

The Role of Mental Health Literacy in Burnout and Psychological Distress among University Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the role-mental *health literacy on* burnout and psychological distress in college students through a systematic literature review approach. The increasing phenomenon of mental health problems among college students is a significant concern because it impacts their psychological well-being, academic performance, and quality of life. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method based on the PRISMA guidelines. Article searches were conducted through several online databases, namely PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, BASE, and Consensus for the period 2020–2025. The article selection process was carried out using inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in 10 articles that met the requirements for analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic synthesis techniques to identify key research patterns and themes. The results showed that mental *health literacy has* a significant relationship with academic burnout, psychological distress, and psychological help-seeking behavior in college students. Students with good mental health literacy tend to have more adaptive coping skills, better emotional regulation skills, and are more open to seeking professional help when experiencing psychological problems. Conversely, low/mental *health literacy is* associated with increased stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and academic burnout. This study concluded that mental *health literacy is* an important protective factor in maintaining students' mental health. These findings provide practical implications for universities to develop mental health promotion programs, psycho education, and campus-based counseling services to reduce the risk of burnout and psychological distress among students.

Keywords: Academic Burnout, Mental Health Literacy, Psychological Distress, Students, Systematic Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

Introduction: College students are a productive age group vulnerable to mental health problems due to academic pressure, social changes, achievement demands, and the adaptation process during higher education (Miles et al., 2021). In recent years, mental health issues in

college students have become a global concern due to the increasing prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression, academic burnout, and psychological distress in the college environment (Zeng et al., 2023). Psychological distress is a state of emotional discomfort characterized by feelings of pressure, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and an individual's inability to manage the pressures of daily life so that they can...influence students' academic and social functioning (Moghadam et al., 2022). The increase in psychological distress among students has become increasingly apparent since the COVID-19 pandemic due to changes in the learning system, social isolation, academic uncertainty, and economic pressures experienced by students (King et al., 2022). Students experiencing psychological distress tend to experience decreased concentration in learning, low academic motivation, impaired interpersonal relationships, and a decreased overall quality of life (Teixeira et al., 2025). These conditions indicate that student mental health is a critical issue in higher education and public health (Wei et al., 2021).

In Indonesia, the problem of psychological distress among college students has also increased in recent years (Fauzi & Suminar, 2023). Students face high academic pressure, demands for achievement, social competition, and concerns about future employment, all of which can trigger prolonged psychological stress (Moghadam et al., 2022). Furthermore, the stigma surrounding mental disorders remains high, leading students to often suppress their problems rather than seek professional help when experiencing psychological distress (Zhou et al., 2022). One factor suspected of being associated with psychological distress in college students is low mental health literacy (Miles et al., 2021). Mental health literacy is an individual's ability to understand mental health, recognize symptoms of mental disorders, understand risk factors, understand treatment options, and determine when to seek professional help (Wei et al., 2021). Individuals with high levels of mental health literacy tend to be better able to recognize symptoms of psychological distress early and have more positive help-seeking behaviors than individuals with low levels of literacy (Zeng et al., 2023).

In the context of higher education, mental health literacy is a crucial issue because students are in the transition phase to young adulthood, making them vulnerable to psychological distress (King et al., 2022). Students with poor mental health literacy often fail to distinguish between normal stress and psychological conditions requiring professional help (Fauzi & Suminar, 2023). Lack of knowledge about mental health services also makes students reluctant to seek help due to fear of social stigma from their peers (Zhou et al., 2022).

Untreated psychological distress can develop into more severe mental disorders such as major depression, anxiety disorders, and academic burnout (Moghadam et al., 2022). Research shows that students with high levels of psychological distress are at greater risk of declining academic performance and overall psychological well-being (Teixeira et al., 2025). Therefore, increasing mental health literacy is seen as a preventative strategy to help students recognize and manage psychological problems early (Kutcher et al., 2021).

