

A Qualitative Inquiry of Homesickness, Psychological Problems, and Coping Responses among Female University Hostelites

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of homesickness, psychological problems, and coping responses among female university hostelites. Using purposive sampling, six subjects (n=6), aged 17 to 22 years, residing in university hostel for at least last six months. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted to gather the qualitative data, enabling participants to freely and confidentially discuss their experiences. Their shared experiences were examined with the help of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Subthemes of homesickness included difficulty in adjusting, desire to live in home, and longing for family members. Subthemes of psychological problems experienced by the participants were sleep difficulties, sadness, feelings of loneliness, and intense anger. Subthemes, identified regarding their responses towards homesickness and psychological problems, were seeking support from friends, expanding social circle, cognitive reframing, patience, regulating emotions, and keeping oneself busy as well. The overall findings revealed how female university hostelites experienced homesickness and psychological problems while staying away from home. Their coping responses towards homesickness and psychological problems helped them in adjusting in hostel, and as well as overcoming psychological issues.

KEYWORDS: *Homesickness, Psychological Problems, Coping Responses, University Hostelites*

Introduction

Homesickness is an intense feeling of being physically cutting off from one's family and home. This resulting emotional distress often impairs a person's ability to function effectively in daily life (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Homesickness involves a strong emotional pull toward home, often causing unpleasant feelings and minor physical symptoms like poor sleep, diminished appetite, or sudden emotional distress (Fisher, 2017). Researchers have identified many forms of homesickness—colonial, modern, global, radical—each embodying different emotional and cultural experiences of displacement (Scanlan, 2019). Psychologists

and theorists have long studied homesickness, as have some literary figures. In the 16th century, European migrants to America often wept from the deep sorrow of missing home. In the 17th century, this condition was well-known in young adults working abroad. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it had evolved into "nostalgia," seen as an illness affecting ethnic populations in parts of Europe. (Van Tilburg, 2005).

For international students adapting to new cultures and academics, homesickness is now a prevalent issue. As more students—particularly girls from conservative backgrounds—study away from home, the combination of cultural adjustment, academic pressure, and separation is turning homesickness into a serious mental health concern (Ward et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2015; Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2023). In some countries, a "hostel" is for travelers, but in Pakistan, it refers to on-campus student residences. These facilities house students from diverse backgrounds and function as interactive learning environments (Iftikhar & Ajmal, 2015). Students in university hostels form a distinct subgroup, learning to manage daily life away from home for the first time. They often face challenges including financial strain, adjustment issues, emotional distress, and disrupted eating and sleeping patterns (Mimrot, 2012).

Hostel life shapes social behavior and interpersonal growth. This phenomenon often leads to psychological distress for female residents, including anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, and related health and sleep issues (Hasan et al., 2017). Homesickness is a complex emotional attachment to one's familiar environment. It undermines emotional security and can increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicidal thoughts. Research links it to stress, depressive moods, loneliness, poor sleep, and lower academic performance. (Dingle et al., 2022; Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021). Psychological effects identified in previous studies include emotional distress, low mood or sadness, social withdrawal, difficulty maintaining focus, and various forms of sleep difficulties (Stroebe et al., 2015; Nauta et al., 2020; Biasi et al., 2018). Homesickness strongly correlates with depression due to their overlapping symptoms (Majid, 2014; Tochkov et al., 2010). Researchers stress the importance of coping strategies, including both problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches (Hack-Polay, 2012; Saigal, 2017). Without effective coping, distress can worsen. This study, therefore, aims to qualitatively examine the lived experiences of female university hostelites using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), focusing on their emotional depth of homesickness, psychological challenges, and adjustment concerns while away from home. In this context, the following questions have been postulated to explore their experiences further:

1. How female university hostelites did experience homesickness since their stay at hostel?
2. What psychological problems did female university students experience living in hostel?
3. Is homesickness related with psychological problems among female university hostelites?
4. How did female university hostelites cope with homesickness and psychological problems?

Method

Research Design

This present phenomenology study explored the lived experiences of female university hostelites from their own perspective, which have been examined using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Sample

Six female university hostelites (n=6), aged 17–22, were purposively selected. All had resided in hostels for at least six months and were willing to share their experiences. Students with less than six months of stay at hostel, having physical disability, and chronic physical illness were excluded from the study.

