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Does Time Heal Homesickness? Stay Duration, Coping, and Well-Being among Female University Hostel Residents in Pakistan

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Abstract

Moving into a university hostel is a major life transition, and for many young women in South Punjab, Pakistan, hostel residence is a precondition for accessing higher education. Guided by the transactional model of stress and coping and Schlossberg's transition theory, this convergent mixed-methods study examined whether the psychological experience of hostel life differs by duration of stay. Female students (N = 211) living in government (72.0%) and private (28.0%) hostels in Bahawalpur completed an online survey with closed-ended items and two open-ended questions. Chi-square tests with Monte Carlo p values compared four stay-duration groups (< 6 months to > 2 years), and open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. Homesickness was the most frequently reported predominant emotional state (30.8%), and its prevalence was similar across duration groups (25.9%–32.7%), indicating that it did not fade with time. Prayer was the primary coping strategy for 56.7% of students, followed by socialising (21.6%). Only 42.5% felt supported by hostel authorities, whereas 61.2% were satisfied with their academic life. No outcome differed significantly by stay duration, although students in their second year of residence showed a trend toward higher loneliness, lower hostel satisfaction, and lower perceived support. Qualitative themes described homesickness, sleep disruption, and environmental stressors such as noise, restrictive rules, and staff behavior, alongside personal growth and independence. The findings suggest that hostel adjustment is not a linear process and that support should continue beyond the first semester. Implications for hostel management are discussed in relation to Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4, and 5.

Keywords: *homesickness, hostel life, religious coping, female university students, transition, Sustainable Development Goals*

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1. INTRODUCTION

For many university students, the move into a hostel is their first extended period away from family. It offers new freedoms and prospects for personal development but is accompanied by students having to adapt to new routines and unfamiliar shared living environments, new institutional rules, and the loss of familiar sources of support (Stroebe et al., 2015; Worsley et al., 2021). These demands are significant for young women especially in Pakistan. Hostel places, which are crucial for women to pursue higher education from smaller towns and rural districts, can frequently be the deciding factor between accessing or missing out on university education due to the notion that many people have about daughters living in supervised hostels in the larger cities where universities are concentrated (Arif, 2026; Atif et al., 2024). Thus, the awareness of what the hostel life of females is like, and how it improves or deteriorates over time, is a mental health and equity issue of students.

Mental health of the students in Pakistan is a rapidly emerging public health problem. According to a recent meta-analysis of 35 studies, approximately half of the students in Pakistan report experiencing depressive symptoms, which is consistently higher in females than males (Niazi et al., 2026). Previous studies have found a high depression, anxiety, and stress prevalence rate among university students (Asif et al., 2020), and recent studies have highlighted the association between such symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress and the academic and social pressure (Riaz Ali et al., 2026). Young people in educational spaces are a World Health Organization priority population for mental health promotion at the global level (2022).

1.1 The Hostel as a Psychological Environment

Student accommodation is not just simply a place to sleep. The results of a qualitative study conducted in the UK revealed that the physical features of accommodation, including noise, cleanliness and privacy, and the relational features, including a sense of community and quality of shared space, affect student well-being (Worsley et al., 2021). Studies in Pakistan point in the same direction. In a survey of female hostel residents in Peshawar, most students reported water shortages, poor sanitation, and overcrowding, and facility quality, security, and food predicted satisfaction with hostel life (Yousfani et al., 2024). Among female residents of government and private hostels, satisfaction with the living environment was associated with psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Shaukat & Butt, 2015). Research in Malaysia similarly found that room quality, facilities, and relationships with roommates predicted satisfaction with university hostels (Khozaei et al., 2010).

Hostel life is not uniformly negative. Residents report gains in self-reliance, confidence, problem solving, and social skills (Atif et al., 2024; Rafique, 2021), and hostels expose students to peers from diverse regional and cultural backgrounds, widening their social networks (Rafiq et al., 2021). Meanwhile, women students in Pakistan are also at a higher risk for adjustment issues compared to male students, as the women hostel puts them at risk of being financially, emotionally, and reputationally compromised, despite its protective nature (Hasan et al., 2017; Arif, 2026). There are also mixed findings regarding the association between hostel living and academic performance, with some studies finding a positive relationship, while others have shown that there is no clear relationship (Hasan & Fatima, 2018).