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between mental health literacy and students' psychological well-being using a quantitative approach (Miles et al., 2021). The results showed that students with better mental health literacy tended to have lower levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological distress (Fauzi & Suminar, 2023). Other studies have also found that mental health literacy is associated with improved help-seeking behavior and students' coping skills with academic stress (Zhou et al., 2022). Although research on mental health literacy continues to grow, available research still shows variations in psychological

outcomes such as stress, academic burnout, emotional exhaustion, and anxiety, necessitating a more comprehensive synthesis (Teixeira et al., 2025). Some previous systematic reviews focused more on mental health interventions and help-seeking behavior than on the direct relationship between mental health literacy and psychological distress in students (Wei et al., 2021). Furthermore, few studies have integrated various forms of student psychological distress into a single systematic literature synthesis (Zeng et al., 2023).

The limitations of previous research indicate a research gap that requires further study, particularly regarding the relationship between mental health literacy and psychological distress in college students (Miles et al., 2021). A systematic literature review is essential to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how mental health literacy acts as a protective factor against psychological distress in college students (King et al., 2022). The results of this research synthesis can also assist higher education institutions in developing evidence-based mental health promotion programs (Kutcher et al., 2021). Based on this description, this study aims to synthesize research findings on the relationship between mental health literacy and psychological distress in college students through a systematic literature review approach (Fauzi & Suminar, 2023). The study focuses on identifying the relationship between mental health literacy and various forms of psychological distress, such as stress, anxiety, academic burnout, and emotional exhaustion in college students (Moghadam et al., 2022). This research is expected to contribute to theoretical in the development of student mental health studies as well as practical contributions to higher education institutions in designing strategies to improve mental health literacy and prevent psychological distress in students (Teixeira et al., 2025).

METHODS

1. Study Design

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review design with secondary data sources obtained from primary research results regarding the relationship between mental health literacy and psychological distress in college students. Articles were collected from several international scientific databases, namely PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Semantic Scholar with a publication range of articles between 2021 and 2025. The search strategy was carried out using a combination of Boolean keywords as follows: (“mental health literacy” OR “mental literacy”) AND (“psychological distress” OR “stress” OR “anxiety” OR “academic burnout” OR “emotional exhaustion”) AND (“college students” OR “university students” OR “undergraduate students”). The literature search process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency, reputability, and traceability of research results (Page et al., 2021). All articles obtained through the search process were then selected based on established inclusion and exclusion criteria.

2. Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study included articles published between 2021 and 2025, available in both English and Indonesian. The selected articles were primary research with quantitative designs, such as cross-sectional studies, correlational studies, cohort studies, and observational studies, examining the relationship between mental health literacy and psychological distress in college students. Included studies must involve

university student respondents and present quantitative data on psychological outcomes such as psychological distress, stress, anxiety, academic burnout, emotional exhaustion, and psychological well-being. Articles must also be full-text and published in nationally or internationally indexed scientific journals. Studies meeting these criteria are considered worthy of analysis because they contribute empirically to the understanding of the relationship between mental health literacy and students' psychological well-being.

3. Exclusion Criteria

Articles excluded from this study included studies with qualitative designs, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, literature reviews, editorial articles, conference abstracts, and commentary papers. Research that did not specifically involve students as the research population was also excluded from the analysis. Articles that solely discussed mental health literacy without measuring psychological distress outcomes were excluded from this review. Furthermore, studies that did not provide clear quantitative data, articles without full-text access, and duplicate articles from different databases were also excluded from the selection process. These exclusions were made to ensure that only articles with relevant methodological quality and aligned with the research objectives were further analyzed.

4. Operational Definition of Variables

Mental Health Literacy defined as an individual's ability to understand mental health, recognize symptoms of mental disorders, know risk factors, understand treatment options, and determine when professional help needs to be sought.

Psychological Distress defined as a condition of psychological pressure that includes stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and psychological well-being disorders experienced by students during higher education.

Academic Burnout is a condition of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion due to prolonged academic pressure.

Emotional Exhaustion describes the condition of emotional exhaustion due to academic burden and psycho social pressure experienced by students.

