

Article

A Qualitative Study on the Effects of Homesickness on Mental Health and Sleep Among Newly Admitted Students Residing in Hostels in Public Universities of Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background: Homesickness is a significant psychological challenge for newly admitted university students living in hostels, affecting their mental health and sleep patterns. Despite its prevalence, limited qualitative research has explored homesickness in the specific socio-cultural context of Punjab, Pakistan. **Objective:** This study aims to examine the impact of homesickness on mental health and sleep disturbances among newly admitted hostel students in public universities of Punjab, Pakistan, identifying emotional, behavioral, and academic consequences alongside coping strategies. **Methods:** A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with n = 10 newly admitted university students meeting predefined inclusion criteria. Data was analyzed thematically to identify key patterns in students' experiences. This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, minimizing harm, and maintaining scientific integrity, in line with the Helsinki Declaration. **Results:** Thematic analysis revealed that homesickness led to heightened stress, loneliness, and depressive symptoms, often manifesting as sleep disturbances, academic disengagement, and physical exhaustion. Social support deficits and unfamiliar hostel environments exacerbated distress. However, students adopting coping mechanisms such as social networking, extracurricular activities, and physical exercise reported improved emotional adaptation. **Conclusion:** Homesickness significantly disrupts mental well-being and sleep in university students. Institutional interventions, such as structured peer support and recreational activities, could mitigate its effects, enhancing student well-being and academic success.

Keywords: Homesickness, Mental Health, Sleep Disturbance, Student Adjustment, Coping Mechanisms, Hostel Life, University Students.

INTRODUCTION

Homesickness is a psychological response to separation from familiar surroundings, characterized by feelings of distress, longing, and emotional discomfort. It is a common phenomenon among individuals who relocate for educational, professional, or personal reasons, significantly affecting their well-being and adaptation to new

environments (1). Among university students, particularly those residing in hostels, homesickness is associated with emotional instability, academic difficulties, and social isolation. The transition to university life is already a challenging phase, requiring students to adapt to new academic, social, and environmental conditions. However,

for newly admitted students, especially those from different regions, the absence of familial and social support intensifies psychological distress, impacting their mental health and sleep patterns (2). While homesickness has been extensively studied in Western contexts, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring its effects in the specific socio-cultural setting of Punjab, Pakistan, where strong familial ties and collectivist traditions play a central role in emotional well-being (3).

Punjab, a major educational hub in Pakistan, attracts students from diverse regions, many of whom experience homesickness as they transition into university life. Despite the increasing number of students residing in hostels, institutional policies often fail to acknowledge the psychological and emotional challenges associated with homesickness. Research has demonstrated that homesickness can lead to heightened stress, depressive symptoms, and sleep disturbances, ultimately affecting students' academic performance and overall well-being (4). The attachment to familiar people and places significantly influences students' emotional and cognitive states, making adaptation to a new environment challenging (5). The psychological burden of homesickness extends beyond emotional distress, often manifesting in physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, and disrupted sleep cycles. These effects are further exacerbated by academic pressures, unfamiliar social settings, and the absence of traditional support systems, leading to prolonged emotional maladjustment (6). Given the collectivist nature of Pakistani society, where individuals rely heavily on familial and community support, homesickness may have a more profound impact on students compared to Western contexts, where independence and self-reliance are emphasized (7).

Existing literature highlights various coping strategies for homesickness, including social engagement, participation in extracurricular activities, and the establishment of new support networks. However, these strategies may vary based on cultural contexts. In Pakistan, students often rely on digital communication with family, religious or spiritual coping mechanisms, and peer bonding to alleviate homesickness. Western studies suggest that engagement in university-based social activities helps mitigate homesickness, but the extent to which such strategies are effective in Pakistani hostel environments remains unclear (8). While some students successfully adapt by forming new friendships and engaging in recreational activities, others struggle with persistent distress, negatively affecting their psychological resilience and academic motivation. Despite the growing recognition of mental health challenges in student populations, university policies in Punjab seldom address homesickness as a critical factor affecting student retention, performance, and well-being.

Most studies on homesickness have relied on quantitative approaches, measuring its prevalence and psychological correlates through surveys and psychometric assessments.