1.2 Homesickness, Loneliness, and Sleep

Homesickness is the feelings of distress due to actual or anticipated separation from home and attachment figures. It involves thinking about home, feeling homesick and struggling with adaptation to the new environment (Stroebe et al., 2015). Homesickness is linked to depressive symptoms among college students, as well as to academic adjustment difficulties and increased risk of dropping out of school (Roxas et al., 2024; Thurber & Walton, 2012). An ecological momentary assessment study of first-year university students revealed that homesickness is a momentary phenomenon and that with other people reduced homesickness (Nauta et al., 2020). This discovery sheds light on the protective effect of social contact. The related issue of loneliness is a great concern. Most university students in a large sample in the United Kingdom experienced moderate to severe loneliness, and this was independent of depression and perceived stress (Akram et al., 2025).

Another place that is vulnerable is sleep. It is a typical problem faced by college students that they do not get

enough sleep and their sleep is irregular, which leads to disturbances in their mood, attention and academic performances (Hershner & Chervin, 2014). In a recent qualitative study conducted on newly admitted hostel residents in public universities in Punjab, homesickness was found to be so closely tied to sleep disturbances, loneliness, and loss of interest in academic activities (Zaidi et al., 2025).

1.3 Coping with Hostel Life

Students adopt various coping strategies to cope with stress related to hostels. Positive reframing, acceptance, and seeking emotional support were common among the students residing in private hostel in Nepal (Shrestha et al., 2023). In predominantly Muslim contexts, religious coping, which uses religious beliefs and practices such as prayer to understand and manage stressful events, is especially salient (Pargament, 1997). A systematic review of Muslim university students found that positive religious coping was associated with lower psychological distress (Javaid et al., 2024). In the context of Pakistan, positive religious coping had predicted better mental well-being (Fatima et al., 2025) and spiritual intelligence had significant positive relationship with the psychological well-being of university students (Anwar & Rana, 2024). However, very little is known about the relative importance accorded to religious, social and physical coping strategies by Pakistani women using hostels or how these changes throughout their stay.

Most of the studies relating to hostel life are centred on the comparison of the hostelites with day scholars or on the first-year students. Less research has been done to find out whether experiences vary throughout the entire spectrum of residence; and less research has been done to which combines quantitative and qualitative data of female students in South Punjab. With this in view, the present study aimed at: (a) understanding the hostel girls regarding their emotional state, satisfaction with hostel, satisfaction with academic stay, coping strategies adopted, family support and hostel mates' relationship, and perceived support from the hostel authorities; (b) examining the differences in emotional state, satisfaction with hostel and academic life, coping strategies adopted, family support, satisfaction with the relationship with hostel mates and the perceived support from hostel authorities among hostel girls based on duration of hostel stay; and (c) exploring the participants experiences through various statements about the effect of hostel life on psychological well-being and how they feel it can be improved. For this reason, the following research questions were asked:

- RQ1: What are the predominant emotional states, satisfaction levels, coping strategies, and sources of support reported by female hostel residents?
- RQ2: Do these experiences differ across stay-duration groups, and in particular, do homesickness and sleep disturbance decline as stay duration increases?
- RQ3: How do students describe the impact of hostel life on their mental health, and what changes do they suggest for improving it?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is based on two interrelated frameworks. The first one, the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) suggests that stress is not necessarily a result of events, but of how an individual appraises the events. In primary appraisal, the student decides if a demand (e.g. noisy room, strict curfew or separation from family) is a threat, loss or challenge. Secondary appraisal: She examines how she can cope with it. Coping then occurs in problem-focused (e.g., asking for a room adjustment) and/or emotion-focused (e.g., prayer, talking with friends) ways. The model allows to assume that the same hostel condition can lead to different results depending on the appraisal and on the resources which a student can draw upon.

The second, is Schlossberg's transition theory, which discusses adapting to life transitions by assessing the 4 S's – situation (timing and duration of the transition), self (personal strengths and vulnerabilities), support (family, peers and institutions) and strategies (coping responses) (Anderson et al., 2012, Schlossberg, 1981). Another important concept in transition theory is that the process of transitioning takes time. The resources a person is able to access can shift from the moving in to the moving through, and into the moving out. The two frameworks were combined to direct the study variables. Stay duration is a situation, family contact, relations with hostel mates and perceived support from authorities is support, coping strategies is strategies and emotional state and satisfaction is outcome of appraisal and coping. A question rarely tested is whether adjustments to the hostel life are really positive, and the longer students remain in hostels, can it actually be beneficial?