Help-Seeking Behavior is the behavior of individuals in seeking professional or social help when experiencing mental health problems.

Psychological Well-Being is a condition of individual psychological well-being that reflects the ability to manage emotions, social function, and quality of life positively.

5. Study Instruments

The article selection process was conducted using the PRISMA 2020 flowchart, which includes the identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion stages. The methodological quality of each article was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Checklist for Quantitative Studies, which includes an assessment of the clarity of the research objectives, the appropriateness of the research design, the validity of the instruments, the data analysis methods, and the relevance of the research results (Moola et al., 2020). Data extracted from each article included the researcher's name, year of publication, country of study, study design, sample size, mental health literacy measurement instrument, psychological distress outcome, and main research findings.

6. Data Analysis

Data from articles meeting the inclusion criteria were analyzed descriptively and narratively to identify patterns of association between mental health literacy and psychological distress in college students. The analysis was conducted by grouping research findings based on key outcomes such as psychological distress, stress, anxiety, academic burnout, emotional exhaustion, and psychological well-being. Findings from each study were compared to identify consistency of results, differences in respondent characteristics, and variations in relationships between variables. The synthesis process used a thematic narrative synthesis approach, emphasizing the integration of research findings based on key themes emerging from primary research data. This approach was used to generate evidence-based conclusions regarding the relationship between mental health literacy and college students' psychological well-being based on current research findings.

RESULT

1. Research Characteristics

A primary article search was conducted through five online databases: PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, BASE, and Consensus, resulting in a total of 420 articles. After deduplication, 265 unique articles remained. The title and abstract screening process yielded 56 articles relevant to the research topic. Eligibility was then assessed based on full text and quality using the CASP Checklist for Quantitative Studies (2018). The assessment revealed that 10 articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final review. The ten selected articles came from various countries, including Turkey, the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Finland, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Portugal, Spain, and Canada. The majority of the studies used cross-sectional studies, while several employed quasi-experimental, randomized controlled trials, and mixed methods studies. Sample sizes ranged from 24 to 5,216 respondents. The study population consisted primarily of university students, healthcare students, medical students, nursing students, and international students. All studies evaluated the relationship between mental health literacy and various psychological outcomes, such as psychological distress, academic burnout, anxiety, depression, stress, well-being, self-compassion, and help-seeking behavior. Overall, all articles showed consistent results, indicating that higher levels of mental health literacy were associated with better mental health outcomes in students.

2. The Relationship between Mental Health Literacy and Psychological Distress

Most studies show that mental health literacy is significantly associated with reduced psychological distress in college students. Research by Pehlivan et al. (2021) reported that more than half of college students experienced psychological distress and had low levels of mental health literacy. The study also showed that female students and students with a history of mental disorders had higher mental health literacy scores. Similar results were found by Gorczynski & Sims-Schouten (2020), who showed that students with better mental health literacy reported better self-compassion and psychological well-being. Furthermore, research by Zeng et al. (2023) showed that mental health literacy mediated the relationship between psychological distress and intention to seek