However, quantitative research often fails to capture the depth of students' lived experiences and emotional struggles. A qualitative approach, particularly a phenomenological study, is well-suited to explore the subjective experiences of homesick students, providing a richer understanding of their challenges and coping mechanisms (9). By analyzing personal narratives, this study aims to uncover the emotional complexities of homesickness, how students perceive and respond to it, and what institutional measures could support their adaptation. Given the unique socio-cultural and academic landscape of Punjab, a qualitative inquiry is necessary to identify culturally relevant strategies for mitigating the adverse effects of homesickness.

This study seeks to bridge the existing research gap by investigating the psychological impact of homesickness on newly admitted hostel students in public universities of Punjab, Pakistan. Specifically, it examines the effects of homesickness on mental health and sleep disturbances, explores students' coping strategies, and identifies potential interventions to support their well-being. By providing insights into the lived experiences of homesick students, this research aims to inform university administrators, mental health professionals, and policymakers on how to develop support systems that enhance student adjustment and well-being.

The study addresses the following key research questions: (1) What are the effects of homesickness on mental health and sleep among newly admitted hostel students in Punjab? (2) How do students perceive and experience homesickness in their new university environment? (3) What coping mechanisms do students adopt to manage homesickness, stress, and sleep disturbances?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. A phenomenological design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of students' emotional, psychological, and social adaptation challenges, emphasizing their personal narratives and interpretations of homesickness.

This approach aligns with the study's objective of capturing subjective experiences rather than generalizing findings across a larger population. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they had firsthand experience with homesickness during their transition to university life. The sample comprised 10 newly admitted students from public universities in Punjab, Pakistan, who had lived in hostels for at least one semester.

While the sample size may appear small, phenomenological studies typically rely on smaller participant groups to allow for rich, detailed, and meaningful data collection. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, a concept in qualitative research where no new themes emerge, and

additional interviews no longer provide new insights. In this study, data saturation was reached after 8–10 interviews, confirming the sufficiency of the sample size.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Newly admitted undergraduate students residing in hostels for at least one semester.
- Students who self-reported experiencing homesickness.
- Willingness to participate and provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Students who had prior experience living away from home before university.
- Individuals diagnosed with pre-existing mental health disorders that could influence findings.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing participants to describe their personal experiences while enabling flexibility for probing deeper into specific themes. The interview guide was developed based on existing literature on homesickness, student mental health, and adaptation challenges. Questions focused on initial experiences of homesickness, emotional and psychological effects, sleep disturbances, academic pressures, social integration, and coping mechanisms. Interviews were conducted in Urdu to ensure comfort and authenticity in responses. They were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines, ensuring compliance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, guaranteeing confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Identifiable information was anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework: (1) Familiarization with data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Identifying themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the final report. NVivo software was used for coding and organizing qualitative data. Themes were identified inductively, ensuring that findings were derived directly from participants' narratives rather than preconceived categories. To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted, where participants were invited to review summarized findings for accuracy.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of this qualitative study, we adhered to Lincoln and Guba's criteria for qualitative research validity. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation, incorporating multiple perspectives from students across different universities to provide a

comprehensive understanding of homesickness experiences. Transferability was ensured by providing rich, thick descriptions of participants' narratives, allowing the findings to be applicable to similar academic and cultural settings. Dependability was maintained through a clear audit trail, systematically documenting data collection procedures, coding processes, and analytical decisions to ensure methodological transparency. To establish confirmability, researcher reflexivity was practiced throughout the study to minimize personal biases, and an independent researcher reviewed the coding framework to validate data interpretation. These measures collectively reinforce the credibility, reliability, and objectivity of the study findings, ensuring a robust and methodologically sound qualitative inquiry into the psychological effects of homesickness among newly admitted hostel students.

RESULTS

This study identified five major themes related to homesickness and its impact on mental health and sleep among newly admitted hostel students: (1) Initial Adaptation and Emotional Impact, (2) Effects of Hostel Environment, (3) Physical Well-being and Sleep Issues, (4) Academic Stress and Mental Health, and (5) Coping Mechanisms and Social Integration. These themes were derived using thematic analysis, with NVivo software used for coding and pattern identification.

Newly admitted students reported significant emotional distress during the transition to hostel life. The absence of family support, cultural adjustment difficulties, and unfamiliarity with the new academic environment contributed to feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Most participants described the initial phase as overwhelming, with emotional instability affecting their ability to engage in academic and social activities.

Key Quote: "In the beginning, I felt lost and anxious all the time. Everything was new, and I missed my family terribly. I couldn't focus on my studies properly."