2.1 Relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals

The study speaks directly to three of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; United Nations, 2015). In SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), it is the 3.4 target to promote mental health and well-being. The stress and coping style of hostel residents play a significant role in designing the mental health support in preventive perspective in higher education. Target 4.3 of SDG 4 (Quality Education) invites equal access for all womankind and mankind to affordable, quality higher education and Target 4.a calls for education facilities to become safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments. University hostels are an integral part of that learning environment. SDG 5 (Gender Equality) has a target of eliminating gender discrimination against women and increasing opportunities for girls. The quality of hostel life is closely linked to women's participation in higher education because a lot of young women from outlying district may depend on getting a hostel place at the university in order to attend. Currently, many of these goals are not on track according to the latest progress report (United Nations, 2025), thus stressing the importance of having local evidence to inform institutional action.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

We used a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time through a single online survey, analyzed separately, and then integrated at the interpretation stage. Closed-ended items addressed RQ1 and RQ2, and open-ended items addressed RQ3.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from government and private hostels in Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan. Eligibility criteria were being a female university student and currently residing in a hostel. Of the students who opened the survey, 211 provided usable responses and formed the analytic sample. Most lived in government hostels (n = 152, 72.0%), and the remainder lived in private hostels (n = 59, 28.0%). Just over half had lived in a hostel for more than 2 years (n = 110, 52.1%); the remaining participants had lived in a hostel for less than 6 months (n = 41, 19.4%), 6 months to 1 year (n = 27, 12.8%), or 1 to 2 years (n = 33, 15.6%). Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

3.3 Instrument

The authors developed a structured questionnaire for this study, drawing on previous research on hostel life, homesickness, and student well-being (Khozaei et al., 2010; Shaukat & Butt, 2015; Stroebe et al., 2015). It had three parts. The first part collected demographic information (hostel type and duration of hostel stay). The second part contained seven single-item, closed-ended questions: (a) the emotional state students experienced most often in the hostel (happy, homesick, lonely, or sleep disturbances); (b) satisfaction with hostel life (very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, normal, or satisfied); (c) the main strategy used to cope with hostel stress (exercise, meditation, music, prayer, or socialising); (d) frequency of interaction with family (never, rarely, often, once a day, or twice a day); (e) quality of relationships with hostel mates (poor, normal, or excellent); (f) perceived support from hostel authorities (no, rarely, or yes); and (g) academic satisfaction (very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, average, satisfied, or very satisfied). Each item asked respondents to select one option. The third part contained two open-ended questions: "How has hostel life impacted your mental health?" and "What suggestions do you have for improving hostel life?"

3.4 Procedure

The survey was undertaken using Google Forms. This link was broadcasted to all the eligible students over a 4-week span via hostel networks and class networks. The first page outlined the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty or the confidentiality of responses. Informed consent was obtained by asking participants to first decide on an agreement option to be able to move on. The names and other identifying information were not gathered and the data are kept in a password-protected account available to the research team only.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study was carried out in compliance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (2017) which includes obtaining informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. The

study was not of a nature to pose any risk and no identifying data was gathered.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Quantitative Analysis

All closed-ended items were calculated in terms of frequencies and percentages. Due to the unequal group sizes of the stay duration groups, all comparisons relied on percentage within groups instead of absolute numbers. Associations between stay duration and each outcome were tested with Pearson chi-square tests of independence. Because several contingency tables had expected cell counts below 5, *p* values were estimated with Monte Carlo permutation tests (20,000 resamples). Effect sizes are reported as Cramér's *V*, interpreted as small (≈ .10), medium (≈ .30), or large (≈ .50) (Cohen, 1988). For ordinal outcomes, Spearman's rank-order correlation (ρ) was used to test for a monotonic trend across duration groups. Responses with a missing value on a given item were excluded from that analysis only, so the sample size varies slightly across items (n = 207–211). The significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$.

3.6.2 Qualitative Analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) was the analytical method used to analyze the responses to the open-ended questions. Both authors repeatedly read all responses to get that feel for the data and inductively created initial codes, sorted the codes into potential themes and reread and revised the themes in relation to the entire data set prior to naming the themes. Until it was agreed upon how things would be interpreted/differed. Quoting verbatim is done with representative quotes (no changes). Answers to the second question were also analyzed in content categories to be translated into practical recommendations. These quantitative and qualitative results were then contrasted to see if there were any similarities/differences.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Sample Characteristics and Overall Experiences (RQ1)

Table 1:. Sample Characteristics (N = 211)

Characteristic	*n*	%
Hostel type		
Government	152	72.0
Private	59	28.0
Duration of hostel stay		
Less than 6 months	41	19.4
6 months to 1 year	27	12.8
1 to 2 years	33	15.6
More than 2 years	110	52.1

Note. All participants were female university students residing in hostels in Bahawalpur, Pakistan.

