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ON ADULT LEARNERS' HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR**

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# Age and Gender's Interactive Effects on Adult Learners' Help-Seeking Behavior

Wan-Chen HSU<sup>1</sup>, Cheng-Yen WANG<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Despite intentions to promote lifelong learning in Taiwan, there are nevertheless many limitations and challenges to doing so. In constructing a lifelong learning society wherein individuals are guaranteed a right to learn, mechanisms must be established to ensure that such opportunities are accessible to all citizens. Hence, the promotion of lifelong learning in Taiwan requires extensive planning and policy intervention in conjunction with the provisioning of high-quality information and counseling services to ensure that an awareness of adult learning opportunities is achieved. Research has generally focused on the effect of gender and age on help-seeking behaviors among adult learners. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the interactive effects of age and gender differences on the help-seeking behaviors of adult learners. In this study, a total of 785 participants were enrolled in the Division of Continuing and Extension Education from southern Taiwan. The data collected were subsequently examined using descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis of variance. An interactive effect was identified between gender and age in relation to instrumental help-seeking and avoiding help-seeking. Furthermore, 21–39 years-old adult learners differed by gender in the form of help-seeking behavior. In adult learners from different age groups, instrumental help-seeking and avoiding help-seeking behaviors existed in different cycles by gender. Based on this study, suggestions for teachers, administrators, and future study were also provided.

*Keywords:* age, gender, interactive effect, help-seeking behavior, quantitative study, adult learning, continuing education.

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## Introduction

In Taiwan, the practice of a learning society begins in adult literacy education, then focuses on continued education and adult education. To review the promoting policy of lifelong learning, in 1998, the Ministry of Education announced the White book of “Toward a Learning Society” and stated fourteen approaches to building a lifelong learning society such as completing legal system of lifelong learning, building a lifelong learning integrated information network, popularizing the learning opportunities, and developing pluralistic patterns of higher education institutions. From then, there was a foundation to promote a learning society systematically in Taiwan.

In order to promote a learning society, Taiwan still needs to strengthen the effectiveness of adult education. According to a national report, 31% of adults aged below 64 years old were taking part in learning activities; this participation rate was less than that of European Union countries, whose average rate was 42%. Furthermore, 34.5% of female adults aged 25–64 and 30.5% of male adults and those in other age groups were attending learning activities; the participation rate was also higher in women than in men (The Ministry of Education and Statistics Department, 2016). The difference in the participation rates by gender and age could indicate gender (Mahalik, Good, & Enflar-Carlson, 2003; Nelson-Le Gall, 1986; Smith, 2004) and age effects (Nelson-Le Gall, 1986; Thacker & Stoner, 2012) on adult learning participation rates.

The lifelong learning process is full of many constraints and challenges (Wang, 2008). For those who easily find individual learning paths to participate in learning, lifelong learning is a simple matter; on the contrary, for some people, lifelong learning may be difficult to achieve (Plant & Turner, 2005). For example, the researchers have access to a 45 years-old adult learner who has been involved in more than one institution of lifelong learning courses. However, in one class, she could not integrate because her peers were almost all older than her, and they rarely had similar communication topics. This problem was not addressed before the end of the course, and this affected her willingness to continue to participate in the course. Since adult learners’ help-seeking behaviors are related to learning outcomes (Nelson-Le Gall, 1986), if individuals adopt appropriate help-seeking behaviors and smoothly overcome problems, adult participation in learning will help to promote the success of learning (Cross, 1981; Falasca, 2011).

As knowing adults’ help-seeking behaviors was helpful in carrying out lifelong learning, the topic was considered worthy of exploring. Understanding the help-seeking behaviors of adult learners could reduce the costs and mistakes of institutions and help the adult learners understand the early planning remedial measures to promote adult participation in learning (Thacker & Stoner, 2012). Therefore, the present study focuses on the effects of gender and age on adult learners’ help-seeking behavior.

