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PRIMARY RESEARCH

Decoding help-seeking attitudes: The mediating roles of distress and vulnerability under the moderation of psychological capital

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Abstract

The focus of this research was on the many different influences that affect how adolescents seek help with their mental health in Oman. This was achieved using the moderated mediation model wherein it helped to establish how mental health literacy, psychological distress, psychological vulnerability and these emotions also mediate the pathway toward a positive attitude toward seeking psychological support. In addition, this study examined how psychology capital is a moderating factor in the relationship between MHL, PD and PV and when these were together there is a direct relationship they have on psychological help-seeking attitudes. The research used 1,024 adolescents from middle and high schools in the Sultanate of Oman as the study sample and a structured survey with psychometric scales validated by other researchers. Analyses were conducted using path analysis and bootstrapping techniques, which indicated that MHL has a significantly positive effect on both PD and PV. The mediation analysis contended that PD and PV were mediators of the relationship of MHL and subsequently suggest a positive attitude toward seeking psychological help. Psychology capital was found to moderate the effects of PD and PV to increase the likelihood of developing an attitude toward seeking professional support from psychologists. This study demonstrates the need for schools to develop programs to assist in developing the literacy of MWL and to provide assistance to develop psychological resilience, therefore, bridging the gap between identifying an issue and not feeling comfortable or confident to seek help.

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INTRODUCTION

Health is a complete physical, mental or emotional, social wellbeing, and not simply the absence of disease or disability. Mental health forms an important part of your overall healthy state. Mental Health as a wellbeing status whereby individuals can achieve full potential, cope effectively with the stresses of everyday life; work productively and contribute back to their community. Oman is among those countries with the highest impact of mental health issue, because there are many living with a variety of mental illnesses. An estimated 630 million people around the world suffers from some form of mental health issue as of 2023 and an additional 32% of people will suffer with a mental illness at some point during their own lifetime (McGINTY, 2023). The willingness of a student to seek out professional help for their mental health concerns can be determined by the help seek attitude. This disposition is influenced by many factors, including culture's perception, family's support, and help perceived effectiveness.

Adolescents' mental health appears to be declining in terms of anxiety, depression, school stress, and suicide annually (Högberg, 2021). Although there is an increase

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in adolescents with anxiety, depression and higher levels of stress due to the Covid-19 pandemic during lockdown, due to the limitations of physical activity and reduced social contact together with increased use of the Internet (Steptoe & Frank, 2023). Psychological distress refers to the states of experiencing negative emotions including anxiety and depression (Ryu & Fan, 2023). Research has found that psychological distress is a significant predictor of adolescents' academic performance, the quality of their relationships, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Ay et al., 2022; Best et al., 2023; Van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). Therefore, there is a pressing need to learn about how adolescents develop psychological distress, so that we can identify ways to assist them better with reducing their psychological distress.

Mental health literacy defines the knowledge and belief systems that can aid with identifying, managing, or preventing mental illnesses (Jorm, 2019). Additionally, mental health literacy has been shown to have a close correlation to the mental health outcomes of an individual. The interest in how mental health literacy has an influence on the mental health levels as well as on happiness and contributes negatively to psychological distress is substantiated through numerous empirical studies (Moss et al., 2022). Improving the literacy of mental health is an effective intervention to improve mental health and therefore improving the level of mental health literacy can be considered an economical and effective public health approach in an attempt to prevent and reduce all forms of psychological distress. While the improvement of literacy regarding mental health can take place in a short timeframe through education, transferring that knowledge and expertise into actual positive outcomes for mental health is far more complex and takes a considerable amount of time to develop the ability to utilize the knowledge acquired.

Psychological vulnerability is defined as "a set of cognitive beliefs" that indicate you are reliant on the achievement of others or external validation for your self-esteem; psychological vulnerability involves how readily one can be affected by stress or damaging thoughts (Alumada, 2021). This can also be explained as an emotional state characterized by high risk perception and emotional safety. Although many people show varying degrees of psychological vulnerability, individuals who are extremely psychologically vulnerable are more likely to develop problems related to stress (Thoits, 1982). Studies have demonstrated a correlation between anxiety symptoms in adolescents and their psychological vulnerability; however, most of the time, this correlation is influenced by prior social/environmental circumstances (Day et al., 2016).

Psychological capital has been defined through research Loghman et al. (2023) as a collection of an individual's positive psychological attributes. Examples of these attributes are self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resiliency. These attributes have been shown to play a role in buffering individuals from experiencing the negative effects of excessive use of the internet (Li et al., 2023). In most cases, PsyCap serves to protect against the harmful effects of internet addiction through an individual's access to positive psychological resources. Higher levels of PsyCap provide a greater ability to manage the adverse effects of an internet addiction (Dóci et al., 2023). Higher levels of PsyCap provide an individual with the tools and abilities necessary to proactively manage their use of the internet and access help when needed; research supports the ability of Self-Efficacy and Resiliency to be significant contributors to the positive and effective management of internet usage (Karimi et al., 2023).