The responses of the closed-ended items are summarized in Table 2. Homesickness was mentioned by the highest number of students (30.8%) followed by happiness (28.9%) sleep disturbances (22.7%) and loneliness (17.5%) when asked about which emotion did, they experienced the most often. So, nearly three-quarters (71.1%) of the students reported a negative state as the one that they felt most often. Most students (62.6%) rated their level of satisfaction with hostel life as "normal" while around one quarter (24.2%) were satisfied with it. By far the most common primary coping strategy was prayer (56.7%), followed by socialising (21.6%), music (8.7%), exercise (7.2%) and meditation (5.8%).

Frequent family contact (68.4% of students) for example meeting at least once a day and 1.0% said they never had contact with their families. The relationships with hostel mates were considered as normal (59,8%) and excellent (38,3%) with very few numbers of students finding it as poor (1,9%). Support from the authorities in the hostels was not as strong. Less than 42.5% of the students felt support, 35.7% felt supported sometimes, and 21.7% felt not supported at all. Most of the students were satisfied or very satisfied with their academic life (61.2%).

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Table 2:. Frequencies of Responses to Closed-Ended Survey Items

Item and response	*n*	%
Predominant emotional state (n = 211)		
Homesick	65	30.8
Happy	61	28.9
Sleep disturbances	48	22.7
Lonely	37	17.5
Satisfaction with hostel life (n = 211)		
Very dissatisfied	9	4.3
Dissatisfied	19	9.0
Normal	132	62.6
Satisfied	51	24.2
Primary coping strategy (n = 208)		
Prayer	118	56.7
Socialising	45	21.6
Music	18	8.7
Exercise	15	7.2
Meditation	12	5.8
Interaction with family (n = 209)		
Never	2	1.0
Rarely	24	11.5
Often	40	19.1
Once a day	78	37.3
Twice a day	65	31.1
Quality of relationships with hostel mates (n = 209)		
Poor	4	1.9
Normal	125	59.8
Excellent	80	38.3
Feel supported by hostel authorities (n = 207)		
No	45	21.7
Rarely	74	35.7
Yes	88	42.5
Academic satisfaction (n = 209)		
Very dissatisfied	4	1.9
Dissatisfied	6	2.9
Average	71	34.0
Satisfied	114	54.5
Very satisfied	14	6.7

Note. Percentages are based on valid responses for each item; missing responses ranged from 0 to 4 per item.

4.2 Differences by Duration of Hostel Stay (RQ2)

Within group percentages and chi square for each outcome are shown for each of the four duration groups in Table 3. None of the outcomes showed any significant association with stay duration, and all effect sizes were small (Cramér's V = .09–.18). Spearman correlations likewise showed no monotonic trend for hostel satisfaction (ρ = .05, p = .452), family contact (ρ = −.04, p = .581), relationship quality (ρ = .07, p = .306), perceived support (ρ = .00, p = .968), or academic satisfaction (ρ = .01, p = .859).

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Table 3:. Selected Outcomes by Duration of Hostel Stay (Within-Group Percentages) and Chi-Square Tests

Outcome	< 6 mo	6–12 mo	1–2 yr	> 2 yr	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*	*V*
Predominant emotional state					10.74 (9)	.296	.13
Happy	31.7	22.2	21.2	31.8			
Homesick	31.7	25.9	27.3	32.7			
Lonely	17.1	14.8	33.3	13.6			
Sleep disturbances	19.5	37.0	18.2	21.8			
Satisfaction with hostel life					15.47 (9)	.076	.16
Satisfied	29.3	22.2	9.1	27.3			
(Very) dissatisfied	7.3	25.9	24.2	9.1			
Primary coping strategy					20.38 (12)	.059	.18
Prayer	60.0	61.5	78.8	47.7			
Socialising	15.0	19.2	18.2	25.7			
Music, exercise, or meditation	25.0	19.2	3.0	26.6			
Family contact at least once a day	72.5	74.1	71.9	64.5	5.23 (12)	.968	.09
Excellent relationships with hostel mates	34.1	30.8	40.6	40.9	7.34 (6)	.275	.13
Feel supported by authorities (yes)	46.3	40.7	21.9	47.7	11.10 (6)	.084	.16
Academically (very) satisfied	61.0	73.1	53.1	60.9	17.04 (12)	.139	.16

Note. Group sizes were $n = 41$, 27, 33, and 110 for the emotional-state and satisfaction items (small variations for other items because of missing responses). Chi-square tests were computed on the full response categories of each item; *p* values are Monte Carlo estimates based on 20,000 permutations. mo = months; yr = years; *V* = Cramér's *V*.