## Literature Review

### *The meaning of help-seeking behavior*

Help-seeking involves related topics, and studies often focus on three themes: who seeks help, the role of social network in the help-seeking process, and the outcome of help-seeking (Gourash, 1978). The present study examined adult learners and tended to explore their help-seeking behaviors. The help-seeking behaviors of learners differ from normal life coping behaviors; individuals evaluate problems, available resources, and viable strategies, then take appropriate actions to reduce the pressure or fulfill learning needs (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981). In the traditional perspective, help-seeking was viewed as an individual's reliance on others and represented failed performance. Nelson-Le Gall (1986) transformed this negative perspective into a positive one and viewed help-seeking behaviors as practices adopted by an individual to deal with difficulties and solve problems. Help-seeking behaviors can be seen as an individual coping mechanism in the face of stress or distress.

Broadly speaking, help-seeking behavior refers to all ability to slow down personal tensions in the face of problems or distress events or to solve personal problems through response modes. The many such responses include the use of self-assistance (e.g., reading self-help books, ignored or denied) and of informal (e.g., seeking assistance from family or friends) or formal (e.g., recourse manner seek assistance) pipelines to psychological professional bodies to deal with problems (Chang & Chen, 2004). In help-seeking behaviors, individual behavior occurs due to an event or problem and feeling troubled by the potential need for resources, support, advice, or assistance to alleviate the pressure (Balogun, Oladipo, Ngoram, & Moradi, 2013; Gourash, 1978). In the course of acquiring assistance skills and strategies, this behavior also enables individuals to become more independent learners (Newman & Goldin, 1990).

### *The dimensions of help-seeking behavior*

Help-seeking behaviors are multidimensional. The concept of help-seeking behaviors in learners was first proposed by Nelson-Le Gall (1981). Nelson-Le Gall considered help-seeking an important coping skill used to help solve problem and pursue self-mastery and divided it into dimensions including instrumental and executive help-seeking. Instrumental help-seeking refers to seeking independent assistance by instrumental means to complete the work required, requesting clues (e.g., asking for a hint or interpretation) to solve the problem of personal mastery or increase capacity. Executive help-seeking refers to learners using others' assistance to mitigate the challenge of an assignment (e.g., directly asking for answers) (Pillai, 2010; Wimer & Levant, 2011).

Some studies extended Nelson-Le Gall's (1981) two dimensions to three (Peng & Cherng, 2005) and four dimensions (Arbreton, 1998; Butler, 1998; White, 2011). Peng and Cherng's (2005) help-seeking behavior was divided into three dimensions: instrumental help-seeking, executive help-seeking, and avoidance of help. Arbreton (1998) added excessive help-seeking as the fourth dimension referring to an individual initially relying on him or herself, never wanting to try to solve the problem, and not giving him or herself a chance to explore appropriate types of help to solve his or her problems before ultimately deciding to seek help. Help-seeking behavior of this type is similar to the implementation of the assistance, but the difference is that it is faster than executive help-seeking and actively seeking help from others and does not involve intention to face the problem situation alone.

While help-seeking is an important learning strategy positively associated with academic achievement, not every student uses it (Er, Kopcha, & Orey, 2015). Individuals may use positive and negative help-seeking behaviors to defuse individual pressure. In the present study, we used Nelson-Le Gall's (1981) two dimensions of help-seeking behavior—that is, instrumental and executive help-seeking—and added Peng and Cherng's (2005) avoidance of help as a third dimension.

### ***Impact of gender and age on help-seeking behavior***

Gender may have an impact on help-seeking behavior. Smith (2004) explored the characteristics of help-seeking behavior among community college freshmen and found that men were less likely to ask for student health center services than were women. However, some studies have found no gender effect on help-seeking behaviors (Liu & Huang, 2003; Thacker & Stoner, 2012).

In addition, people of different ages might have different help-seeking behaviors. Gourash (1978) found that age was a key factor affecting individuals' help-seeking behavior; the lower the age, the less likely one was to seek help from others. When younger people faced troubles, it was easier to use self-strategies to resolve their problems. Nelson-Le Gall (1986) referred to different sub-groups differing in help-seeking behavior—the young, the elderly, the poor, the disadvantaged racial or religious group—expected to have more help-seeking behavior.