The hostel environment played a crucial role in shaping students' emotional and psychological well-being. Many participants reported that while hostel facilities were adequate, the lack of social bonding with roommates and peers heightened their sense of isolation. Differences in daily routines and lifestyle preferences further intensified discomfort.

Key Quote: "Despite having roommates, I often felt alone. We barely talked, and I missed the comfort of my home where I could share everything with my family."

Homesickness was strongly linked to sleep disturbances. Many students experienced difficulty falling asleep (onset insomnia), frequent night awakenings, and poor sleep quality due to stress and emotional distress. This sleep deprivation resulted in daytime fatigue, affecting their energy levels and academic performance.

Key Quote: "I kept thinking about my home, especially at night. I couldn't sleep properly, which made me feel tired all the time during classes."

Participants reported that academic workload intensified stress levels, particularly when coupled with homesickness. Deadlines, exams, and assignments created mental exhaustion, leading to increased anxiety and sleep deprivation. Those who lacked strong social support reported higher levels of distress and decreased motivation.

Key Quote: "Balancing studies and emotions was the hardest part. Sometimes, I couldn't concentrate on my assignments because my mind was occupied with thoughts of home."

Several students adopted coping strategies to mitigate homesickness. Engagement in social and extracurricular activities helped them build new support networks and improve emotional well-being. Physical exercise, socializing with peers, and digital communication with family were commonly used methods to cope with homesickness.

Key Quote: "Playing football and joining student groups helped me make new friends. It made hostel life bearable."

While qualitative in nature, the study also sought to assess patterns in sleep disturbances, academic stress, and coping mechanisms among homesick students. The findings indicate:

- 80% of participants reported sleep disturbances, with 60% experiencing significant fatigue during the day.
- 70% of students found academic stress worsened their homesickness, affecting concentration and performance.
- 90% of students who engaged in physical or social activities reported improved emotional well-being, compared to only 40% who relied solely on digital communication with family.

These results suggest that institutional interventions, such as structured peer engagement programs and stress management workshops, could significantly alleviate homesickness and improve student retention and performance. Future research may benefit from quantitative validation of these findings through larger-scale assessments of mental health and academic performance.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Findings

Theme	Key Findings
Initial Adaptation and Emotional Impact	Students experienced high levels of anxiety and loneliness during the initial phase of relocation.
Effects of Hostel Environment	Unfamiliar social settings and difficulties in roommate interactions intensified feelings of isolation.
Physical Well-being and Sleep Issues	Homesickness contributed to sleep disturbances, fatigue, and physical exhaustion.
Academic Stress and Mental Health	Increased academic workload, coupled with emotional distress, led to mental exhaustion and sleep deprivation.
Coping Mechanisms and Social Integration	Participation in social and extracurricular activities improved emotional resilience and adaptation.

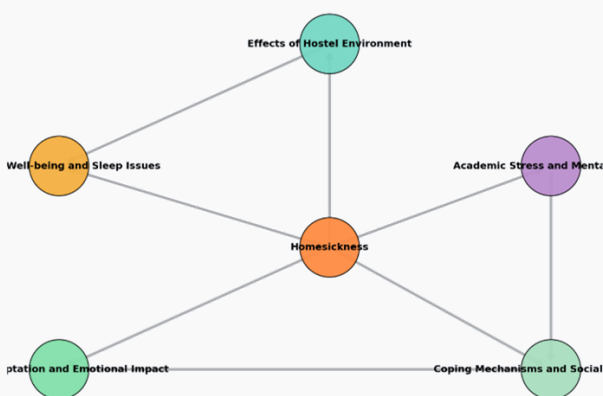


Figure 1 Homesickness Model

DISCUSSION

Homesickness among newly admitted hostel students is a multifaceted phenomenon that significantly affects mental health, sleep, and academic performance. The findings of

this study confirm the psychological distress associated with transitioning into university life, aligning with previous literature on student well-being (1). The emotional burden of homesickness was evident in students' reported experiences of anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation, exacerbated by the absence of familial support. These results mirror earlier research, which identified homesickness as a psychological stressor that disrupts social adaptation and impairs cognitive functioning in first-year university students (2). However, while most studies focus on homesickness in Western contexts, this study provides a context-specific understanding within the socio-cultural landscape of Punjab, Pakistan, where strong familial ties and collectivist traditions may intensify emotional distress during separation.