The pattern for emotional states is shown in Figure 1. Homesickness was reported at similar rates by students in their first 6 months (31.7%) and by those who had lived in a hostel for more than 2 years (32.7%). It therefore did not decline as stay duration increased, $\chi^2(3, N = 211) = 0.70$, $p = .873$, for homesick versus all other responses. Sleep disturbance did not follow a steady decline either. It was most frequent among students in the 6-month to 1-year group (37.0%) and similar across the other groups (18.2%–21.8%), $\chi^2(3, N = 211) = 3.83$, $p = .281$.

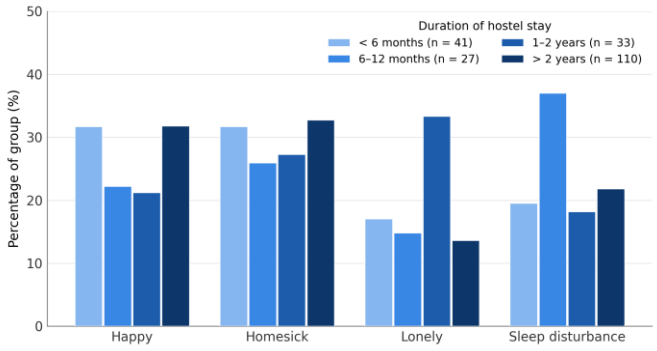


Figure 1:. Predominant Emotional State by Duration of Hostel Stay

Note. Bars show the percentage of students within each duration group who selected each state as the one they experienced most often. Omnibus $\chi^2(9, N = 211) = 10.74$, $p = .296$.

Although none of the omnibus tests reached significance, students who had lived in a hostel for 1 to 2 years showed a consistent pattern across several variables. Compared with the other groups, they reported the highest rate of loneliness (33.3% vs. 13.6%–17.1%), $\chi^2(3, N = 211) = 7.00$, $p = .072$; the lowest rate of satisfaction with hostel life (9.1% vs. 22.2%–29.3%); the lowest perceived support from authorities (21.9% vs. 40.7%–47.7%); and the lowest academic satisfaction (53.1% vs. 60.9%–73.1%). This group was also the most reliant on prayer as its main coping strategy (78.8%).

The distribution of coping strategies across duration groups approached significance, $\chi^2(12, N = 208) = 20.38$, $p = .059$, $V = .18$ (Figure 2). In an exploratory follow-up comparing prayer with all other strategies, reliance on prayer differed by duration, $\chi^2(3, N = 208) = 10.58$, $p = .014$, $V = .23$. It was highest in the 1- to 2-year group (78.8%) and lowest in the more-than-2-years group (47.7%). There was a greater variety of strategies used by students in the longest stay group with increased rates of socialising (25.7%), music (11.9%) and meditation (9.2%). It should be viewed as hypothesis generating because this follow-up was not originally planned and would not withstand a Bonferroni correction for the eight tests performed (adjusted $\alpha = .006$).

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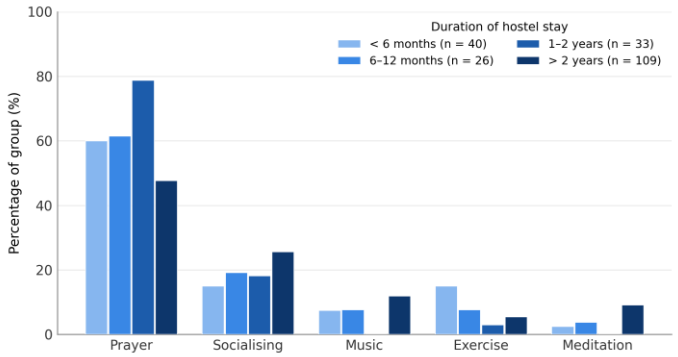


Figure 2:. Primary Coping Strategy by Duration of Hostel Stay

Note. Bars show within-group percentages ($N = 208$; three students did not answer). Omnibus $\chi^2(12, N = 208) = 20.38$, $p = .059$.

4.3 Qualitative Findings (Perceived Impact of Hostel Life on Mental Health)

Thematic analysis of responses to the question "How has hostel life impacted your mental health?" produced six themes.