The significance of this research is addressing an important and urgent research gap in education in Oman by researching the internal mechanisms of students' experiences. Most of the research done looks at how prevalent the disorders are, but this research will also identify the reasons behind why and how students seek help. This research identify Psychological capital as a moderating factor and can therefore provide school counselors with a roadmap for creating interventions that will not only address students' current distress but also build internal resilience in students (Hughes et al., 2021). Ultimately, this research provides a roadmap for improving mental health literacy so that decreasing psychological vulnerability can create a generation that will not fear seeking help.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental Health Literacy and Psychological Distress

Mental health literacy refers to a person's knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that aid in recognizing, managing, or preventing them (Li et al., 2023). Empirical studies indicate that MHL is a strong predictor of an individual's mental well-being. Adolescent study findings illustrate that individuals with higher levels of MHL tend to report lower rates of psychological distress (Moss et al., 2022). For example, MHL has demonstrated a negative effect on psychological distress, meaning that when a student has an increased understanding of MHL, the level of their anxiety, depression, or stress tends to decrease. This association is typically explained through the knowledge-as-empowerment, which proposes that since literacy diminishes the fear of the unknown, students can also better label and manage their feelings before they result in more severe distress (Jin & Hahm, 2021).

Vanova et al. (2021) has demonstrated that there is a strong statistical link between levels of reading and writing ability (literacy) and self-reported symptoms of mental and emotional disorders. The findings indicate that when people become more literate, it provides them with an additional layer of protection from being subjected to the effects of psychological crises. A moderated mediation analysis conducted with adolescents shows that higher levels of mental health literacy are negatively associated with experiences of psychological distress (Zhang et al., 2023). This relationship exists because groups of people who are literate have the ability to use their psychological resilience to cope better with stressors in their lives. Therefore, among middle and high school students, when students have the capacity to identify a specific disorder (e.g., depression or social phobia), they have lower levels of chronic emotional distress than do those who do not possess that capacity. However, student populations reported an unexpected correlation between increasing levels of literacy and higher levels of reported psychological distress, suggesting that for some communities, being literate and knowledgeable regarding one's own symptoms or the stigma associated with severe mental illnesses may increase a student's ability to recognize symptoms and contribute to temporary emotional distress until they obtain long-term support services (Teixeira et al., 2022). Overall, while there may be some minor inconsistencies, the overwhelming body of literature, indicates that improvements in mental health literacy will typically result in improved emotional states as well as a notable decrease in levels of depression and anxiety. Thus;

H1: Mental health literacy has direct impact on psychological distress.

Mental Health Literacy and Psychological Vulnerability

Psychological vulnerability is described as a cognitive deficit or belief system that leads to a person being less capable of coping with stressful life related incidents (Riskind & Alloy, 2006). Research shows that mental health literacy is a major contributor to psychological vulnerability, as MHL serves as an important asset in developing and maintaining these fragile belief systems and / or reducing the impact of continued persistence of these beliefs. Having a high level of MHL decreases the likelihood of feeling helpless and/or "vulnerable" among high school and middle school students because MHL helps students understand the nature of psychological problems and the ways in which to deal with these problems. Research has shown that MHL acts as a protective factor against feelings of vulnerability (Kok & Low, 2019). Nogueira et al. (2023) found in their study of students that psychological vulnerability is a strong predictor of anxiety, but at the same time, high levels of MHL decreased the increase in anxiety symptoms over time. Such findings provide evidence that MHL alters an individual's perception of being vulnerable to injury.

Silveira et al. (2022), concluded that less knowledge about the "good" aspects of mental health leads to higher levels of cognitive fragility. Although some studies show that when it comes to the relationship between mental health literacy and vulnerability, the connection can be either moderate or insignificant depending on the specific aspect of literacy that has been measured, there are other studies that show a clear linear trend (Teixeira et al., 2022). For example, Singh et al. (2022) showed that although there was a clear trend, it also proved to be statistically

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non-significant for certain age groups when it came to the relationship between the ”knowledge” component of MHL and the psychological vulnerability. Jorm (2000), suggests that knowing information about mental health alone may not be enough to mitigate one's psychological vulnerabilities unless that information is complemented by positive attitudes and help-seeking capability. In summation, while the literature supports the idea that there is a direct relationship between MHL and vulnerability, it reiterates that the best means of lessening vulnerability is through ”literacy” that encompasses attitudes toward the mental health profession and self-care skills, in addition to factual knowledge of mental health. Thus;

H2: Mental health literacy has direct impact on psychological vulnerability.

Psychological Distress as Mediating Role

MHL contributes to the development of appropriate help-seeking attitudes but requires an emotional catalyst in order to translate the knowledge into an attitude of help-seeking behaviour (Sonmez et al., 2023). The MHL influences the emotional state of an individual psychological distress and subsequently influences the behavioural tendencies of an individual help-seeking. Steptoe and Frank (2023), MHL provides a foundation for the identification of symptoms, but it is the experience of psychological distress that links an individual from ”knowing about help-seeking” to ”intending to seek help”. Empirical studies show that there are both positive and negative effects of distress as a mediating variable between MHL and help-seeking behaviour. A substantial chained mediation, whereby MHL increased help-seeking attitudes through the process of allowing the students to identify their distress through the use of MHL and to lessen the stigma attached to their anxiety and depression by providing them with a rational explanation.

