Enhancing Mental Health Literacy in University: Interactions Between Student Initiatives and Counsellor Strategies

Abstract

Aims: This research explores efforts to improve mental health literacy in university settings by examining the interaction between student initiatives and counselor strategies. Previous mental health research has tended to separate counselors and students as separate entities, leading to a lack of understanding and knowledge at the university level.

Method: Exploratory qualitative methodology was used with interviews, observations, documentation, and focus group discussions as data collection tools.

Findings: The results identified three types of student initiatives (self-initiative, peer-initiative, and collaborative initiative) and different counselor strategies (education and information, counseling and mentoring, and collaboration with stakeholders). The interaction between the two forms an educational and collaborative interaction pattern that promotes mental health development.

Conclusion: This study recommends three practical steps to improve students' understanding and awareness of mental health: focusing on mental health in new student orientation programs, developing collaborative mental health programs, and encouraging student involvement in developing mental health initiatives in the university environment.

Keywords: Self-Initiated, Mental Health, Peer-Initiated, Collaborative-Initiated, Educational Interaction, Collaborative Interaction, Empowerment Interaction

Introduction

The low level mental health literacy among college students raises significant concerns regarding the youths' wellbeing. The main factors contributing to this literacy low level are believed to be stigma, limited access to resources, and insufficient understanding of symptoms associated with mental health problems [1], [2]. Furthermore, insufficient literacy skills can be connected to disregard of counselors' and students' viewpoints in the endeavours to enhance mental health literacy [3], [4]. World Health Organization (WHO) conducted a survey across 19 universities in eight countries revealed that 31% of students were diagnosed with mental disorders, 35% reported having thoughts, plans, or attempts of suicide [5]. A recent study revealed that approximately 20% of students in Southeast Asia suffer from anxiety, stress, depression, and exhibit elevated suicide rates (Dessauvagie et al., 2022).The number of student suicides in Indonesia is on the rise, with a minimum of five reported cases in 2023 [7], [8]. Insufficient knowledge about mental health among students may have resulted in missed opportunities to prevent severe depression and suicide cases [9], [10]. Therefore, the primary barriers that should be addressed are the stigma and misconceptions surrounding the counselor's responsibilities, as well as the lack of collaboration in creating mental health education initiatives.

A review of previous studies identifies three trends in students' mental health literacy. An initial area of investigation has been the examination of different student literacy profiles and students' endeavors to seek assistance for mental health issues [11], [12]. In the interim, recent scholars have directed their attention toward evaluating the efficacy of diverse counseling approaches and interventions as remedial measures for fostering students' mental health literacy (Chen et al., 2023; Cormier et al., 2022; Shim et al., 2022). Furthermore, an additional line of research has been devoted to the development of dependable instruments for assessing students' mental health literacy to determine their knowledge and abilities regarding mental health [15], [16], [17]. These three research trends suggest that the interplays between students' initiatives and counselors' strategies have not been extensively investigated in the context of student mental health literacy.

In general, this study aims to fill the gap in previous research that has not comprehensively examined the relationship between student initiation and counselor strategies to improve student mental health literacy in the higher education setting. Consistent with this goal, three specific objectives were formulated: (1) identify how student initiation improves mental health literacy, (2) identify counselor strategies to improve student mental health literacy, and (3) formulate patterns of interaction between student initiation and counselor strategies to improve student mental health literacy. The three formulated specific aims are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how students behave in seeking, obtaining, and using mental health resources and how counselor strategies can meet students' mental health literacy needs.

The premise of this research is that the interplay between student initiative and counselor strategies is an important contributor to the successful improvement of student mental health literacy. Students who actively take the initiative to understand mental health are more likely to improve mental health literacy with counselor support and guidance. Additionally, counselor strategies that are focused and adaptable to students' mental health literacy needs will positively impact students' mental health understanding and skills, as well as foster confidence in managing their mental health concerns. Therefore, the chosen method will test the argument and answer the research objectives.