- **Homesickness and Loneliness:** Many students reported that they recurring struggled with homesick and family feelings, many of which were related to sadness or anxiety: "I feel homesick all the time and it took a toll on my mental health" and "I often feel sad and anxious because I can't be with my family." Some of the hostel week was planned around the next visit home: "I always am waiting for the weekend, when I can go back home.
- **Negative Emotional Impact:** Students spoke of stress, anxiety, low mood, and in some instances things that they would consider to be traumatic: "It made me traumatized in so many ways." This distress was exacerbated by academic demands, and comparison with peers: "Increased stress and anxiety due to academic pressure and peer competition."
- **Sleep and Lifestyle Disruption:** Disturbed sleep and irregular meals were frequent complaints: 'I'm having serious trouble with insomnia' and 'sleeping irregularly and eating irregularly has an impact on my health, physically and mentally'. Students made an explicit link between sleep and emotional health: Poor sleep influences our emotional health.
- **Environmental and Institutional Stressors:** The students associated a good part of their unhappiness not to hostel life in general but with aspects of the hostel. They reported about the noise, absence of privacy, strict rules, food, and staff behavior; "Noise from the hostels mates and absence of privacy affects the mental health," "No privacy and strict rules make it stressful," and "Dissatisfaction with food and bad behavior of warden affects mental health."
- **Personal Growth and Independence:** Other students found their hostel life a means of development, as in "Hostel life helped me to grow up more confident, patient and to work in a team," and "It helps to manage time and to grow up personally.
- **Mixed and Ambivalent Experiences:** Many of the answers were a combination of both: "The positive and negative effects of hostel life, I grew more confident but also stressed", and "It has been a positive and a negative experience on mental health." Others reported a mixed or neutral response: "Sometimes it upsets me, sometimes it's OK."
- ***Students' Suggestions for Improving Hostel Life:*** The answers to the question 'To make hostel life better, what needs to be done?' were analyzed and categorized under 10 content areas (Table 4). The most common concerns were physical environment issues (maintenance, utilities, Wi-Fi, security and cleanliness), meal quality and timing, and wardens and staff attitudes. Fair and transparent rules increased social and recreational opportunities, counseling and medical services, and grievance services were also among the requests made by the students. Some of the answers did not provide any suggestions or were general and expressed satisfaction.

Table 4:. Categories of Student Suggestions for Improving Hostel Life

Category	Representative suggestions
Management and facilities	Repair lights, water coolers, and cupboards; provide hot water in winter, functional kitchens, and reliable Wi-Fi; upgrade security
Food and mess quality	Improve hygiene, taste, and variety; serve meals on time; accommodate dietary needs; allow students to cook
Warden and staff behavior	Train staff to be polite, cooperative, and supportive; encourage open communication with students
Rules and restrictions	Relax overly strict rules; allow reasonable outings; publish a transparent rule chart and fair timings
Social and community building	Organize sports, cultural, and extracurricular events and gatherings that foster friendships
Cleanliness and hygiene	Maintain clean washrooms and common areas; ensure waste management; promote shared-space etiquette
Personal development and activities	Offer workshops on stress management and hobbies; provide gym access; arrange mentorship programs
Support services	Provide medical and emergency facilities, counseling and mental health services, and grievance mechanisms
Discipline and coexistence	Encourage respectful behavior; set clear roommate boundaries; promote cooperation in shared spaces
Other suggestions	Financial support or subsidies for students in need; printing and stationery facilities; movie nights and bonfires

Note. Categories were derived inductively from responses to the open-ended question "What suggestions do you have for improving hostel life?" A small number of students gave no suggestions or reported general satisfaction.

4.4 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The two data streams converged in many ways. Two of the most salient qualitative themes matched the quantitative presence of homesickness (30.8%) and sleep disturbance (22.7%). The level of perceived support by authorities was low (42.5%) and students freely voiced criticism about wardens, rules and grievance procedures. The qualitative data also provided a context which the closed items could not have offered. They showed that much of the reported distress was attributed to modifiable features of the environment, such as noise, food, and staff behavior, rather than to living away from home as such, and they revealed a strand of personal growth that coexisted with distress for many students.

5. DISCUSSION

The psychological phenomenon of living in a hostel and its improvement with prolonged living among female university students of Bahawalpur, Pakistan was explored in the present study, using mixed methods. There were three noteworthy findings. First, the most prevalent predominant emotional state was homesickness, and it did not decrease as the length of stay increased. Second, prayer was the dominant coping strategy, and exploratory analyses suggested that students who had lived in a hostel for more than 2 years relied on a broader repertoire of strategies. Third, fewer than half of the students felt supported by hostel authorities, and the qualitative data identified modifiable environmental and institutional stressors as major sources of distress.