Van Zoonen and Sivunen (2022), examining the relationship between adolescent literacy and attitudes toward help-seeking, also found that despite being high in students with high levels of literacy, many students only perceived the need for help once their distress became obvious and could not be easily alleviated or resolved by themselves. Best et al. (2023), their distress serves as a motivator and reconfirms the resources available to them because of their high literacy. Additionally, literature also notes a ”distress paradox” where a student with extremely high levels of distress may experience diminished effectiveness of very high levels of literacy. Research has shown that students experiencing extreme levels of distress may feel ”overwhelmed” or ”paralyzed” resulting in a decrease in motivation to seek help, even though they possess very high levels of literacy (Ay et al., 2022). This indicates that the influence exerted by distress upon the information intermediaries of literacy is most strong at moderate levels of distress. At this moderate level of distress, the student uses the distress as an alert or indicator of needing help, instead of the distress acting as a barrier to seeking help. Overall, Dóci et al. (2023) has established that psychological distress is a very important emotional mediator that illustrates the movement of literate students toward professional assistance because they have the ability to accurately recognise their suffering as requiring external assistance. Thus;

H3: Psychological distress has mediating role between mental health literacy and psychological help-seeking attitudes.

Psychological Vulnerability as Mediating Role

A student's psychological vulnerability is a cognitive predisposition that makes them perceivably more likely to experience stress (stressors), typically due to an inability to acknowledge their limit (feeling out of control) and an unstable view of themselves (Silveira et al., 2022). In regard to seeking support from others, psychological vulnerability is the mechanism through which a student's psychosocial (i.e., cognitive appraisal) of their fragility influences how they will eventually perceive support from a professional, after they have developed their level of mental health literacy. Kutcher et al. (2016), show that MHL will not create a 'fact-based' understanding of mental health issues, but will alter or change how a student's cognitive appraisal of their own fragility is perceived. When students have MHL, their perception of vulnerability is lessened leading to an inclination of developing a more

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positive attitude regarding seeking help. Multiple studies that have utilized adolescent samples have verified that this mediated effect exists, with robust and significant findings. Warr (2020), indicate that psychological vulnerability serves as a gatekeeper variable. Students with low literacy levels tend to view their mental health conditions as being indicative of their long-lasting, pervasive personal weakness or 'tenderness' to experience danger.

On the other hand, students with increased levels of literacy have the capability to view their symptoms as away able mental/psychological or physical issues. Thus, this concept of viewing these issues in a more rational and empirical manner will create the shift from viewing such vulnerabilities as a flaw to seeing the act of receiving assistance by professionals as a positive action instead of as an acknowledgment of failure (Carter, 2009). In particular, many cultural expectations are focused on self-reliance, the reduction of perceived vulnerability through literacy will significantly increase the interest of students in seeking professional assistance. Nonetheless, the findings of some studies indicate that the mediating effects of vulnerability may vary depending on gender or be moderated (Teixeira et al., 2022). In addition, in several Middle Eastern cultures, the relationship between vulnerability and seeking assistance may be complicated; if the student experiences heightened vulnerability then the amount of fear of judgment by others may be magnified, which would defeat the positive influence of increased levels of literacy (Žilinskas & Lesinskienė, 2023). Despite the complexity of these relationships, the overall literature supports that the cognitive vulnerability of the student needs to be addressed in order for the knowledge of mental health information to translate into actual utilization of the counsel provided in schools. Thus;

H4: Psychological vulnerability has mediating role between mental health literacy and psychological help-seeking attitudes.

Psychological Capital as Moderating Role

Psychological capital consists of four positive psychological resources or "HERO" traits: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Li et al., 2023). PsyCap can be developed through educational interventions; therefore, it is an essential factor in educational policy in Oman. For example, PsyCap serves as a buffer, preventing individuals from withdrawing socially when experiencing high levels of distress.Students with high levels of PsyCap, psychological distress had a greater motivational impact on help-seeking because of the self-efficacy to believe that counseling would prove beneficial and the encouragement to pursue recovery (Horne, 2023). Additionally, for students with low levels of PsyCap, similar distress led to less positive attitudes toward seeking help due to the absence of resilience to endure the stigma or optimism regarding their future situations (Ammirati et al., 2015).

Individual students' psychological weaknesses produce a personal sense of "cognitive weakness", which makes students afraid to expose themselves to a professional counselor. In contrast, Ammirati et al. (2015), demonstrated that students possessing high PsyCap are able to significantly offset the adverse effects of this sense of vulnerability with their high levels of resilience and optimism. Therefore, students with high PsyCap will not experience the sense of being "vulnerable" as a reason for not seeking assistance, as their internal psychological resources allow them to understand that seeking assistance is still a self-efficacious decision, rather than an indication of failure (Žilinskas & Lesinskienė, 2023). Because of the strong cultural emphasis placed on resilience and family honor in most of the Middle East, the relative impact of PsyCap on Omani and other Middle Eastern students has been shown to be moderate to high in hybrid settings. Middles Eastern high scholars' PsyCap possessions will allow them to feel "internally empowered", diminishing the weight given to the perceived connection between their vulnerability and the stigmas related to receiving assistance from mental health professionals (Teixeira et al., 2022). Individuals with low mental health literacy tend to experience higher levels of anxiety. The higher levels of mental health literacy are related to greater recognition and understanding of anxiety by adolescents (Al-Shannaq & Aldalaykeh, 2023), which may assist in obtaining assistance when necessary. In addition, many researchers have indicated that developing mental health literacy in adolescents assists

