems is crucial, especially for international students who may face language and cultural barriers in face-to-face interactions.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay between self-esteem, cultural background, and academic help-seeking behaviour among British and Chinese postgraduate students. The findings showed significant group differences in self-esteem, help-seeking source preferences and attitudes toward help-seeking. British students reported higher self-esteem than both Chinese groups, while Chinese students studying abroad reported the lowest mean self-esteem. Chinese students studying at home showed the strongest preference for instructor help and perceived help-seeking as more threatening. British students reported a stronger preference for family support, while self-directed help was commonly preferred across groups.

The results emphasise that self-esteem was associated with students' willingness to seek help, with higher self-esteem associated with more constructive help-seeking and lower perceptions of threat. However, the relationship between self-esteem and help-seeking varied by cultural context, with Chinese students studying at home demonstrating behaviours consistent with the consistency hypothesis and those studying abroad aligning with the vulnerability hypothesis. These subgroup findings should be interpreted cautiously because of the small sample sizes and multiple comparisons, but they highlight the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors when designing interventions to promote effective help-seeking.

Overall, the study highlights the need for support systems that are clear, accessible and sensitive to students' different cultural and academic experiences. Reducing help-seeking stigma, strengthening academic confidence, clarifying routes to support and improving access to digital resources can help students seek support more effectively. Future longitudinal and mixed-method research should examine how study-abroad experiences, digital learning environments and adaptation to new academic cultures shape students' help-seeking behaviour over time.

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