5.1 Homesickness Does Not Simply Fade

A common assumption is that students "get used to" hostel life and that homesickness decreases over time. Our data did not support this. When the unequal sizes of the duration groups were taken into account, the proportion of students reporting homesickness as their predominant state was virtually the same in the first 6 months (31.7%) as after more than 2 years (32.7%). This is consistent with the dual process model of homesickness, which conceptualizes homesickness as a "mini-grief" in which people oscillate between loss-oriented coping (focusing on what has been left behind) and restoration-oriented coping (engaging with the new environment) rather than progressing through a linear recovery (Stroebe et al., 2016). Frequent family contact, which was reported by more than two thirds of our participants, may serve as a comforting continuing bond. At the same time, it may keep home salient and sustain loss-oriented feelings. Nauta et al. (2020) found that homesickness is lower when students are with others, suggesting that the quality of daily social contact inside the hostel may matter as much as the length of stay.

According to transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) the continued experience of homesickness would indicate that many students never completely transition from the "moving through" stage. Parts of the transition can come on again each time the student vacations or moves back to the

hostel. In a cultural context in which close family ties are highly valued and daughters' residence away from home is often a family decision, separation may continue to carry emotional weight throughout a student's time at university (Arif, 2026; Atif et al., 2024).

5.2 Sleep and the Second-Year Dip

Sleep disturbance did not decrease steadily with stay duration. The highest rate was seen among students in their 6-month to 1-year period, which may reflect the cumulative effect of noise, shared rooms, and irregular routines once the novelty of the first semester has passed. Students' written accounts clearly identified sleep issues with the accessibility of noise and irregular eating patterns, consistent with evidence on the role of accommodation environments (Worsley et al., 2021) and the impact of sleep impairments on the academic and emotional outcomes of students (Hershner & Chervin, 2014; Zaidi et al., 2025).

The profile of students in the 1- to 2-year group, although not statistically significant, should be of interest. This group had the highest loneliness scores and the lowest hostel satisfaction, perceived support and academic satisfaction scores. This trend is similar to the "sophomore slump" in the higher education literature, where engagement and satisfaction drop after the first year when the orientation support is removed and academic expectations rise (Webb & Cotton, 2019). Finally, stressors can be appraised as more threatening if they are not regarded as temporary and institutional resources are not all that available (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If this pattern is replicated, it would suggest that hostel support programs concentrated on new arrivals miss a group of residents who may need it more.

5.3 Faith as the First Line of Coping

More than half of the participants selected prayer as their main coping mechanism while 7.2% opted for exercise. The result aligns with the importance of religion in the daily lives of Pakistanis and the fact that positive religious coping has been related to reduced distress and enhanced well-being in Muslim students and young adults (Anwar & Rana, 2024; Fatima et al., 2025; Javaid et al., 2024). Prayer can provide meaning, control, emotional support and a connection to family and community traditions within Pargament's (1997) framework. These resources will become particularly useful when further support is not close by.

The exploratory finding that longer-staying students were less reliant upon prayer but more on socialising, music, and meditation was in line with Schlossberg's belief that individuals develop a wider range of strategies as they go through a transition (Anderson et al., 2012). It is generally accepted that a wider repertoire of coping is considered adaptive in that it enables coping responses to fit varying demands of different situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The clustering of prayer-based coping in the 1- to 2-year group, a group that reported the highest levels of loneliness, may be a clue that some students resort to personal, private coping when social and institutional support are low. Thus, religious coping should be considered as a source of strength and respect and be included in support services rather than as a replacement for social support and professional assistance.

5.4 Institutional Support and the Hostel Environment

The relationships with hostel mates were generally good with limited perceived support from hostel authorities. Over half the students reported rarely or not at all to feel supported. The qualitative data accounts for this: students complained about the inflexible or unclear rules, indifferent wardens, poor food, poor facilities, and requested grievance procedures and respectful interactions between wardens and students. These results are very similar to the findings from the female hostels in Peshawar (Yousfani et al., 2024) and are consistent with the evidence on the relationship between environmental satisfaction and psychological well-being of female hostel dwellers (Shaukat & Butt, 2015). Fortunately, the majority of students, irrespective of stay duration, were happy with their educational life. This indicates that for most, hostel residence was not detrimental to academic involvement, though approximately four out of 10 were at the "average" or "less than average" level of satisfaction.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results indicate some evidence-based measures that universities and hostel administrations should take:

- **Extend support beyond the first semester:** Orientation and check-in programmes should be continued in the 2nd and 3rd years of stay and

especially for those who have been in the hostel for 1 to 2 years.