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in minimizing specific modifiable psychological vulnerabilities, thus enhancing the overall health of adolescents (Pretorius et al., 2022; Žilinskas & Lesinskienė, 2023). Mental health literacy includes the fundamental component of knowledge and understanding of mental illness and the treatments, methods for reducing stigma towards those who seek help or treatment, as well as how to acquire and maintain mental health. Thus;

H5: Psychological capital has moderating role on psychological distress and psychological help-seeking attitudes.

H6: Psychological capital has moderating role on psychological vulnerability and psychological help-seeking attitudes.

The research study presented here has used the constructed regulated mediation model (Figure 1) how mental health literacy affects psychological distress; vulnerability; and potential mediation process.

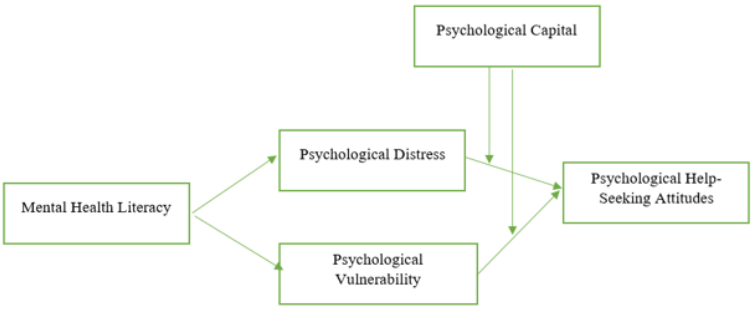


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Model

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedure

This study employed a cross-sectional design to explore the relationships among mental health literacy, psychological distress, vulnerability, and psychological help-seeking attitudes among adolescents residing in the Sultanate of Oman. Data collection occurred during the 2023/2024 academic year. A digital survey protocol including an informed consent form, socio-demographic questionnaire, and validated psychometric scales was developed. As the sample consisted of participants who were minors (i.e., middle school and high school students), digital informed consent was obtained from their parent/legal guardian before they gained access to the survey. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and participants were completely anonymous. Students were also advised that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To minimize common method bias, the dependent variable, psychological help-seeking attitudes, was displayed first followed by the independent variables, and all items on the survey were translated into Arabic using a back-translation method for clarity and cultural relevance.

Sampling and Sample Size

A total of 1024 students made up the study's final participant pool. Power analyses were performed using G*Power software to assess whether the study contained enough power to identify moderation and mediation effects. However, ensuring a larger sample size is desirable based on recent trends in adolescent epidemiological studies to decrease non-respondent bias and improve on the generalizability of the results. To achieve this greater sample, a multistage sampling strategy was employed where first a school was selected via simple random sampling for several areas located in Oman, and then students who had been selected under these conditions were recruited using convenience sampling to participate in the study. Students were required to: (1) currently be enrolled as a full time student in a middle/high school program (grades 7 - 12), (2) be aged 12 - 18 years old and (3) have provided parental consent as well as personal assent.

Demographics Profile

A diverse cross-section of Omani Youth was reflected in the demographic profile for the sample of 1,024 participants. Gender representation was balanced, and there

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was a great deal of representation in both middle school grades (7–9) and high school grades (10–12).

TABLE 1. Respondents Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	486	47.5%
	Female	538	52.5%
School Level	Middle School (Grades 7-9)	492	48.0%
	High School (Grades 10-12)	532	52.0%

Measurements

Five standardized scales were utilized to measure the study's variables, all of which were tailored for use within an Omani school environment and used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree"). Mental health literacy was assessed utilizing a 5 item scale that contained items such as "I feel very confident that I know where I can go for more information concerning mental illness" and "I feel very confident when I go to an appointment face-to-face for the purpose of receiving information regarding mental illness" (Horne, 2023). To measure psychological distress, the researchers used a scale with items dealing with symptoms of anxiety, distress, and depressed moods, including items such as "I felt as though I was using too much nervous energy" and "I was worried about situations where I would panic and embarrass myself". The psychologically vulnerable were using a 5 item scale with items such as "I require the approval of others before I feel good about myself" and "I sometimes tend to set my goals very high and then become disappointed in myself when I can't meet those goals." The students' psychological capital questionnaire as applied to an academic setting (Li et al., 2023). Examples of sample items include: "After I have had a setback in studying, I gain strength from the experience" (resilience) and "Through my studies, better times are coming" (optimism). Attitudes related to Help Seeking were measured using a 5-item scale. Items included in the scale included: "I have been in situations when I felt totally lost and would have appreciated talking to someone who knows about mental health", and "If a friend asked me for advice regarding their mental health, I would suggest talking to a mental health professional" (Horne, 2023).