Participant and Methods

Settings and design

This study was conducted at the three preeminent Islamic state universities in Indonesia, which are under the jurisdiction of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. All three universities have a number of counsellors who provide guidance and counselling services to their students. Interviews with counsellors at the three universities revealed that the development of mental health literacy remains suboptimal due to various barriers and challenges, including policy, resource and stigma issues. It is noteworthy that despite the sub-optimal conditions for

improving mental health literacy, there are students enrolled at these universities who have taken initiatives to develop mental health literacy in academia. This fascinating phenomenon stimulates the researchers' interest to investigate the correlation between initiatives taken by students and strategies employed by counselors in enhancing students' mental health literacy.

This study utilized a qualitative exploratory research design to thoroughly investigate the experiential phenomena of research participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject being studied. Furthermore, qualitative research design permits a limited number of participants, as the focus lies on the thoroughness of the gathered information or data. Hence, the qualitative research design aligns with our research objectives to thoroughly investigate endeavors to enhance mental health literacy in universities, focusing on the viewpoints of students and counselors, while utilizing a restricted sample size.

Participants
The informants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on certain criteria. The criteria for the selected informants were (1) actively involved in mental health activities, (2) have experience with counseling services, (3) have an understanding of the development of mental health in higher education, (4) be willing to share experiences and concerns about mental health in higher education. The selected informants consisted of students (code I-S) and counselors (I-C) from the three selected universities. Eight students participated in the study, including six undergraduate and two graduate students. The six informants were professional counselors who were also lecturers. This dual role allows them to promote mental health literacy among students. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the data collected met the research objectives.

Data collections
The data were gathered through the utilization of interview, observation, and documentation techniques. Using open interview techniques, the researchers conducted an in-depth exploration of respondents' viewpoints and personal encounters regarding mental health literacy. Interviews were conducted using WhatsApp voice notes, chats, and calls. Examples of open-ended questions posed to student respondents during the interview include "Have you ever encountered mental health issues?" If yes, could you elaborate on that encounter?"; "What is your motivation for showing concern towards the psychological challenges faced by others?"; "In what ways do you actively participate in mental health awareness activities/communities on campus?"; "Can you explain how campus counselors react to mental health initiatives and discuss the factors that facilitate or impede their response?". Additionally, the interviewers asked the counselors questions such as "How do you employ techniques to increase students' understanding of mental health?" and "What methods do you employ to assist and empower students in becoming catalysts for enhancing mental health awareness?" The researchers additionally perform observations to gather data on the activities of both students and counselors. Observations are conducted directly and indirectly using video recording technology. Documents gathered comprise photos, electronic documents, videos, social media posts, and websites. These three techniques were employed interchangeably as a method of triangulating data.

Data analysis
Qualitative data analysis was conducted in four structured steps. First, data from interviews, observations, and documentation were carefully read and certain thematic patterns were identified, separating the elements of student literacy initiation and counselor strategies to develop mental health awareness. Second, an in-depth analysis was conducted by identifying nuances and key concepts that emerged from the respondents' narratives. Third, major themes were systematically organized to explore relationships and patterns of interaction. Fourth, through convergence and divergence approaches, student and counselor perspectives were Analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of how student initiation interactions and counselor strategies influence each other in improving mental health literacy on campus. These two approaches provide a more comprehensive and in-depth view of the phenomenon under study [18]. These four steps of data analysis help provide an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence student mental health literacy and lead to more effective intervention recommendations.

Findings
The current study investigates the interplay between student initiatives and counselor strategies to enhance students' mental health literacy. A relevant data were analyzed and classified into three sub-themes: student initiatives, counselor strategies, and the relationship between counselor strategies and student initiatives to improve mental health literacy.

Student's Initiating to Develop Mental Health Literacy
Student initiation in mental health literacy context refers to student active role in initiating or building efforts to develop mental health understanding, knowledge and skills. This study has found three categories of student initiation: self-initiated, peer initiated and collaborative initiated (see Table 1).

