Exploring Mental Health Challenges and Counseling Needs Among Distance Learners: A Case Study of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

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The Asian Conference on Psychology & the Behavioral Sciences 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This investigation examines the determinants of mental health outcomes among students enrolled at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) and evaluates their perceived necessity for psychological counseling services. Data collection involved 442 participants, comprising undergraduate and graduate students, using a detailed questionnaire aimed at evaluating psychological factors (for instance, stress levels and coping tactics), biological indicators (like the quality of sleep and physical health), and social conditions (such as support from family and financial stability). A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate significant predictors of mental health outcomes. The results indicated that psychological variables ($\beta = 0.319$, $p < 0.001$), biological variables ($\beta = 0.239$, $p < 0.001$), and social variables ($\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.001$) served as critical predictors, in addition to age, gender, and academic discipline, collectively elucidating 47.3% of the variance in mental health outcomes. The results emphasize the significance of focusing on psychological stress management and strengthening social support systems to enhance mental health outcomes. In light of the distinctive challenges encountered by distance learners, the investigation accentuates the necessity for accessible, customized counseling services that specifically address these psychological, biological, and social variables.

Keywords: distance learning, mental health, counseling services

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Introduction

In current higher education, distance learning has become a pivotal component, offering flexibility and accessibility to a diverse student population (Lagier, 2003; Kliucharev, 2020). This educational framework not only enables learners to pursue their academic ambitions and goals but does so without imposing the conventional constraints associated with geographical limitations or inflexible scheduling structures, thereby effectively fostering the involvement of individuals who are simultaneously navigating a multitude of professional commitments, familial duties, or other personal obligations that might otherwise obstruct their educational endeavors (AL-Mukhtar & Murad, 2012; Farajollahi & Zarifsanaee, 2012). However, despite the numerous benefits that online education offers, it is essential to recognize that this educational approach does pose its own unique and complex challenges, particularly in relation to the mental health and overall well-being of students participating in this mode of learning (Lister et al., 2021).

The significant transition that scholars encounter when shifting from traditional classroom settings to virtual education platforms can profoundly impact their psychological condition and emotional well-being in manners that may not be readily discernible (Akpınar, 2021; Lister et al., 2021). Research grounded in practical examinations indicates that individuals participating in online learning frequently contend with elevated stress levels, feelings of isolation, and heightened anxiety when juxtaposed with their peers in conventional on-campus education (Aditya, 2021). The conspicuous deficit of direct, face-to-face interaction with fellow students and instructors can evoke an emotional vacuum and considerable loneliness, which could yield detrimental effects on academic performance and the overall quality of life experienced by these learners (Akpınar, 2021). Furthermore, the autonomous nature of online education necessitates that students possess robust skills in time management and a substantial degree of self-motivation, which may inadvertently exacerbate stress for those who find it challenging to acclimate to this independent educational environment (Beilina & Baranova, 2022; Zhytova & Butuzova, 2023).

At Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), a distinguished institution in Thailand specializing in the provision of distance education, it is crucial to comprehend and address the mental health requirements of the student population, as this understanding is essential to the success and well-being of these learners. Given the increasing acknowledgment of mental health challenges faced by distance learners, it is noteworthy that there exists a pronounced deficiency of research specifically targeting this demographic within the framework of the Thai educational system. Consequently, this study is intentionally crafted with the objective of bridging this critical gap in the literature by thoroughly examining the mental health challenges encountered by students at STOU while concurrently identifying their specific counseling needs and preferences regarding available support services.

This research intends to explore the psychological, biological, and social determinants affecting mental health outcomes in distance learners, aiming to uncover critical findings that might guide the formulation of tailored support services suited to the individual needs of this cohort (Gamage & Herath, 2021; Mohan, 2023). Furthermore, gaining an understanding of students' preferences regarding various counseling methodologies, whether they entail face-to-face engagements or digital support options, will enable STOU to modify its services to more effectively address the specific requirements of its student body. This initiative primarily focuses on boosting the wellness and educational achievements of learners engaged

in distance education by applying tailored support approaches and solutions to their problems.

Method

Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the mental health challenges and counseling needs of students enrolled in distance learning programs at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). The research aimed to identify predictors of mental health outcomes and analyze students' preferences for counseling services.