Results and Analysis

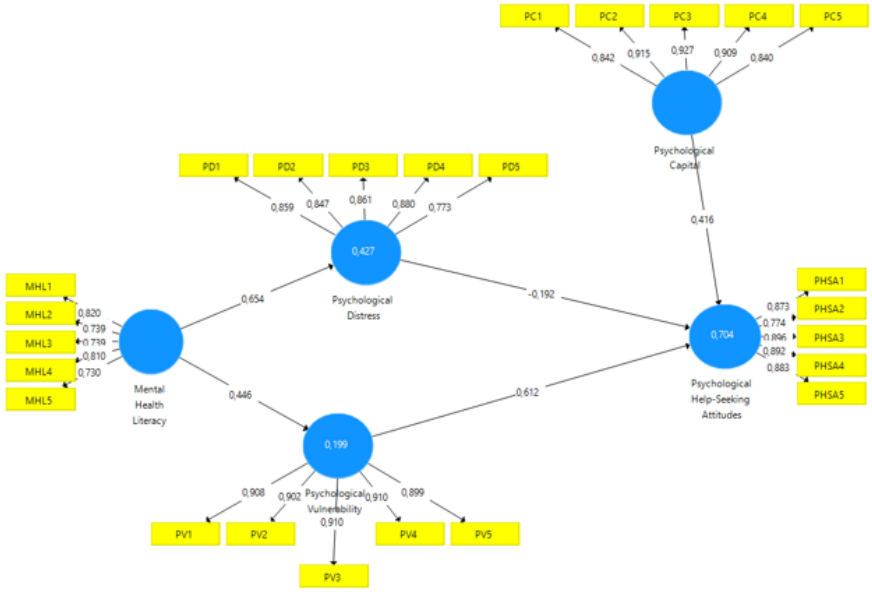


FIGURE 2. Measurement model

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Smart-PLS 3.0 evaluates responses based on two different stages; 1) measurement model analysis allows for reliability/validity. 2) Structural model evaluation allows for hypothesis testing.

Measurement Model Evaluation

Measurement model algorithm results representation of a model will be found in Figure 2. Therefore, it will depict how many independent variables are influencing all dependent variables.

Validity and Reliability

The factor loadings of each item as well as the Cronbach alpha values, composite reliability, and average variance extracted for those items may be found in Table 2. In order to measure a variable, you must have multiple questionnaire items. Items contribute to constructs based on their factor loading scores. Jordan et al. stated that a factor loading of less than 0.60 is viewed as unacceptable, a score higher than 0.60 is viewed as acceptable or average with a score higher than 0.70 being a sign of strong, well-defined constructs. Based on the factor loading from Table 2 for each of the variables, we would conclude that all factors for all of the variables comprised by this study were average based on our factor loading score (i.e., >0.60) so therefore these variable's factor loading scores were average for the factors defined in the study (Hair et al., 2021). Table 2 shows the Cronbach alpha for all variables used in this study. Based on the results, we can conclude that there was sufficient internal consistency based on the fact that the scores (i.e., >0.70) for all variables were greater than 0.70 in this study. We have also shown that the composite reliability score is satisfactory for each of the variables within this study because of the composite reliability scores being greater than 0.60 as indicated in Table 2 of this study. The average variance extracted scores for all four variables exceed an average of 0.50 as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Measurement model assessment

Variables	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Mental Health Literacy	MHL1	0.820	0.826	0.878	0.591
	MHL2	0.739			
	MHL3	0.739			
	MHL4	0.810			
	MHL5	0.730			
Psychological Distress	PD1	0.859	0.899	0.926	0.714
	PD2	0.847			
	PD3	0.861			
	PD4	0.880			
	PD5	0.773			
Psychological Vulnerability	PV1	0.908	0.945	0.958	0.820
	PV2	0.902			
	PV3	0.910			
	PV4	0.910			
	PV5	0.899			
Psychological Capital	PC1	0.842	0.932	0.949	0.788
	PC2	0.915			
	PC3	0.927			
	PC4	0.909			
	PC5	0.840			

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Cont.....

Variables	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes	PHSA1	0.873	0.915	0.937	0.748
	PHSA2	0.774			
	PHSA3	0.896			
	PHSA4	0.892			
	PHSA5	0.883			

HTMT and Discriminant Validity

Studies use a variety of different variables so researchers can determine discriminant validity as well as whether there is a relationship between two sets of variables. For example, discriminant validity can be determined by two techniques, the HTMT Ratio (Heterotrait-Monotrait) and the Fornell & Larcker Criterion, by looking at the statistical calculation of a relationship between all variables that have a different statistical comparison (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). A relationship is determined to exist if the HTMT ratio is less than 0.90 and the Fornell & Larcker criterion meets the requirements for discriminant validity as per the authors published methods, as demonstrated in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively. In Table 3, every value in each column of the HTMT ratio is greater than every other value. In Table 4, all the first value of the columns of the Fornell & Larcker ratios is greater than all subsequent values in each column of the table, indicating that the variables are indeed different from each other and have discriminant validity for the present study based on the discussed models.