Table 1. Student-initiation to enhance mental health literacy

initiatives	Description	Impact
Self-initiated	Engaging in information retrieval, participating in training sessions, seminars, and seeking guidance from counselors.	Improve mental health self-literacy and ability to overcome psychological challenges.
Peer-initiated	Informants' awareness to share mental health experiences and knowledge with fellow students.	Increase self-awareness and literacy of mental health issues in university students in a broader scope
Collaborative-initiated	Engaging in cooperative efforts with counselors and other individuals to implement outreach initiatives	Enhanced literacy and awareness, program outreach, decreasing stigma about mental health

Based on Table 1, self-initiated as the first student initiation. Self-initiation refers to students' efforts to acquire mental health knowledge on their own. All student informants stated that self-initiation awareness stemmed from the mental health challenges they faced. Their personal experiences with mental health problems motivated them to seek comprehensive information about their mental health problems and effective coping mechanisms. For example, I-S1 shared her experiences with mental health challenges and how she sought information to cope with them.
"…I once experienced depression that made me unhappy, insecure, and uncomfortable interacting with others. My academic performance was low and my physical condition was unhealthy. Fortunately, I had the spirit to overcome these psychological problems by reading books on stress management, consulting campus counselors, and engaging in activities that produced immediate results…" (I-S1)
In line I-S1, I-S4 also experienced a lack of self-confidence that led to feelings of incompetence, social discomfort and negative self-talk. These feelings led to loneliness and unhappiness. She sought help from her academic advisor and faculty counselor, proactively gathering information to overcome these issues, and observed her peers who were struggling with mental health issues. Through this process, I-S4 increased her self-awareness and acquire skills to cope with mental health issues. In summary, students' self-initiation can develop from their experiences with mental health problems.
Table 1 also shows peer initiation as a student initiative to share mental health knowledge with others. In practice, peer initiation takes several forms: willingness to share information, willingness to share mental health problems, accompanying friends to seek help from counselors, and joining student mental health activist communities. As confirmation from I-S3, one of the student informants.
"…having mental health issues experience has made me more empathetic towards friends who are going through similar struggles. I am willing to provide a listening, offer support during tough times, and assist in finding resources such as on-campus counseling services…" (I-S3)
It has been observed that student peer initiatives can be realized through the development of digital media as a source of information and education to improve student mental health literacy (see Fig. 1) and peer counseling (see Fig. 2).
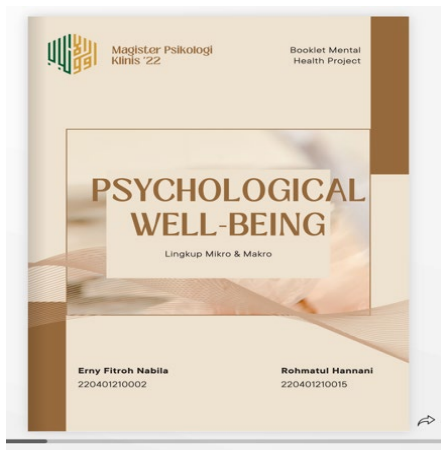
Figure I. Peer-initiated through digital media education

Figure 2: Student-initiated through peer-counseling activity.

In Table 1, the third form of collaboration-initiation refers to students' proactive involvement in improving their understanding of mental health through collaboration with campus counselors and off-campus mental health organizations, as explained by one of the informants, I-S5;

"In fact, joining a mental health community will not only increase our understanding of mental health, but also network with other activists who are concerned with improving mental health literacy on campus.

Webinar activities in collaboration with college counselors (Figure 3) and mental health enhancement training (Figure 4) are some forms of student-initiated collaboration.

Figur 3. Webinar activity	Figure 4. Mindful living training activity

Based on the data collected, it can be concluded that student self-initiation is the driving force behind the emergence of peer-initiated and collaborative-initiated. Student self-initiation has an impact on improving the mental health literacy of individual informants and fellow students and parties related to mental health development.

Counselors' Strategies to Improve Student's Mental Health Literacy

Counselor strategies to improve students' mental health literacy refer to counselors' efforts to increase students' understanding, awareness, and skills related to their mental health and the mental health of those around them. The study identified at least three types of counselor strategies. Table 2

summarizes the findings on counselor strategies of mental health literacy improvement strategies for students.

Table 2. Counselor strategies to improve student mental health literacy

Strategies	Methods	Impact
Information and Education	Providing mental health information and education through informal classes; seminars, training, counseling, etc.	Increased understanding, awareness and initiation of students involved in mental health programs
Counseling and mentoring	Provide counseling, consultation, and mentoring services individually and in groups to students who experience mental health problems.	students have self-awareness and understanding to overcome mental health problems
Collaboration	Collaborate with students through peer counseling, seminars, training, and social support.	Students engage in literacy activities. The audience for mental health education is broadening.