- **Build belonging through peers:** Structured social, sports, and cultural activities and peer-mentoring schemes are effective for reducing homesickness and loneliness, involving senior and junior residents. As student loneliness is among the most effective interventions that increases social connection (Ellard et al., 2023).
- **Provide accessible, culturally sensitive counseling:** On-site or easily accessible counseling, delivered by practitioners who respect students' religious values and can integrate them into coping support, should be complemented by basic medical and emergency services.
- **Protect sleep:** Students' sleep and lifestyle disruptions may be tackled through enforced quiet hours, reasonable lights out schedules in communal areas and regular meal times.
- **Improve staff–student relations:** Training for wardens/staff in respectful communication / student welfare. It would be helpful for students to feel heard by having clear, published rules and a confidential grievance and feedback mechanism.
- **Upgrade facilities and food:** Conditions of well-being, such as reliable water, electricity, Wi-Fi, clean washrooms, safe premises and hygienic and nutritious meals, should be monitored through ongoing student satisfaction surveys.
- **Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals**: Table 5 links the main findings to specific SDG targets. Improving mental health support for hostel residents contributes to SDG Target 3.4, and making hostels safe, well-maintained, and supportive learning environments contributes to SDG Targets 4.3 and 4.a. Because hostel places are often a gateway to university for young women from outlying districts, improving the quality of hostel life also supports SDG 5 by helping women not only to enroll in higher education but also to thrive and complete their studies (Arif, 2026; United Nations, 2015).

Table 5:. Alignment of Study Findings With Sustainable Development Goal Targets

SDG target	Relevant finding	Recommended action
3.4: Promote mental health and well-being	Homesickness (30.8%), sleep disturbance (22.7%), and loneliness (17.5%) were common predominant states; homesickness did not decline with time	Continuous, culturally sensitive counseling and peer support throughout residence
4.3: Equal access to tertiary education	Hostels enable women from outlying districts to attend university; 52.1% had lived in hostels for more than 2 years	Affordable, adequate hostel places and financial support for students in need
4.a: Safe, inclusive, and effective learning environments	Only 42.5% felt supported by authorities; noise, facilities, food, and rules were key stressors	Facility upgrades, quiet hours, staff training, and grievance mechanisms
5: Gender equality and women's empowerment	Students reported growth in confidence, independence, and teamwork alongside distress	Programs that build self-efficacy and leadership among female residents

Note. SDG = Sustainable Development Goal. Targets from United Nations (2015).

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, this is a cross-sectional design, meaning that the discrepancies between duration groups could be due to cohort or year of study rather than change within the individual. The need is for longitudinal studies, in which the same students are tracked from the entry to graduation. Secondly, the questionnaire included only one, author-developed questionnaire items, and no psychometric properties were determined. One which does not describe concurrent states is the emotional state item, where a single dominant emotion was selected by students. In the future, studies need to be repeated with well-established instruments like Utrecht Homesickness Scale, Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index and Brief RCOPE for

religious coping. Finally, the use of convenience sampling and the differential group sizes for duration groups also restrict generalizability and statistical power, particularly for the smaller groups. Fourth, only female students were included in the sample, and the findings cannot be generalized to the male hostel inmates. Fifth, the responses to the open ended questions were short and written; a richer qualitative analysis could be achieved with an interview or focus group. Finally, the study was not formally approved by an IRB but informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. Further studies will be able to compare the Government and private hostels and examine how effective the interventions suggested in this report are.

8. CONCLUSION

For female students in Bahawalpur, hostel life is a mix of hardship and growth. Homesickness was the most common predominant emotional state and did not fade with time, sleep and environmental stressors were common, and fewer than half of the students felt supported by hostel authorities. Students relied mainly on faith and peers to cope, and those who had lived in hostels the longest used the widest range of strategies. These findings challenge the assumption that time alone resolves adjustment difficulties. Hostel support should therefore be continuous rather than confined to the first semester, sensitive to students' religious and cultural values, and focused on the modifiable conditions (facilities, food, rules, and staff attitudes) that students themselves identify. Investing in the quality of hostel life is an investment in young women's mental health, their education, and progress toward SDGs 3, 4, and 5.

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