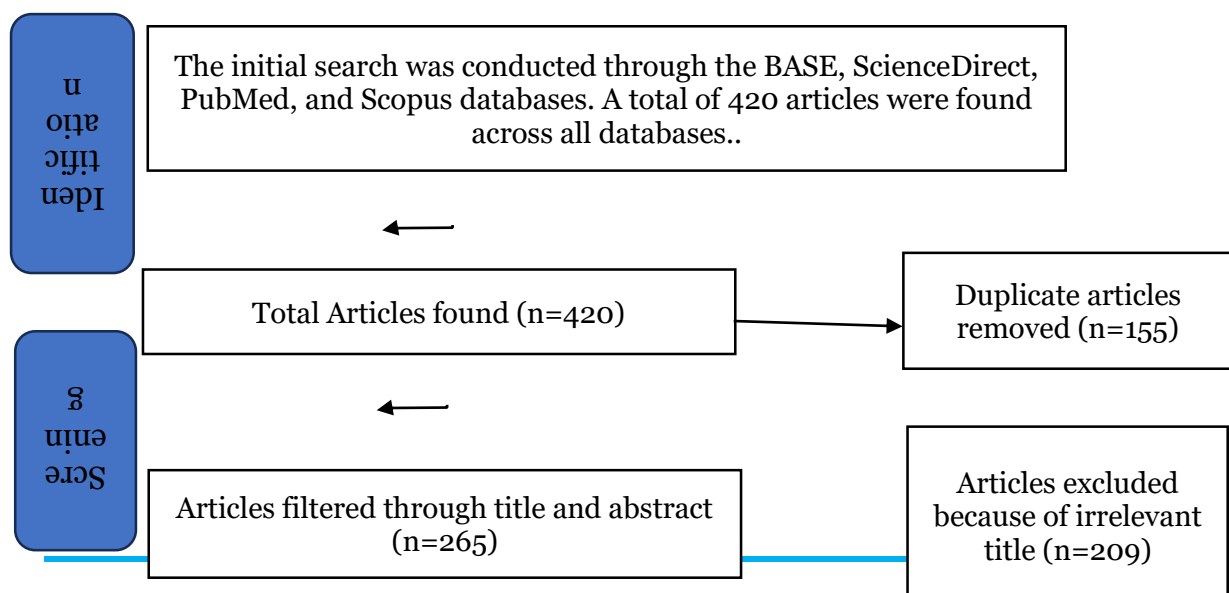
psychological help in international students in Singapore.

3. The Influence of Mental Health Literacy on Academic Burnout

Several studies have shown that low mental health literacy is associated with increased academic burnout in students. Research by Park et al. (2021) found that more than 60% of psychology graduate students experienced burnout and exhibited high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, research by Capdevila-Gaudens et al. (2021) on medical students in Spain showed a 37% prevalence of burnout, with higher levels of anxiety and depression than the general population. This study also emphasized the importance of mental health support within the university environment to reduce academic burnout. Meanwhile, a study by Kurki et al. (2021) showed that a digital mental health literacy program reduced stress levels in first-year medical students and increased positive attitudes toward seeking psychological help. These findings suggest that improving mental health literacy could be a preventative strategy in reducing academic burnout and emotional exhaustion in students.

4. The Influence of Mental Health Literacy on Wellbeing and Help-Seeking Behavior

Five studies in this review highlight the positive influence of mental health literacy on students' well-being and help-seeking behavior. Research by Baklola et al. (2024) showed that students with better mental health literacy were more likely to seek professional help when experiencing psychological problems. Similar results were found by Shi & Tian (2025), who showed that mental health literacy positively influenced attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. Anxiety and depression were also found to mediate this relationship. Furthermore, research by Teixeira et al. (2025) showed that mental health literacy was associated with academic satisfaction, resilience, and psychological well-being among health students in Portugal. Research by Kurki et al. (2021) also found that a digital mental health literacy program improved well-being of students and reduced emotional symptoms after the intervention. Overall, all studies in this category indicate that improving mental health literacy not only helps students recognize mental health issues earlier but also improves coping skills, help-seeking behavior, and psychological well-being..