Table 2 demonstrates that providing information and education about mental health, symptoms of mental disorders, and how to overcome them is a counselor strategy. This strategy is implemented through various means such as informal class discussions, lectures given by counselors during new student orientation activities, seminars, counseling, and campaigns. Findings from interviews with several advisors (I-C1, I-C3, and I-C6) confirm that they provide mental health information and education to students during lectures, seminars, and new student orientation. According to the informants, these strategies have a preventive and curative effect on students' mental health problems.

Table 2 lists counseling and mentoring as remedial strategies to help students understand their problems and develop practical skills for managing mental health. Counseling services are effective in developing students' mental health awareness and skills, according to the results of interviews with counselor informants. For example, one informant (I-C5) is quoted as saying;

"...consultation and counseling services both individual and group are very effective to provide education on understanding and self-awareness of problems and effective problem solving to overcome them..." (I-C5)

In addition to counseling, counselors implement mentoring strategies after the counseling process ends. According to informants (I-C4), the mentoring strategy effectively monitors post-counseling progress and motivates students to maintain mental health and reduce stigma.

The collaborative strategy, as presented in Table 2, is the third strategy that is discussed. Collaboration strategies refer to the efforts made to enhance the students' mental health literacy by collaborating with various stakeholders, including the students themselves. The interviews findings conducted with counselor informants (I-C4, I-C7, and I-C8) revealed that engaging in collaboration with students enables counselors to effectively reach a larger number of students, thus increasing their mental health literacy. Collaborating with students also addresses limitations faced by counseling center staff, as explained in I-C6;

"...collaborating with students is beneficial in addressing the shortage of counselors for improving mental health education. Students who interested to become mental health volunteers will receive training as peer *counsellors..."* (I-C6)

Combining all three strategies, counselors can create a holistic approach to helping students overcome challenges and build a strong foundation for academic and personal success.

Interacting Student Initiation and Counseling Strategies

In the context mental health literacy in universities, the interplay between student initiative and counselor strategies is a dynamic interaction that impacts one another. Students are the recipients, while counselors are knowledgeable professionals in the mental health domain. This study discovered three types of connections - educational, collaborative, and empowering - as illustrated in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Interaction of student initiation and counselor strategies
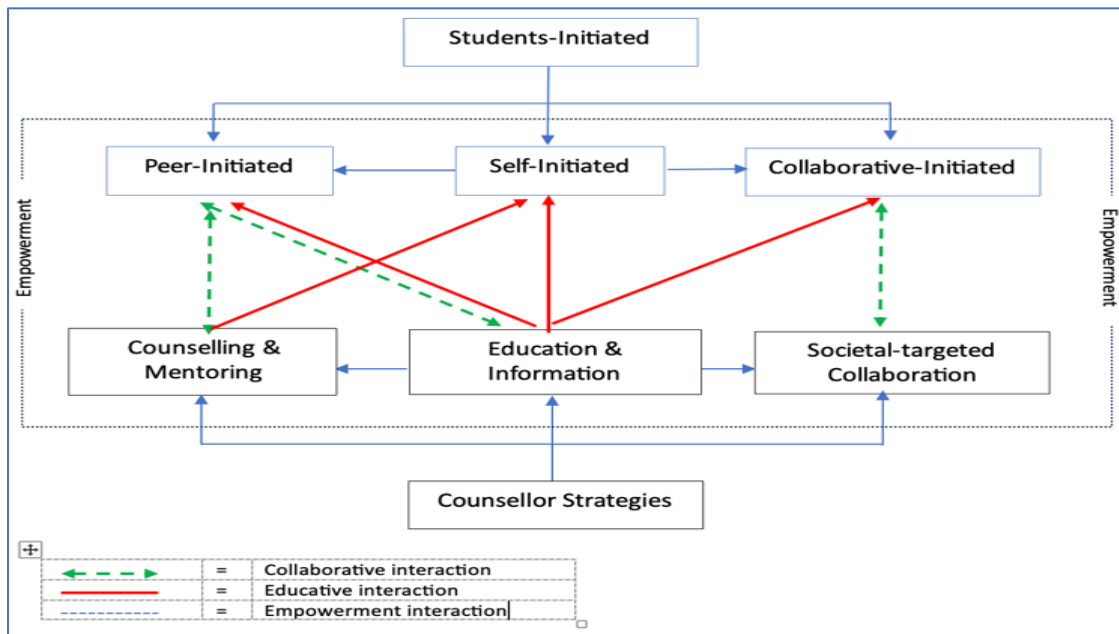