Thacker and Stoner (2012) also pointed out that there were negative relationships between age and help-seeking behavior among subordinates; older subordinates sought less help from managers, probably because of their age; as they have confidence and higher self-esteem, their help-seeking behavior is less aggressive. Gender and age are more likely to present interactions. Syau (2002) found that, as grades increased, instrumental help scores lowered, and male senior high school students tended to demonstrate instrumental help-seeking behaviors while female students tended to adopt executive help-seeking behaviors.

Previous studies of the effects of gender and age on help-seeking behaviors have focused more on the experience of adolescents; few have focused on adult learners. As gender and age might have not only effects on learners' help-seeking behaviors but also an interaction with each other, the present study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Adult learners of different genders will have differing help-seeking behaviors.

H2: Adult learners of different ages will have differing help-seeking behaviors.

H3: There will be interaction effects between age and gender among adult learners.

## Research Method

### *Participants*

This study focuses on the effects of gender and age on learner help-seeking behavior among continuing education students. In the pilot study, we adopted purposive sampling and excluded incomplete responses. A total of 167 valid questionnaires were analyzed to test a help-seeking behavior scale. In the formal study, we adopted a cluster sampling method and excluded incomplete responses. A total of 785 valid questionnaires were analyzed. In terms of participants' background, the average respondent's age was 28.48 years, and there were 369 males (47%) and 416 female (53%) participants.

### *Instrument*

The measurement of the current study was a revised version of the help-seeking behavior scale from Nelson-Le Gall (1981), Arbretton (1998), Butler (1998), and Peng and Cherng (2005). The survey instrument comprised basic information such as gender and age in addition to the Adult Learners' Help-Seeking Behavior Questionnaire. For the pilot study, item and exploratory factor analyses were performed on responses from 167 participants to gauge their help-seeking behavior. T-tests were used to compare responses from the upper and lower 27<sup>th</sup> percentiles for each item; items for which  $t$  was not significant ( $p > .05$ ) were discarded. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was also calculated between each item and its subscale, thereby eliminating items for which  $r$  was not significant ( $p > .05$ ) or less than .2.

In terms of the Adult Learners' Help-Seeking Behavior scale, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin sampling adaptability test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were employed to determine the suitability of the questionnaire items for factor analysis. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was subsequently performed using Kaiser's Eigenvalue-greater-than-one rule to extract and verify the research instrument's

constructs. Questionnaire items were measured on a Likert-type scale in which 1 and 6 represented the least and greatest significance, respectively. Item analysis produced  $t$  values between 2.01 and 9.48 ( $p < .01$ ), thus demonstrating adequate response discrimination. Likewise, correlation analysis revealed that there was high homogeneity between items ( $0.27 < r < 0.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and, hence, each of the items was retained. EFA results from the pilot study-extracted three factors revealed a variance of 74.85% and a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .87.

### ***Data Analysis***

SPSS 16.0 was used to perform a descriptive statistical analysis in an attempt to better understand the participants' characteristics. A multivariate analysis of variance was then performed to determine the interactive effects of age and gender on help-seeking behavior among participants.

## **Findings**

### ***Descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis on help-seeking behaviors***

The results of descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis are described in *Tables 1 to 4*. When multivariate analysis reached significant levels, it required further univariate analysis. In this study, the interaction of the two factors by multivariate Wilks' Lambda  $\Lambda = .97$  ( $p = .002$ ), and verification of a significant level indicate a multivariable interaction among gender, age, and the presence of help-seeking behavior, gender Lambda  $\Lambda = .99$  ( $p < .05$ ), age Lambda  $\Lambda = .95$  ( $p < .001$ ). A significant multivariate test of significant resistance to further analyze the effect of gender and age, mainly in three dimensions of help-seeking behavior, found that the interaction of gender and age for two-factor univariate instrumental help-seeking behavior and avoidance behavior help test reached statistical significance, i.e., gender and age had a significant interaction with instrumental help-seeking behavior ( $F_{(2,785)} = 4.34$ ;  $p < .05$ ); gender and age also had a significant effect on avoiding help-seeking behavior ( $F_{(2,785)} = 7.59$ ;  $p < .01$ ) (see *Table 4*).