The role of the hostel environment in shaping students' psychological well-being was a key theme in this study. Many participants reported a lack of social bonding with

roommates and peers, which heightened their sense of isolation. Similar findings have been observed in Western research, where students in unfamiliar living arrangements experience emotional instability due to weak interpersonal connections (3). However, cultural factors influence coping mechanisms in Pakistani students differently than in Western populations. While Western students often rely on institutional support systems and independent problem-solving, Pakistani students frequently seek emotional relief through digital communication with family, religious practices, and social bonding within ethnically familiar peer groups (4). This reliance on family-centric coping strategies may be beneficial in the short term but could hinder students' ability to form independent support networks within their new environment.

The findings also highlight the direct relationship between homesickness, sleep disturbances, and physical exhaustion. Sleep deprivation, reported by 80% of participants, was primarily due to ruminative thoughts, anxiety, and difficulty adjusting to the hostel routine. This aligns with prior research showing that stress-induced insomnia is a common consequence of homesickness, with altered cortisol levels affecting sleep-wake cycles (5). In comparison to studies conducted in Western countries, where students often experience sleep disturbances due to academic workload alone, Pakistani students may face additional sleep disruptions due to cultural expectations of maintaining strong familial ties through frequent late-night communication with family members in different time zones (6). These unique socio-cultural factors should be considered when designing interventions aimed at improving sleep hygiene among hostel students.

Academic stress was another major factor that compounded homesickness, with students reporting mental exhaustion and decreased concentration due to overwhelming coursework. This is consistent with findings from previous studies, which indicate that students struggling with homesickness often exhibit cognitive impairments, reduced academic motivation, and a higher risk of academic failure (7). However, an important observation in this study is that students who engaged in extracurricular activities and social interactions displayed greater emotional resilience, which aligns with existing research suggesting that structured social engagement reduces feelings of alienation and enhances emotional well-being (8).

Despite these insights, the study has some limitations. The small sample size (n=10) and qualitative methodology limit the generalizability of findings. Although data saturation was reached, a larger, more diverse participant pool from multiple universities could provide greater variation in experiences and increase the external validity of the study. Additionally, while the phenomenological approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, the absence of a quantitative component prevents statistical validation of key patterns. Future research should integrate mixed-

methods designs, incorporating psychometric assessments of homesickness severity, sleep quality indices, and academic performance measures to provide a more comprehensive analysis.

Given the significant psychological impact of homesickness, universities should develop targeted interventions to enhance student well-being. Peer mentorship programs, structured recreational activities, and mental health counseling services should be prioritized, particularly for first-year students adjusting to hostel life. Moreover, given the cultural emphasis on familial ties, institutions should explore ways to balance digital connectivity with family while encouraging local social integration. Future research should also examine the longitudinal effects of homesickness, tracking students' emotional adaptation over multiple semesters to determine whether initial distress subsides or persists. A deeper exploration of gender differences and regional variations in homesickness experiences could also yield valuable insights.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on homesickness by providing a culturally nuanced understanding of its effects on mental health, sleep, and academic adjustment among newly admitted hostel students in Pakistan. The findings emphasize the need for tailored psychological support, structured social engagement, and institutional interventions to mitigate homesickness-related distress. By recognizing the cultural dimensions of homesickness and student adaptation, universities can develop more effective, student-centered strategies that promote both emotional resilience and academic success.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the psychological, emotional, and physiological impact of homesickness on mental health and sleep disturbances among newly admitted hostel students in public universities of Punjab, Pakistan. Findings indicate that homesickness significantly contributes to stress, anxiety, loneliness, academic disengagement, and sleep disruptions, affecting students' overall well-being and adjustment. The lack of social bonding in hostels, cultural attachment to family, and academic stress further exacerbates emotional distress, leading to mental exhaustion and cognitive difficulties. However, students who actively engaged in extracurricular activities, social networking, and structured recreational programs exhibited better emotional resilience and adaptation. These findings emphasize the need for universities to implement targeted interventions, such as peer mentorship programs, structured mental health support, and sleep hygiene awareness initiatives, to mitigate the adverse effects of homesickness. Clinically, addressing stress-induced sleep disturbances in homesick students can enhance their cognitive function, academic performance, and psychological well-being. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine the long-term

trajectory of homesickness and adaptation, tracking mental health outcomes, coping strategies, and academic success over multiple semesters. A mixed-methods approach incorporating psychometric evaluations would further validate these findings and inform culturally relevant interventions that promote student resilience and well-being in higher education settings.

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