Measures

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form that gathered detailed what participants of the study experienced. The form consisted of three sections: A) demographic and personal details; B) hostel-specific details such as duration of stay and facilities; and C) open-ended questions about homesickness, psychological problems, and their coping responses as well. Questions were phrased simply to ensure clarity and encourage rich responses on the part of all research participants.

Procedure

Following approval from the hostel administration, participants were individually approached. They received a full briefing on the study, including its voluntary and confidential nature and their right to withdraw, before providing written informed consent. In-depth one-on-one interviews were then conducted in a private setting to ensure participant safety and comfort. With permission, sessions were recorded for accuracy. Each participant was thanked for their time and contribution at the conclusion.

Data Analysis

The technique of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to understand experiences of female university hostelites related to hostel. This approach (Smith et al., 2009) prioritized individual perspectives to understand how participants interpreted their experiences of homesickness, psychological problems and as well as their way of coping with these problems. Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed to identify key themes, with findings presented through participants' own experiences.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Summary of Superordinate themes and Subordinate Themes obtained through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Sr.	Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes
1	Homesickness	Difficulty in adjustment

	Desire to live in home
	Longing for family members
2	Psychological Problems
	Sleep difficulties
	Sadness
	Feeling of loneliness
	Intense anger
3	Coping with Homesickness and Psychological Problems
	Seeking support from friends
	Expanding social circle
	Cognitive reframing
	Patience
	Regulating emotions
	Keeping oneself busy

1. Homesickness

Homesickness was a significant issue for students, that was emerged in form of difficulty in adjustment, desire to live in home, and longing for family members.

1.1. Difficulty in adjustment

Adjusting to hostel life emerged as a major challenge for female university students. Moving from independent home to shared environment with unfamiliar mates, new routines, and limited personal space seemed quite difficult. Adapting to hostel life was common problem students were struggling with as they reported,

"It was very difficult to adjust with people after coming here, and I didn't like the environment either." (C-1)

"In the beginning, it was very difficult to live with roommates and adjust with them." (C-2)

"In the beginning, it was hard for me to adjust in this new environment." (C-3)

"It's hard to adjust with so many people. Initially, I was very worried about how I to adjust here." (C-5)

" I had great difficulty within hostel environment as adjusting to the environment and living with unfamiliar people was a big challenge for me." (C-6)

These experiences are congruent with previous study related to hostel life adjustment. Students frequently struggle with unfamiliar routines, shared living arrangements, and limited privacy in the early weeks (Sami et al., 2023). Overcrowding, abrupt changes in daily routines, and limited personal

space are frequently cited as key stresses, negatively impacting female hostel students' overall quality of life (Akmal et al., 2023).

1.2. Desire to live in home

Another experience related to homesickness was desire to live in family. Relocating to the hostel frequently left students feeling disconnected and emotionally stressed. Even when surrounded by peers, many had an intense desire for familial presence, emphasizing the impact of family separation on their adjustment and mental health. Participants shared that,

“I missed my home a lot. Everything felt unfamiliar without them, and it felt empty not having anyone around who really knows me. (C-1)

“Living away from home is difficult; I keep thinking about the facilities and relations available at my home” (C-2)

“The most difficult thing is living alone, away from home the place where we can live independently (C-4)

“When I really miss home, I feel like leaving everything and going back.” (C-6)

Hostel environment is usually different from home environment, developing negative feelings and distress among hostelites. Within home, people enjoy numerous facilities, while being with family members enhance their well-being. Homesickness was associated with housing, whereas students living away reported more homesickness (Medani et al., 2024). According to study conducted in Pakistan, regular disturbances and unfamiliar hostels environments cause mental distress and impede students' assimilation (Awan et al., 2025).

1.3. Longing for family members

Another theme that surfaced was the participants' intense emotional attachment to their homes and family members. Being away from familiar surroundings, routines, and family support frequently resulted in an intense yearning to return home. Students of the present study shared their experience,

“Living away from family is already hard, and on top of that, doing things you're not used to makes it even harder. I miss my brothers a lot in the hostel. At home, my brothers didn't let me do any work; they even did my share of the work. I used to call my family and say that I can't live here, please take me back, I'll study privately.” (C-3)

“I miss my family and mom a lot. It's hard doing everything on my own without anyone around to support me.” (C4)

“Being away from family was hard — I miss my mom and family a lot. Without them, I feel like something is missing, and I'm not completely at settled in this location.” (C-6)

Students were struggling with the transition from home to hostel settings where did not find family members. The warmth and routine care they received by family was absent at hostel. Family environmental clues like family photographs or familiar objects, may alleviate homesickness, whereas

absence of family can exacerbate it (Nauta et al. 2020). Isolation from family has been substantially associated with increased levels of homesickness, (English et al., 2017). Longing for family members is a major emotional component of homesickness, originating from disturbed familial bonds rather than a simple background feeling.