TABLE 3. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	1	2	3	4	5
Mental Health Literacy	0.768				
Psychological Capital	0.469	0.888			
Psychological Distress	0.654	0.725	0.845		
Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes	0.471	0.752	0.529	0.865	
Psychological Vulnerability	0.446	0.776	0.685	0.804	0.906

Structural Model Evaluation

The second phase of the data analysis process involves investigating the structure model. The relationship between the proposed variables is confirmed using the PLS-SEM bootstrapping model, as represented in figure 3. The proposed hypotheses from this research were tested based on coefficient, *p*-values, t-statistics, and standard error. To assess the relationship of this research with a 95% corrected bootstrap (Hair et al., 2021).

TABLE 4. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	1	2	3	4	5
Mental Health Literacy					
Psychological Capital	0.525				
Psychological Distress	0.749	0.792			
Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes	0.539	0.811	0.583		
Psychological Vulnerability	0.491	0.824	0.742	0.819	

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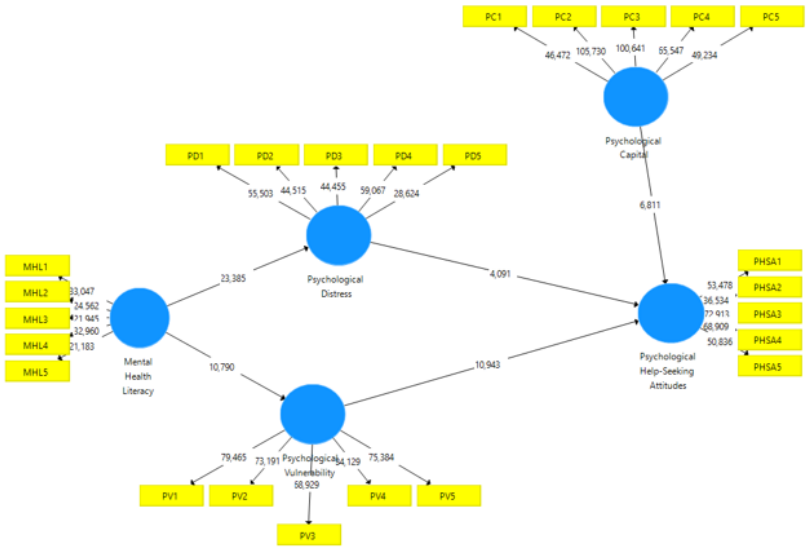


FIGURE 3. Structural model

Hypothesis Testing

To evaluate the hypotheses, PLS-SEM Bootstrapping was conducted. Bootstrapping was run on a model with a moderating effect related to the psychological capital. The results of Bootstrapping can be viewed in Tables 5 (direct and indirect relationships). The results confirm or reject the hypotheses based on *T*-Value and *p* Value (Hair et al., 2021).

According to the findings, mental health literacy was found to directly impact both psychological distress (β=0.654, p<0.001) and psychological vulnerability (β=0.446; p<0.001) and indicates that increasing levels of literacy lead to a greater understanding of their emotional state. In addition, the mediation analyses showed that psychological distress acts as a mediator in the relationship between literacy and help-seeking attitudes (β=-0.125, p<0.001), as does psychological vulnerability (β=0.273; p<0.001). Finally, the moderation analyses showed that psychological capital interacts with both mediating variables to produce a better outcome towards seeking help. The interaction between psychological capital and psychological distress (β=-0.238, p<0.001) is significant, as is the interaction with psychological vulnerability (β=-0.229; p=0.004).

TABLE 5. Direct and Indirect Analysis

Paths	β	Mean	SD	*T* Values	*p* Values
Mental Health Literacy -> Psychological Distress	0.654	0.657	0.028	23.385	0.000
Mental Health Literacy -> Psychological Vulnerability	0.446	0.447	0.041	10.790	0.000
Mental Health Literacy -> Psychological Distress -> Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes	-0.125	-0.123	0.029	4.263	0.000
Mental Health Literacy -> Psychological Vulnerability -> Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes	0.273	0.275	0.037	7.441	0.000
Psychological Capital * Psychological Distress -> Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes	-0.238	-0.239	0.033	7.257	0.000
Psychological Capital * Psychological Vulnerability -> Psychological Help-Seeking Attitudes	-0.229	-0.227	0.048	4.607	0.004

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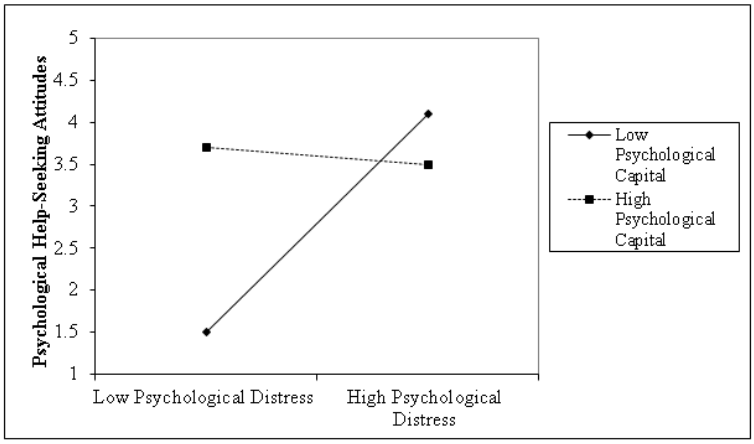