In the present study, we found that there were gender and age effects on instrumental help-seeking behavior and avoidance of help-seeking behavior. The results showed that adult learners with different genders differed in their help-seeking behaviors. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were mostly supported. In addition, the study found significant interaction between gender and age on help-seeking behaviors. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. We continued to conduct simple main effects analysis and used Scheffé's method for post-hoc analysis.

**Post-hoc comparisons of gender and age groups on instrumental help-seeking**

Table 3 shows that there was gender effect on instrumental help-seeking behavior among participants. Furthermore, female participants in the below 20 ( $F_{(1,785)} = 6.57, p < .05$ ) or 21–39 age group ( $F_{(1,785)} = 27.40, p < .001$ ) had a greater tendency to seek instrumental help-seeking than did male participants in the same age groups.

In addition, men and women of different ages reached significant levels in the instrumental help-seeking behavior score; the women in the 21-39 years-old and above 40 groups scored significantly higher than did those in the below 20 group ( $F_{(2,785)} = 5.45, p < .01$ ). Men in the above 40-years-old group scored significantly higher than those in the below 20 and 21–39 groups ( $F_{(2,785)} = 13.40, p < .001$ ). This can be seen in the *Figure 1* trend.

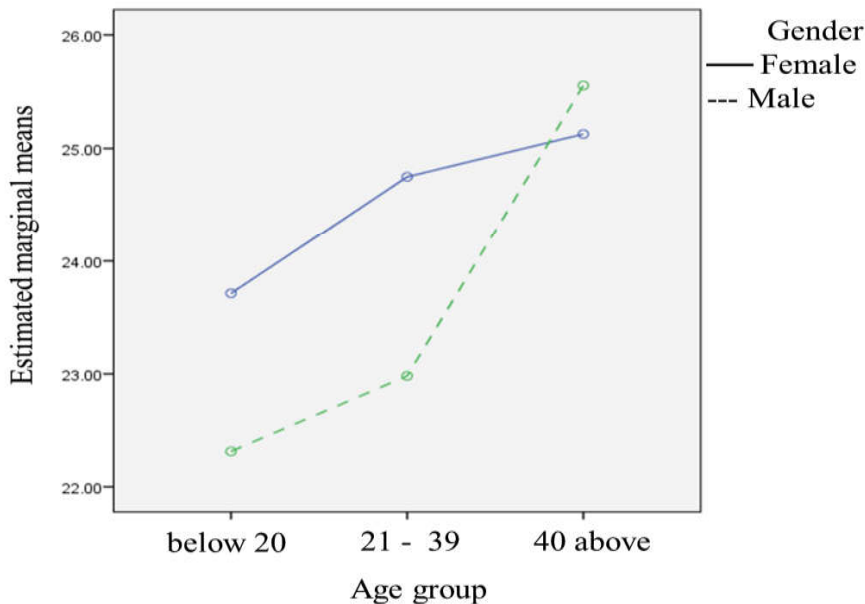


Figure 1. Estimated marginal means of instrumental help-seeking behavior



**Post-hoc comparisons of gender and age groups on executive help-seeking**

In different age groups of participants, their executive help-seeking behavior scores were different ( $F_{(2,785)} = 5.32, p < .01$ ). The univariate analysis of variance for age and gender’s effects on executive help-seeking behavior, the below 20 and 21-39 years-old groups scored significantly higher than the above 40 years old group. However, there were no significant differences between men and women in executive help-seeking scores ( $F_{(1,785)} = .80, p > .05$ ), and gender and age had no interaction effect ( $F_{(2,785)} = .61, p > .05$ ).