2. Psychological Problems

Participants experienced psychological problems while adjusting in hostel life. Under this umbrella theme, sleep difficulties, sadness, feelings of loneliness, and intense anger were reported. Female hostelites reported their experience,

2.1. Sleep Difficulties

Sleep disturbance was one kind of psychological problem experienced by female university hostelites. Many individuals reported changes in their sleep patterns such as difficulty in falling asleep, midnight awakenings. They stated,

“My sleep was disturbed, after coming to hostel. I couldn't sleep comfortably, and it disrupted my schedule.” (C-1)

“I used to wake up again and again at night. Couldn't sleep properly.” (C-2)

“My sleep is disturbed to the extent that I cannot sleep even by 1 am.” (C-3)

“It's hard to sleep here. There's always noise, and I miss the silence of home.” (C-4)

“My sleep has been affected since I came here — I sleep less.” (C-6)

Hostel living has a major impact on students' sleep quality. Noise, insufficient sleeping accommodations, and stress are significant causes, with female students being particularly vulnerable (Luqman et al., 2020), while homesickness affects sleep (Rafiq et al., 2021).

2.2. Sadness

Sadness also emerged as a significant psychological problem female hostelites experienced. Several individuals described feeling consistently depressed, emotionally exhausted, and uninspired after moving away from home. They shared that,

“I felt very sad after coming here. I used to cry for no reason.” (C-3)

“I didn't feel like doing anything, internally remain sad ” (C-5)

Previous study also noted sadness among students living in hostel due to emotional isolation and a lack of familiar support (Jawed et al., 2019). Limited social interaction, adjustment challenges, and new settings might exacerbate depression, diminish motivation, and lead to social disengagement among hostel students (Hydrie et al., 2024).

2.3. Feeling of loneliness

Female university hostelites shared their experience of loneliness,

“From the beginning, I have been feeling lonely.” (C-1)

“When I am here, I feel lonely, that's why I go home every week.” (C-2)

“Even after so long, I still feel lonely sometimes — even when people are around. (C-4)

These experiences demonstrate that physical proximity to peers does not ensure emotional connection. Loneliness in hostels is typically caused by a lack of genuine human relationships and emotional support. Empirical research supports these findings that greater feelings of loneliness among university hostel students are linked to decreased self-esteem and fewer social bonds (Ishaq et al., 2018). Loneliness has also been connected with negative moods, decreased social interaction, and emotional dysregulation (Qirtas et al., 2023). Furthermore, students who perceive insufficient social support in residence halls are more likely to feel chronic loneliness and poor psychological health (Mehmood et al., 2020).

2.4. Intense Anger

Anger is another psychological problem female university hostelites reported during interview. They said that,

“I started getting very angry after coming here, fought with friends over small things. When I visited home, I expressed my anger on family members” (C-3)

“Since I stayed at hostel, I get angry at everyone.” (C-4)

“I cry a lot, and I get angry more easily — even small things change my mood.” (C-6)

These experiences indicate that living in a new setting with limited emotional support, shared rooms, and altered routines can exacerbate emotional reactivity and make little triggers seem overwhelming. The adaptation with hostel life might exacerbate mental instability, especially among students without established support networks (Bibi et al., 2020). Young people who live away from home are more likely to experience anger and irritability as a result of stress, interrupted habits, and a lack of coping tools (Shah & Khan, 2021). Participants of the present study were young adults who might have felt the huge difference exist between home and hostel life, cultivating angry feelings and actions.