Chart 1 illustrates the interaction dynamics between student initiation and counselor strategies to develop mental health literacy in higher education, divided into three. The first is the educational interaction, which is the primary interaction and involves educating, understanding, and raising awareness about mental health (shown with red arrow lines). The educational interaction occurs when the counselor uses strategies to educate students about mental health issues. The counselor's strategies are relevant to students' needs to gain in-depth mental health knowledge and information. The educational interaction occurs during the counseling and mentoring process, activities in lecture classes, training, and seminars. One informant (I-C5) stated that efforts to improve mental health literacy in students need to be conducted continuously through various means ranging from providing information and counseling sessions to training and seminars.

On the other hand, Self-initiated students impact mental health understanding, fostering peer and collaborative initiatives, facilitating knowledge and understanding transformation, and promoting educational interaction.as stated by a student informant (I-S1);

"...My counselor motivated me to learn from different sources, attend seminars, and self-development trainings to gain insight into mental health. It's made me want to help my friends who are having mental health problems..." (I-S1)

Second, collaborative interaction refers to the cooperation between students and counselors in improving mental health literacy in the campus environment, represented by a green dotted line in Chart 1. This interaction is formed through activities like organizing seminars, training, providing support, peer counseling, and mentoring. Collaborative interaction can create an environment where both parties play an important role in developing a mental health climate on campus. According to counselor informants (I-C2, I-C5, I-C6), collaboration with students solves the problem of limited counselor resources for implementing mental health service programs on campus. Meanwhile, interviews with student informants (I-S4, I-S5, I-S7, and I-S8) revealed that collaboration between students and counselors in mental health programs positively impacts increasing their knowledge and awareness of mental health. Active participation in such activities provides opportunities for learning and mutual support, creating an environment that fosters a better understanding of mental health among students.

Third, the empowerment interaction is a mutually empowering interaction between students and counselors in improving mental health literacy. Chart 1 shows a blue dotted line around the interaction of student initiation and counselor strategy. In relation to this interaction, one of the counselors (I-C3) stated that all strategies used by counselors in developing mental health on campus are aimed at empowering students to become literacy agents for themselves and other students. The results of the interviews with counselor informants revealed that all forms of strategies used by counselors have an impact on the development of feelings of empowerment to develop mental health literacy on campus. One counselor (I-C3) stated;

"...We appreciate students' experiences and involvement in mental health literacy on campus. We position students as agents of mental health literacy for themselves and other students. We have different ways to help them deal with mental health issues..." (I-C3)

I feel better when I help my friends with their mental problems. My knowledge grows when I do mental health activities. Especially when the counselor allows me to be a peer counselor for others students...." (I-S5).

Thus, based on the research findings, it can be concluded that any student-initiated interaction with counselor strategies, whether educational or collaborative, results in mutually empowering interactions. For students, these interactions create confidence, motivate positive change, and support mental well-being, while for counselors, empowerment creates optimism for developing a mental health environment in higher education.

Discussion

This study highlights the dynamic interaction between student initiatives and counselor strategies in improving mental health literacy in a university setting. Student initiatives appear in three forms: self-initiated for self-understanding of mental health, peer-initiated to help fellow students, and collaborative-initiated to work with counselors and other institutions. Meanwhile, counselor strategies include education and information, counseling and mentoring, and student collaboration. This interaction of student initiatives and counselor strategies resulted in three patterns: educative, collaborative, and empowering. The findings indicate that improving mental health literacy must be comprehensively understood from the perspectives of students and counselors as a complementary process.