**Post-hoc comparisons of gender and age groups on avoidance of help-seeking**

From Table 4, in the 21-39 group, there was a gender effect on avoidance of help-seeking ( $F_{(1,785)} = 29.47, p < .001$ ), and male participants scored higher than female participants. In addition, there were gender and age effects on avoidance of help-seeking. In terms of female participants, the below 20 group scored significantly higher than the 21–39 group ( $F_{(2,785)} = 4.11, p < .05$ ); in terms of male participants, the 21-39 years-old group scored significantly higher than the above 40 group ( $F_{(2,785)} = 9.02, p < .001$ ), as can be seen from the Figure 2 trend.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Help-Seeking Behavior

Age Group Gender	All partici- pants		Below 20		21–39		40 and above	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Instrumental help-seeking								
Male	23.28	4.06	22.32	4.24	23.01	4.01	25.55	3.10
Female	24.50	3.31	23.75	3.58	24.75	3.16	25.13	3.06
Executive help-seeking								
Male	10.47	3.38	10.71	3.08	10.64	3.49	9.52	3.25
Female	10.15	3.20	10.67	3.47	10.05	3.07	9.43	2.96
Avoidance of help-seeking								
Male	10.92	4.81	10.54	4.16	11.64	5.09	8.76	3.80
Female	9.65	4.29	10.50	4.87	9.29	4.05	9.26	3.61

Note. N = 785

Table 2. The Multivariate Analysis of Variance on Gender and Age among Help-Seeking Behaviors

Source of variation	MANOVA					ANOVA <sup>a</sup>		
	Instrumen- tal	Executive [SSCP]	Avoidance	df	Wilks' Lambda Λ	Instru- mental	Execu- tive	Avoid- ance
Gender (A)	122.51 -32.45 -84.04	-32.45 8.59 22.26	-84.04 22.26 57.66	1	.99* (F = 3.45)	9.46** Female > Male	.80	2.88
Age (B)	401.26 -211.65 -265.55	-211.65 113.69 149.86	-265.55 149.86 222.44	2	.95*** (F = 7.11)	15.49*** B3 > B2 > B1	5.32** B1,B2 > B3	5.56** B1,B2 > B3
Gen- der*Age (A × B)	112.48 -22.94 -138.40	-22.94 13.07 61.70	-138.40 61.70 303.82	2	.97** F = 3.44)	4.34*	.61	7.59**
error	10025.52 -225.23 -3811.21	-225.23 8278.37 4601.55	-3811.21 4601.55 15486.51					

Note. N = 785

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

<sup>a</sup>B1 = below 20; B2 = 21–39; B3 = 40 and above

Table 3. Simple Main Effects for Age and Gender's Effects on Instrumental Help-Seeking

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Post-hoc comparisons
Gender (A)					
B1 (below 20)	97.42	1	97.42	6.57*	(Female > Male)
B2 (21–39)	354.85	1	354.85	27.40***	(Female > Male)
B3 (above 40)	5.61	1	5.61	.59	
Age (B)					
A1 (Female)	116.89	2	58.45	5.45**	B2;B3 > B1
A2 (Male)	412.24	2	206.12	13.40***	B3 > B1;B2

Note. N = 785

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

Table 4. Simple Main Effects for Age and Gender's Effects on Avoidance of Help-Seeking

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Post-hoc comparisons
Gender (A)					
B1 (below 20)	.11	1	.11	.01	
B2 (21–39)	622.56	1	622.56	29.47***	Male > Female
B3 (above 40)	6.77	1	6.77	.49	
Age (B)					
A1 (Female)	150.63	2	75.32	4.11*	B1 > B2
A2 (Male)	399.83	2	199.91	9.02***	B2 > B3