FIGURE 4. Moderating Role of Psychological Capital

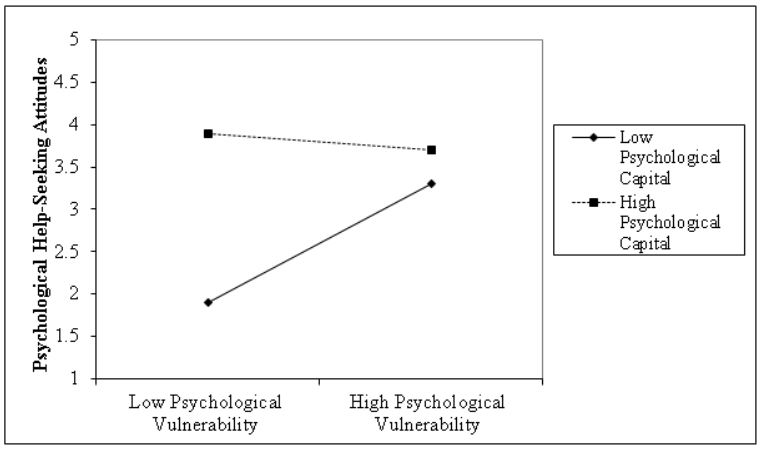


FIGURE 5. Moderating Role of Psychological Capital

DISCUSSION

This study has provided a thorough understanding of the mechanisms that determine psychological help-seeking attitudes of middle and high school students in Oman. The relationships of mental health literacy, emotional states and internal psychological resources were examined. Ultimately, while mental health literacy certainly plays an important role, it is not the only factor affecting students' willingness to seek mental health assistance. Instead, the way students filter information through feelings of distress, vulnerability and psychological capital, influence their willingness to seek psychological assistance.

Hypothesis 1, indicating that mental health literacy exerts a direct impact on psychological distress levels. Interestingly, however, the positive relationship between mental health literacy and psychological distress suggests that as Omani students develop greater mental health literacy, they will experience greater psychological distress. Horne (2023), which suggests that the greater a student's understanding of mental illness and its symptoms, the greater amount of distress he/she will experience. The increase in psychological distress may be viewed as a result of self-awareness for the student of the distress, which is evidenced by the student's ability to label a previously ignored feeling. The transition from unconscious to conscious psychological distress is a major step toward seeking help; thus, educational programs that increase students' understanding of emotional and psychological issues will be essential.

H2 was also confirmed, supporting mental health literacy directly influences psychological vulnerability. This indicates that how a student cognitively views mental health

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significantly affects their understanding of their own level of vulnerability. While mental health literacy gives students the tools to understand their mental health, the results support that mental health literacy may increase the student's awareness of how vulnerable they may be to their environmental stressors. Woloshyn and Savage (2018), also supported the notion that mental health literacy serves as a cognitive "mirror" for students, allowing them to identify their own psychological vulnerability, thus requiring the development of coping strategies and/or the seeking of support from others.

The results of the research demonstrate that psychological distress serves to significantly mediate the relationship that exists between mental health literacy and an individual's willingness to seek help from specialists. The identified negative mediating pathway demonstrates that although increasing awareness of the prevalence and severity of psychological distress through MHL also increases the likelihood of an individual's awareness of mental distress; however, when an individual experiences excessive psychological distress they will sometimes view seeking help from professionals as a barrier or a source of being "paralyzed". O'Neill et al. (2021), indicating that at least some groups of youth may experience emotional distress to a greater degree than they do understanding the cognitive reasons why they should seek help, resulting in the individual feeling as though it would be "overwhelming" and/or "ineffective" to seek help from a professional. In order to address this significant issue, it is important to develop a way for mental health services to be provided as "low-pressure" environments designed to mitigate the effects of psychological distress.

The findings of this study also indicate that psychological vulnerability mediates the relationship between distress and the willingness to seek help (H4). However, unlike distress, psychological vulnerability had a positive indirect effect on the willingness to seek help, indicating that literacy can help a student recognize his or her cognitive vulnerability and encourage a more proactive approach to seeking help. Al Omari et al. (2022), in which the recognition of one's own vulnerability serves as a rational basis for seeking professional assistance. The findings suggest that for Omani students, recognizing vulnerability may be a necessary step to turn an abstract knowledge of mental health into a strong desire to seek psychological support.

Psychological capital was found to play a significant moderating role in the relationship between distress and help-seeking behaviour, as well as the relationship between vulnerability and help-seeking behaviour. Students with high PsyCap are better equipped to take positive action to seek help when feeling distressed or vulnerable. Stone (2018), which posits that PsyCap provides the necessary "agentic power" to overcome stigma associated with seeking mental health care. Increasing the internal resilience (PsyCap) of students may be as important as increasing their knowledge of mental health issues in the Omani cultural context, allowing them to act on their mental health literacy even while experiencing emotional fragility.