Participants

The study included 442 students, comprising 79.2% undergraduate and 20.8% graduate students (19.2% master's and 1.6% doctoral). Participants were recruited using Taro Yamane's formula with a 95% confidence level, with an additional 20% to account for possible non-responses. Inclusion criteria required participants to be active students at STOU, aged 18 or older, and enrolled for at least two semesters.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed online through LINE, email, and QR codes. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections:
1. **Demographic Data**: Information on age, gender, marital status, education level, study duration, and income.
2. **Mental Health Factors**
   Psychological Factors: Stress levels were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, with coping mechanisms assessed by examining students' strategies for managing academic and personal challenges.
   Biological Factors: Sleep quality was evaluated through questions on sleep disturbances and restfulness, while physical health was assessed via self-reported general health and chronic conditions.
   Social Factors: Family support was measured by the quality and frequency of family interactions, and financial stability was evaluated through students' perceived ability to meet educational and living expenses.
3. **Counseling Needs and Preferences**: Items explored perceptions of counseling importance, demand levels, and preferences for service delivery modalities, timing, and formats.

Instrument Validation

The research instruments were adapted from validated sources, such as the Thai Mental Health Indicator (TMHI-55), and tailored for the context of STOU students. All items were reviewed by a panel of three experts in health sciences and psychology to ensure content validity. The experts assessed the instruments for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Necessary modifications, such as rephrasing ambiguous items and ensuring cultural appropriateness, were made based on their feedback.

To test reliability, the revised instruments were pilot tested with a diverse group of 30 STOU students. The pilot study confirmed internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.85 for all subscales. Additional feedback from pilot participants informed further refinements to simplify complex questions and improve the overall clarity and usability of the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated for demographic characteristics and counseling preferences. Stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify significant predictors of mental health outcomes, with R^2, adjusted R^2, and standardized beta coefficients reported to evaluate the explanatory power of the model. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 27, with significance levels set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Participant Demographics

The study surveyed 442 distance learners at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), including undergraduate (65.4%) and graduate students (34.6%). Most participants were female (61.8%), with an average age of 36.12 years (SD = 9.358).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	149	33.7
Female	273	61.8
LGBTQ+/Prefer not to disclose	20	4.5
Age Group		
< 20 years	5	1.1
21-30 years	133	30.1
31-40 years	170	38.5
41-50 years	101	22.9
51-60 years	28	6.3
> 60 years	5	1.1
Min: 19, Max: 65, Mean: 36.12, SD: 9.358		
Marital Status		
Single	245	55.4
Married	168	38
Widowed/Divorced/Separated	29	6.6
Education Level		
Bachelor's	350	79.2
Master's	85	19.2
Doctoral	7	1.6

Study Duration		
< 1 year	57	12.9
1-2 years	184	41.6
3-4 years	141	31.9
> 5 years	60	13.6
Monthly Income (THB)		
< 5,000	25	5.7
5,000-10,000	49	11.1
10,001-15,000	87	19.7
15,001-20,000	67	15.2
20,001-25,000	49	11.1
25,001-30,000	42	9.5
> 30,000	123	27.8

Predictors of Mental Health Outcomes

Stepwise multiple regression analysis identified psychological, biological, and social factors as significant predictors of mental health outcomes, collectively explaining 47.3% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.473$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.466$, SEE = 17.478, F = 65.080, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2
Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Mental Health Outcomes

Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	p-value
Psychological Factors	0.319	< 0.001
Biological Indicators	0.239	< 0.001
Social Variables	0.283	< 0.001

Counseling Preferences and Needs

Perceived Importance of Psychological Counseling

The survey revealed that most participants recognized the importance of psychological counseling services at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). Specifically, 55.0% rated the importance as "high," and 33.9% rated it as "very high." In contrast, 10.9% considered the importance "low," while only 0.2% saw no importance at all. These findings indicate that most distance learners acknowledge the necessity of counseling services to support their mental health and well-being.

Table 3
Importance of Psychological Counseling Services

Importance Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
None	1	0.2
Low	48	10.9
High	243	55.0
Very High	150	33.9
Total	442	100.0

Demand for Counseling Services

The demand for psychological counseling services was notably high among participants. Nearly half (48.9%) expressed a "high" need, and 36.4% rated their need as "very high." A smaller proportion (13.8%) indicated a "low" need, while only 0.9% reported no demand for such services. This data highlights a substantial unmet need for psychological support tailored to the challenges faced by distance learners.