Note. N = 785

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

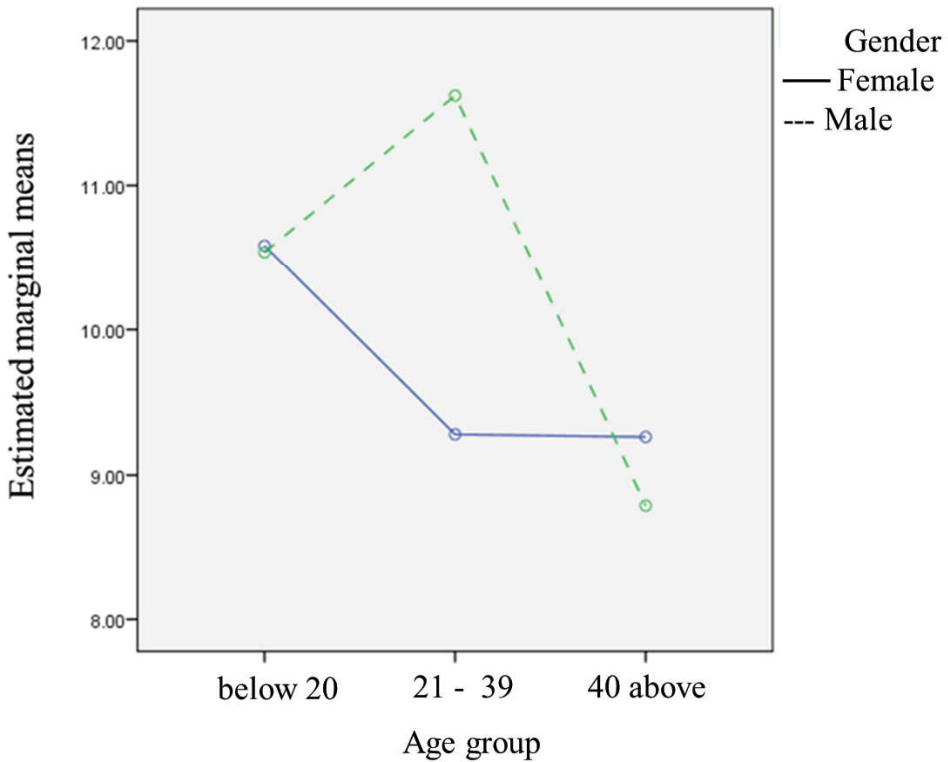


Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of avoidance of help-seeking

## Discussion

### *Adult learners with different kinds of help-seeking behaviors*

In the present study, we found that gender and age had an interaction effect on instrumental help-seeking behaviors and avoidance of help-seeking behaviors. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. In the 21–39 years-old group, female participants had more instrumental help-seeking behavior than male participants while male participants had more avoidance of help-seeking behavior than female participants. Smith (2004) also found that men had more avoidance of help-seeking behavior than women and want to maintain “macho” male self-esteem and avoid seeking help from others. The reason may be that men often consider virility and therefore refrain from help-seeking behavior (Wimer & Levant, 2011). Conversely, for women, the role of help-seeking behavior is consistent with social expectations, so, in case of psychological distress, women are more prone than men to exhibit help-seeking behavior (Gourash, 1978; Mahalik *et al.*, 2003; Nelson-Le Gall, 1986). Women are more active than men, possibly because of the impact of gender role stereotypes, which often give men an image in the community of being less help-disadvantaged (Brannon, 1985; Morgan, Ness, & Robinson, 2003).

In the present study, we also found that 21-39 years-old female participants often take instrumental help, consistent with the opinion of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998). They proposed six assumptions of adult education and described adult learners with learning motivation and self-directed learning characteristics, contrasting with the assumption that men more often avoid help-seeking. How should we respond to the heterogeneous help-seeking behavior shown by adult learners in adjusting adult education policy? It is necessary to use multiple learning strategies to meet the learning needs of adults heterogeneously. In continuous new learning as a key to developing personhood, generative learning within ambiguity is essential to giving shape to a new “curriculum of living” in this period of liquidity. Such learning increases individuals’ ability to respond effectively to work and life demands (Nicolaidis & McCallum, 2014).