The study findings provide essential meaning in the mental health literacy context. The research findings have shown that the dynamic interaction between student initiation and counselor strategies positively impacts mental health literacy. An approach that involves students' initiation of information seeking, peer collaboration, and counselor support provides evidence that this holistic framework is efficacious in improving mental health understanding and awareness. In addition, the results of this study underscore the crucial role of counselors in providing guidance, technical support, and ongoing mentorship to students. The implications of these findings strengthen the argument for adopting a collaborative approach to mental health services on campus, making an essential contribution to the development of mental health practices and policy improvements on campus.

In the context of the theory of mental health literacy, the interplay between student initiation and counselor strategies plays a critical role in shaping the understanding and treatment of mental health issues in higher education [19]. During initiation, counselors play a crucial role in providing psychological support to students facing academic and social pressures [20], [21]. Counselors must implement appropriate strategies, such as providing information about mental health maintenance, identifying symptoms of problems, and providing resources for stress management [22]. Student initiation encourages students to engage and bring a new understanding of mental health to the campus environment. These interactions enrich students' mental health understanding and literacy, alert them to available counseling resources, and provide a consistent and in-depth flow of information.[23]. Conversely, counselors can use student initiation as an informal channel to reach a broader audience and raise awareness about the importance of mental health care. In this way, these interactions build a bridge between prevention efforts and formal support, creating a holistic and integrated mental health environment on campus.

In the social cognitive view, the dynamic interaction between student initiation and counselor strategies is a process of individuals learning and developing through observation, imitation, and reinforcement.. [24], [25]. Therefore, when college students take initiatives to improve their mental health, they are engaging in a process of self-regulation and actively seeking ways to improve their

overall well-being. [26]. Counselors play an essential role in this dynamic process, and they can empower students to develop practical coping skills and mental health self-management strategies through various strategies, including psychoeducation, consultation, and collaboration [27], [28]. In developing mental health literacy in higher education, a comprehensive approach through student-counselor interactions is not only educationally but also collaboratively and empowering [29], [30]. This social cognitive approach highlights the mutual influence of student initiation and counselor strategies in promoting mental health development on campus.

The results of this study are consistent with existing research. A number of previous studies, such as those conducted by Mantzios, [31], Yang et al., [32], Singh et al., (2022), Sui & Leng (2023) underscore the significance of fostering collaborative approaches among counselors and students, as well as among students themselves, in the cultivation of mental well-being within the college milieu. These three investigations are aligned with the findings of the present study, which supports the notion that the collaborative interplay between student agency and counselor strategies effectively contributes to the enhancement of student comprehension and consciousness regarding mental health. Through this comparison, our study makes an additional contribution to the understanding of this field, providing further insight into the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of mental health literacy interventions.

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the interaction between student initiation and counselor strategies in developing mental health literacy in higher education. The findings provide the basis for three action plans to improve mental health literacy. First, it is recommended that the student orientation program be strengthened by adding special sessions that provide detailed information about campus mental health resources. Second, it is necessary to develop collaborative programs involving students and counselors, such as workshops or seminars, to share experiences and build students' mental health literacy skills. This program can be integrated into the counseling curriculum or co-curricular activities. Third, support student initiatives to form support groups or organize awareness campaigns and mental health literacy activities on campus by facilitating infrastructure and providing resources, incentives, and regulations. These three steps can create a campus environment that supports students' mental health, with holistic involvement among students, peers, and counselors.

Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that active collaboration between students and counselors can have a significant positive impact not only as an instrument of mental health knowledge transformation, but also a feeling of empowerment in overcoming mental health challenges. This positive impact is an important factor for preventive and curative efforts to overcome problems and increase mental health literacy among students.

The use of the interaction perspective of student initiation and counselor strategies in this study provides insight into students' active efforts in developing mental health literacy. This enabled a deeper understanding of the motivations, barriers and challenges they faced in this process. In addition, the counselor strategies perspective enriched the research with an understanding of the professional role of counselors and identified best practices in providing recommendations to enhance the role of counselors in supporting college students' mental health.

This study contributes to the understanding of mental health literacy in the college environment, despite limitations in the number of informants and focus on specific colleges. The researcher suggests future studies involve more colleges with more complex characteristics, and involve greater participation from students and counselors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their interactions. This is expected to generate innovative ideas for the development of mental health literacy at the higher education level.