3. Coping in Response to Homesickness and Psychological Problems

Participants of the present study were trying cope with homesickness and psychological difficulties by seeking support from friends, expanding social circle, cognitive reframing, patience, regulating emotions, keeping oneself busy, spending time with peers,

3.1. Seeking Support from Friends

Seeking support from friends emerged as a commonly used coping response. Participants expressed that talking to friends helped them deal with homesickness, loneliness, and sadness, as they shared:

“I talk to my friends whenever I feel lonely.” (C-2)

“I share my problems with my friends at university and get relaxed (C-4)

“Whenever there’s a problem, I discuss with close friends that increased my satisfaction.” (C-5)

Having conversation with friends helped them to managing their emotions, sadness, and maintain a sense of connection with others. They were able to quickly adjust and feel

emotionally safe in the unfamiliar hostel setting by having family members listen to them and offer guidance.

3.2. Expanding Social Circle

Participants also tried to cope with homesickness and psychological problems through interacting with peers and building friendships. They shared:

“I gradually started to adjust by talking to the girls and going in and out with them. Eventually, we became friends with other girls living here. Initially, I have few friends but now I have many to spend time with. By spending time with them, I overcame my loneliness and sad mood” (C-1)

“Sometimes, I go out with hostel friends to feel good and decrease my sadness.” (C-6)

Participants were able to reduce their feelings of loneliness and strengthened their sense of belonging. By spending time with hostel fellows, participants tried to make their experience more positive and manageable. Previous studies also showed good peer relationships improve adjustment and lessen emotional stress among students living in hostels (Mori, 2000).

3.3. Cognitive Reframing

Another coping response of the participants towards homesickness and psychological problems was cognitive reframing. They reported,

“I changed my mind and thought; I started thinking that I have to live here anyway. Wherever you go, there will be some issues, and nothing is perfect.” (C-2)

“Now, I think that one has to face everything independently. I say to myself that one year is almost over; just three more years to go. It’s okay. This thought helped me in controlling my anger (C-3)

“I tell myself that I have to manage here; this place can be enjoyable with litter effort.” (C-6)

Participants changed their thoughts and noted reduction in homesickness and psychological problems they were experiencing. This change boosted their mental resilience, reduced frustration and helped in focusing long term goals. Cognitive techniques helped to regulating emotions and maintaining psychological stability during adjustment (Amlashi et al., 2025)

3.4. Patience

Patience appeared as an adaptive coping strategy used when participants felt they had limited control over their circumstances. A participant shared her experience,

“I handle things patiently as I cannot change the situation instantly; so, I stay calm. If there’s no solution to a problem, I just show patience hoping for a better solution” (C-4)

By practicing patience, student managed her negative emotions and feelings that prevented unnecessary confrontations, as a result, she mentally prepared herself to cope with the daily challenges during hostel life. It also has been reported by previous study that patience helped

people to stay calm in difficult situations and increase gradual adjustment in unfamiliar environment (Shan & Xu, 2025).

3.5. Regulating Emotions

One participant shared that,

“In difficulty situation, I tell myself to remain calm, and control my anger. I consider other opinion and accept their likes and dislikes that stopped me from unnecessary arguments with others”
(C-3)

By regulating emotions, participant considered own capable enough to deal with problematic situation and hostel-related challenges. Students who practice emotion regulation tend to adjust more effectively and face fewer psychological problems while living away from home (Bai, 2016).

3.6. Keeping Oneself Busy

Participants coped by engaging own in productive tasks and focusing on personal growth as reported,

“I am involved in multiple tasks, such as making some special foods, reading, designing, etc. This helped me in controlling my negative thinking and frustration” (C-2)

“Now I try to engage in my own work and learn new things like cooking, washing clothes, ironing the clothes, etc” (C-5)

Staying engaged in productive activities helped participants in managing their psychological problems. The participant felt less alone and gained understanding of how others coped with similar challenges by observing and adopting the actions of peers. Engaging in routine tasks can lower rumination and decrease homesickness-related stress (Stroebe et al., 2015). This strategy made it easier for her to adapt to living in a hostel and taught her useful techniques for stress management (Sheng, et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Living in hostel, away from home, causes homesickness and psychological problems among students. Homesickness is developed owing to the transition from comforts available at home, to hostel, an independent living environment. Physical and emotional separation from family members is likely to develop sadness, loneliness, anger, and sleep problems which demand instant resolution. University hostelites who are well-responded to homesickness and psychological problems may better cope with these problems. Effective coping responses may increase adjustment in hostel by decreasing homesickness and psychological issues.

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