### *Differing gender and age of adult learners with different instrumental help-seeking behaviors and avoidance of help-seeking behaviors*

In the present study, we found that male and female adult learners above 40 displayed more instrumental help-seeking behavior than those below 20 years of age. Below-20 female adult learners showed more avoidance of help-seeking behavior than those 21–39 years of age; male adult learners aged 21–39 showed more avoidance of help-seeking behavior than those above 40 years of age. Syau (2002) found that, with increasing grades, high school students reduced their instrumental help-seeking behaviors. Thacker and Stoner (2012) also found that older subordinates had less motivation to ask for help from managers. Given the

relationship between help-seeking behavior and the amount of knowledge, though it is not a linear correlation curve, as the amount of knowledge or experience of the individual increases, it is easier to identify the usefulness of help-seeking behavior; in behavior affected by self-help cognitive function, problems that involve too little or too much knowledge and experience may reduce the possibility of using behaviors (Nelson-Le Gall, 1986). Thus, compared to younger people, older learners have more empirical knowledge, perception, and practice for easy resources to conduct positive help-seeking behavior.

In addition, according to Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory, in which thoughts and actions regarding self-efficacy evaluation result in the evaluation of the interaction of different effects on individuals, social cognitive theory explains the behavior of learners to help individual problems involving too much or too little knowledge or experience, and then to assess the availability of external resources to produce a comprehensive assessment of the individual and perception of the degree of success of help-seeking behavior and further affect the decision to seek assistance and practice. This theory can provide two reasons why individuals choose to avoid help-seeking behavior. One may be that individuals with low self-efficacy feel useless and belittled and easily give up; the other is that the results help individuals consciously take useless actions, and therefore they choose not to take any action. In addition, if learners encounter problems of troubled confidence that can be resolved by enough external assistance, and efficacy and outcome expectations are high, individuals are more likely to take instrumental help. Additionally, when the individual efficacy expectations are not high but results are not expected confidently, it is easy to solve the problem directly through external resources and to accept assistance.

### ***Implications for Practice and Further Research***

In the present study, we found that gender and age had interaction effects on adult learners' instrumental help-seeking and avoidance of help-seeking behaviors, highlighting that different adult learners may take different help-seeking behaviors. Because, of course, the learner's help-seeking behavior has multiple stages, there is help-seeking behavior in the severity of the individual learner's prior perception problems, needs, and possible outcomes with pressure, further assessment of reliable resources, and the cost of the interests of help-seeking behavior, a strategy portfolio and consequences can be obtained, and the individual can finally select and perform the appropriate action (Mojtabai, Olfson, & Mechanic, 2002; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). Thus, in terms of practice, for educators who are new to the conditions of liquid modernity and the way ambiguity influences how adults learn, grow, and develop, this finding provides a way to approach and shape adults learning in this current reality through metaphor. Designing novel opportunities for adults to consciously explore, engage with, and shape a connection to ambiguity

provides a doorway to drawing out the potential emerging from within ambiguity that may guide intelligent action (Nicolaidis, 2015).

For institutions, it is recommended that they develop a manual including learning resources and consulting services as a tool for learners to understand how to access the resources and take appropriate actions. The mission of institutions is to engage democratic action, to develop deliberate learning pathways that enhance adults' participation in society, and to provide intentional space for inclusion and diversity that grow adults' capacities to meet the demands of this complex liquid modernity; generative learning within ambiguity provides a shelter for adults to shape new mutual realities.

Because of the broad factors that could affect individuals' help-seeking behavior, we recommend that future studies focus on exploring the antecedents, process, and outcome factors influencing help-seeking behavior. It is necessary to construct the causal model to understand the impact of a systematic picture of the key factors influencing adult learning. Secondly, since the present study used questionnaires to collect data, social desirability-vulnerable participants and the impact of fixation reaction or defensive mentality and heart errors make it impossible to fully understand the idea of individual differences in respondents. Therefore, it is proposed that future studies be either qualitative research, such as interviews or observation, or a hybrid method summarized to help determine adult learners' behavior patterns.

## Conclusion

This research is based on Nelson-Le Gall's (1981) help-seeking behaviors definition to explore age and gender's interactive effects on adult learners' help-seeking behaviors. The study showed that there was an interaction effect between gender and age on instrumental help-seeking behavior and avoidance of help-seeking behaviors. We hope that the findings will stimulate further debate about how an adult learner framework can be translated into practical approaches and will contribute to further refinement of the adult education concept. This information should be explored in more detail in the hope to understand how to cope with adult learners' help-seeking behaviors and promote learning outcomes.

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