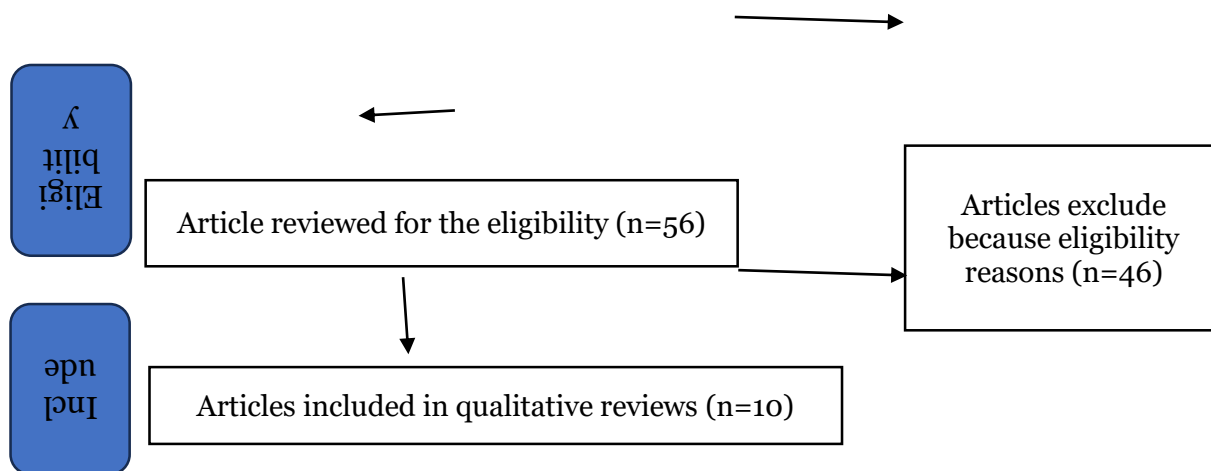


Table 1. Critical appraisal skills programme of the article

Primary Article	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Total
Pehlivan et al., (2021)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Gorczyński & Sims-Schouten, (2020)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Miles et al., (2020)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Kurki et al., (2021)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Capdevila-Gaudens et al., (2021)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Park et al., (2021)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Campbell et al., (2022)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Zeng et al., (2023)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Baklola et al., (2024)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Shi & Tian, (2025)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22

Question Description:

1. Does this research address a clear and focused issue?
2. Were research subjects recruited in an acceptable manner?
3. Is exposure measured accurately to minimize bias?
4. Are outcomes measured accurately to minimize bias?
5. Have the authors identified all important confounding factors?
6. Have these confounding factors been taken into account in the study design and/or analysis?
7. Was follow-up of research subjects carried out sufficiently comprehensively?
8. Is the follow-up period long enough to assess the research results?
9. Do you believe the results of this study?
10. Can the results of this study be applied to local populations?
11. Are the results of this study consistent with other available evidence?

Evaluation Criteria:

No (No) = 0

Unclear = 1

Yes = 2

Table 2. Researcher Characteristics

Researcher Name (Year)	Country	Number of Samples	P (Population)	I (Interest/ Exposure)	C (Comparison)	O (Outcome)	Research result
Pehlivan et al., (2021)	Türkiye	417 students	University students	Mental health literacy	There is no specific comparison	Psychological distress	College students have high levels of psychological distress and low mental health literacy. Female students and those with a history of mental disorders have higher MHL scores.
	United States of America	326 students	College students	Mental health literacy	Gender and history of mental diagnosis	Psychological distress, wellbeing	There is a positive relationship between mental health literacy and self-compassion. Female students have higher MHL scores than male students.
Gorczynski & Sims-Schouten, (2020)	China	2,078 students	College students	Mental health literacy	The levels of anxiety and depression are different	Anxiety, depression, help-seeking attitude	Mental health literacy has a positive effect on attitudes toward seeking psychological help. Anxiety and depression mediate this relationship.
	German	315 students	University students	Mental health literacy for depression	Health vs non-health students	Intention toward depression prevention	The level of mental health literacy is quite high and is related to the intention to take preventive measures against depression.
Miles et al., (2020)	Egypt	1,740 students	Egyptian undergraduates	Mental health literacy	Medical vs non-medical students	Help-seeking behavior	Medical students are better at recognizing mental disorders. Mental health literacy is significantly associated with professional help-seeking behavior.