Table 4
Demand for Psychological Counseling Services

Demand Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
None	4	0.9
Low	61	13.8
High	216	48.9
Very High	161	36.4
Total	442	100.0

Preferred Counseling Modalities

Participants expressed clear preferences for specific types of counseling. Individual counseling was the most favored, with 49.1% rating it "high," followed by face-to-face sessions (44.8%) and online counseling without video (42.5%). Chatbot-based counseling services were the least preferred, with 20.8% of respondents indicating no preference for this modality. These findings emphasize the importance of offering personalized and flexible counseling options that align with students' preferences.

Preferred Channels and Formats

The LINE application emerged as the most preferred communication channel for counseling services, selected by 28.9% of participants. This was followed by telephone (26.2%) and face-to-face meetings (19.6%). Additionally, 43.0% of respondents preferred scheduled appointments, while 16.5% indicated a preference for walk-in services. These results underline the importance of integrating technology and scheduling flexibility into counseling delivery systems.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the mental health challenges and counseling needs of distance learners at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), focusing on predictors of mental health outcomes and students' preferences for counseling services. The findings highlight key factors influencing mental health, significant unmet needs for counseling services, and actionable insights into preferred modalities, channels, and formats for psychological support.

Predictors of Mental Health Outcomes

The stepwise multiple regression analysis identified psychological, biological, and social factors as significant predictors of mental health outcomes, collectively explaining 47.3% of

the variance. Among these, psychological factors, including stress and coping mechanisms, had the strongest influence ($\beta = 0.319$, $p < 0.001$). These findings align with existing literature emphasizing the centrality of psychological resilience in maintaining mental health among students, especially in distance learning contexts where self-directed coping skills are critical (Mayor-Silva et al., 2021; Vizniuk & Polishchuk, 2020). The moderate contributions of biological ($\beta = 0.239$, $p < 0.001$) and social factors ($\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.001$) underscore the importance of holistic approaches that address sleep quality, physical health, and social support networks. These results support the integration of comprehensive support systems that combine mental, physical, and social interventions to enhance mental health outcomes (Peterson, 2013).

Counseling Needs and Preferences

The study revealed a widespread recognition of the importance of psychological counseling services, with 88.9% of participants rating the importance as "high" or "very high." Similarly, nearly 85.3% expressed a "high" or "very high" demand for such services, highlighting an urgent need to address psychological challenges faced by distance learners. These findings are consistent with the unique stressors reported by distance learners, such as isolation, academic pressure, and balancing personal responsibilities (Kampfe et al., 2006). Participants' preferences for counseling modalities provide valuable insights for service design. Individual counseling (49.1%) and face-to-face sessions (44.8%) were the most preferred, indicating a strong desire for personalized interactions. However, the popularity of online counseling without video (42.5%) and digital platforms like LINE (28.9%) reflects the importance of convenience and privacy, particularly in a distance-learning environment. These findings suggest that hybrid counseling models, which combine face-to-face and digital delivery formats, could address the diverse needs and preferences of students (Conn et al., 2009; Coll & Stewart, 2002).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for the design and implementation of counseling services at STOU and other distance-learning institutions (Hallford, 2012). The high demand for psychological counseling services, coupled with preferences for flexible formats and evening availability, calls for a restructuring of existing support systems. Incorporating digital platforms such as LINE and expanding service hours to include evenings and weekends could increase accessibility and utilization of counseling services. Moreover, integrating tailored interventions targeting the identified predictors of mental health outcomes, such as stress management programs and peer support groups could further enhance students' mental well-being.

The low preference for chatbot-based services (20.8%) highlights the need for caution in relying solely on automated solutions (Marcondes et al., 2019). While technology can enhance access, human interaction remains a critical component of effective psychological support. Institutions should consider balancing technological innovation with traditional counseling approaches to maximize engagement and effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of addressing mental health challenges among distance learners and highlights actionable strategies for designing accessible and effective

counseling services. By focusing on predictors of mental health outcomes and aligning services with students' preferences, institutions can foster a supportive environment that promotes the overall well-being of their learners.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the mental health challenges and counseling needs of distance learners, offering practical recommendations for service improvement. However, it is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between predictors and mental health outcomes. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to explore how these predictors evolve over time. Additionally, while this study focused on distance learners, expanding the sample to include staff and faculty could provide a broader understanding of mental health needs within the university community.

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