Implications of Research for Mental Health Professional in Oman

The results of this research are a key takeaway for school counselors, psychologists, and educational decision makers working to improve the mental health situation of middle and high school students in Oman. Mental health literacy may be increased, but without also addressing emotional intermediary variables such as distress and vulnerability as well as the protective buffer of psychological capital, there will be limited benefit to students with respect to enhancing their mental health status. The increase of mental health literacy will result in students becoming increasingly aware of their own distress and vulnerability as well; therefore, mental health professionals should anticipate that after the implementation of literacy campaigns, there will likely be an initial rise in the number of reports students make regarding their experiences with symptoms of distress and vulnerability. Mental health professionals should view this initial increase in reports of distress and vulnerability as an indication of the success of the literacy campaign rather than a sign of personal failure; instead, mental health professionals should frame this heightened awareness as an important step in the process of recovery.

Given the evidence that Psychological Capital moderates

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the relationship between internal suffering and seeking help, interventions to strengthen this internal resource should be developed; therefore, creating specific school-based programs, such as resilience workshops and optimism training, will allow students to perceive their distress, or suffering, as something that can be managed. In strengthening a student's PsyCap, a professional would ensure that even when students experience psychological vulnerability, they have the "agentic strength" to navigate social stigma and seek professional help. Therefore, the professional should establish outreach programs specifically aimed at addressing "cognitive vulnerability" and re-contextualize professional help-seeking as a tool for success for high-achieving students, rather than as a last resort for those who are perceived to be weak (Horne, 2023). In Oman and similar cultures, the strong cultural values of self-reliance can be leveraged by emphasizing help-seeking as a behaviour that aligns with "Efficacy," a subcomponent of PsyCap; in this way, help-seeking is viewed as an act of proactive, strategic, and expert-level management.

To incorporate the learning and growth of mental health literacy and PsyCap into Oman's national educational system, the Ministry of Education, in conjunction with school leadership, needs to build awareness of the importance of having open conversations regarding psychological distress/vulnerability from an early age; helping to alleviate the "shock" of such occurrences during the demanding period of high school. Additionally, it is critical that teachers receive training on how to identify literate but distressed students who may be ready to ask for assistance, yet need reassurance from someone they trust as to what to do next. Ultimately, creating these policies will facilitate the transformation of Omani schools into settings where knowledge about mental health is complemented with the resilience to act upon it.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provides valuable insight about the connections between mental health literacy, distress, and help-seeking attitudes, but there are some limitations to this study's design. First, utilizing cross-sectional research may limit the ability to determine causality. Although the moderated mediation model provides a strong theoretical basis, this research was conducted at one point in time and therefore does not account for developmental differences that occur during the transition period from middle to high school. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs that will be able to follow a student's psychological capital in relation to their literacy over the course of multiple academic years and how these variables impact their help-seeking behaviours over time. Secondly, the study's sample was limited to students from specific governorates; therefore, it cannot capture the experiences of students living in remote or rural areas within the Sultanate. Future research could benefit from a mixed-methods research approach by collecting qualitative data (e.g., interviews or focus groups) to gather more in-depth and descriptive data about cultural differences associated with psychological vulnerability among youth in Oman. The family plays an important part in the student's decision-making process and their individual resilience to engage in professional counselling may be determined more by their parents' perceptions and expectations. Future investigations on the outcome of this model should examine the concepts of "family literacy" and "social capital" and how these concepts relate to the student's individual internal psychological resources as well as the interaction of the family environment with the student's capacity for resilience. Finally, the current study's results suggest that further studies should examine the impact of specific interventions on enhancing student psychological capital and compare the help-seeking attitudes of students attending public versus private schools. These comparisons may demonstrate socio-economic differences in the manner in which students process literacy and distress, and therefore provide more specific guidance on the direction of national mental health policy.

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that the interaction between mental health knowledge, anxiety, and vulnerability within Oman's schools produces positive attitudes towards seeking mental health treatment. Mental health knowledge

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positively influences attitudes towards seeking treatment for psychological distress by acting as a mediator via anxiety and vulnerability. Mental health knowledge enables students to identify their feelings and ultimately influences the likelihood that students will seek help through the formal mental health care system. The support provided by psychological capital (e.g., hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism) serves as a moderator for the emotional responses to anxiety and vulnerability and ultimately increases adolescent's likelihood of developing positive attitudes toward seeking treatment for their psychological health issues. This study helps clarify how mental health knowledge can motivate individuals to engage in treatment-seeking behaviours through the incorporation of intermediary moderators, showing that mental health knowledge cannot be acted on without the support of agentic resources.

This study broadens the existing theories on how adolescents seek help by presenting the specific thoughts and feelings that link Literacy with Distress and Vulnerability to Action. The findings offer valuable insights for mental health programs in Oman's middle and high schools. The results of this study challenge professionals and policymakers in Oman to improve the current mental health education curriculum and emphasize the need to develop students' individual psychological resources. Through teaching both resilience and hope along with literacy, school counsellors can provide students with tools to recognize their psychological needs and motivate them to pursue mental health services.

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