	Singapore	281 international students	International university students	Mental health literacy	Different levels of psychological distress	Psychologic al distress, help-seeking intention	Mental health literacy mediates the relationship between psychological distress and intention to seek psychological help.
Kurki et al., (2021)	United Arab Emirates	295 nursing students	Nursing students	Mental health literacy	Academic education level	Help-seeking behavior, mental health knowledge	Final year students have higher mental health literacy scores than initial level students.
	Iran	20,571 respondents	Adults aged 18–65 years	Health literacy	Limited vs adequate literacy	Mental health problems	Low health literacy is significantly associated with mental health problems and higher psychological distress.
Capdevila-Gaudens et al., (2021)	Engl ish	300 students	UK university students	Mental health literacy	Gender and history of mental disorders	Psychologic al distress, wellbeing	Most students experience mild to severe psychological distress. Student mental health literacy is relatively low compared to other countries.
	Port ugal	24 students	Health students	Mental health literacy	Gender and mental health history	Distress, resilience, academic wellbeing	Mental health literacy is related to academic environment satisfaction and students' psychological well-being.

DISCUSSION

The Influence of Mental Health Literacy on Students' Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is one of the most common mental health problems experienced by students due to academic pressure, social changes, achievement demands, and the adaptation process during higher education. This condition is characterized by stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and decreased psychological well-being, which can impact students' academic performance. In recent years, mental health literacy has become a crucial factor in helping students recognize symptoms of mental disorders and determine appropriate treatment strategies. Mental health literacy encompasses an individual's ability to understand the symptoms of mental disorders, recognize risk factors, understand treatment options, and have the ability to seek professional help when needed. Students with good mental health literacy tend to have more effective coping skills, thereby reducing the risk of psychological distress (Gorczyński & Sims-Schouten, 2022). A synthesis of various studies indicates that low mental health literacy is associated with increased psychological distress in students. This finding is supported by research by Kurki et al. (2021a), which showed that improving mental health literacy through digital programs significantly reduced stress levels and improved well-being in medical students. The program helped students understand the symptoms of psychological distress and improved their ability to cope with academic pressure. Furthermore, research by Pehlivan et al. (2021) also showed that students with low levels of mental health literacy had higher levels of psychological distress than students with high levels of literacy. Similar results were found in research by Gorczyński & Sims-Schouten (2020), which showed that students with higher levels of mental health literacy had better psychological well-being and self-compassion than students with low levels of literacy. The study also explained that women tended to have higher mental health literacy scores than men. Overall, the findings from these studies indicate that increasing mental health literacy contributes to reduced psychological distress by improving students' abilities to adapt, cope, and manage their emotions when facing academic stress.

The Influence of Mental Health Literacy on Academic Burnout

Academic burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion that arises from prolonged academic pressure. Students experiencing burnout typically exhibit decreased motivation to learn, emotional exhaustion, impaired concentration, and decreased academic performance. In this context, mental health literacy is a crucial factor in helping students understand their psychological state and prevent academic burnout. Students with a good understanding of mental health are more likely to recognize burnout symptoms early and employ more adaptive coping strategies. The study results showed

that students with good mental health literacy were better able to manage academic stress and emotional distress. This finding is supported by Ning et al. (2022), who explained that low mental health literacy is one of the main obstacles for students in overcoming psychological problems and seeking professional help. Students who do not understand their mental health tend to have difficulty managing academic stress, making them more susceptible to burnout and emotional exhaustion. Research by Yang et al. (2024) also showed that students with a good level of mental health literacy were better able to utilize social support and professional services to cope with psychological distress. The study explained that mental health literacy plays a role in increasing perceptions of social support and reducing stigma towards professional psychological services. Overall, the results of the study showed that mental health literacy contributes to reducing academic burnout by increasing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and students' ability to determine appropriate coping strategies when facing academic demands.

The Influence of Mental Health Literacy on Students' Help-Seeking Behavior

Help-seeking behavior is a crucial component in addressing mental health issues in college students. However, many students still face barriers to seeking professional help due to stigma, lack of mental health knowledge, and fear of social judgment. In this context, mental health literacy is a crucial factor influencing students' decisions to seek psychological help. Research by Baklola et al. (2024) demonstrated a positive relationship between mental health literacy and help-seeking behavior in college students. Students with high levels of mental health literacy tended to be more open to using professional mental health services when experiencing emotional problems or psychological distress. The study also showed that females and non-medical students were more likely to seek mental health information than other groups. Similar results were found in a study (Kiliñç & Kendirkiran, 2025), which showed that students with higher levels of mental health literacy had more positive attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. The study also demonstrated that mental health education on campus can increase student awareness of the importance of mental health services. Furthermore, research by Zeng et al. (2023) showed that mental health literacy acts as a mediator between psychological distress and intention to seek psychological help in international students. These findings suggest that improving mental health literacy can help students understand the importance of seeking professional help before psychological conditions worsen. Research by Lui et al. (2022) also shows that low mental health literacy is one of the main barriers to students seeking professional help for depression and anxiety. Conversely, students with good mental health knowledge are more likely to receive social support and professional mental health services. Thus, mental health literacy not only plays a role in improving students' understanding of mental health but also helps improve access to and use of mental health services more effectively. High levels of psychological help-seeking behavior can help prevent worsening psychological distress and academic burnout in students.

Practical Implications and Development of Mental Health Literacy Programs in Higher Education

The synthesis of various studies shows that mental health literacy has a significant influence on psychological distress, academic burnout, and students' help-seeking behavior. These findings suggest that improving mental health literacy needs to be a key component of mental health policies in higher education. Education-based mental health promotion programs can help students understand their psychological state and improve their coping skills against academic stress. Practically, universities can develop various programs such as psychoeducation, mental health seminars, peer support groups, campus counseling, and mental health-based digital interventions to improve student mental health literacy. The use of digital platforms can also help expand student access to mental health information in a flexible and sustainable manner. Furthermore, lecturers and campus health workers need to be involved in the mental health education process to ensure optimal psychological support for students. From a student perspective, improving mental health literacy can strengthen self-awareness, emotional regulation, and resilience in the face of academic stress. This approach supports the concept of student-centered mental health care, which positions students as active individuals in maintaining their own mental health. Going forward, the development of digital technology-based mental health programs in higher education environments is expected to improve early detection, service access, and the quality of student mental health more effectively.

CONCLUSION

The results of this systematic literature review show that *mental health literacy* plays a significant role in burnout and psychological distress in college students. Students with good mental health literacy tend to be better able to recognize symptoms of psychological disorders, manage academic stress, use adaptive coping strategies, and seek professional help when experiencing mental health problems. Conversely, low levels of mental health literacy *mental health literacy* is associated with increased psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, academic burnout, and low psychological help-seeking behavior. The findings of this study reinforce the concept that *mental health literacy* is a protective factor that contributes to students' psychological well-being. In addition to influencing understanding of mental health, mental health literacy also plays a role in increasing students' self-awareness, resilience, emotional regulation, and adaptability when facing academic and social pressures in the university environment.

Theoretically, this research broadens the understanding of the relationship between *mental health literacy*, psychological distress, academic burnout, and *help-seeking behavior* in college students. The results of this study also strengthen the theory that increased knowledge and awareness of mental health can influence individual behavior in maintaining psychological health and accessing mental health services more

effectively.

Practically, the results of this study demonstrate the importance of developing campus-based mental health promotion programs through psychoeducation, mental health seminars, counseling services, peer support groups, and digital mental health interventions. Universities need to integrate mental health education into the academic environment as a preventative measure to reduce student burnout and psychological distress.

From a policy perspective, higher education institutions and health policymakers need to strengthen student mental health support systems by increasing access to psychological services, developing early detection programs, and providing more inclusive and accessible mental health services. Digital-based approaches can also be an effective strategy for expanding the reach of mental health education and services among students. However, this study has limitations because most of the articles reviewed used a digital design.*cross-sectional* Therefore, the causal relationship cannot be explained with certainty. Furthermore, variations in measurement instruments and respondent characteristics between studies may influence the synthesis results. Therefore, further research is recommended to use a longitudinal or experimental study design to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions to improve health.*mental health literacy* towards reducing burnout and psychological distress of students in more depth.

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