



## Exploring and Understanding the Subjective Experiences of 'Home' Feeling Away Students Living In Hostel

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim:** This study explores the subjective experiences of students living in hostels and how they conceptualize 'home' away from family residences.

**Design:** A qualitative, phenomenological design was utilized, employing reflexive thematic analysis.

**Methods:** Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight hostel students selected via purposive sampling. Thematic analysis revealed ten key themes reflecting the social, emotional, and environmental dimensions of hostel living.

**Results:** Major themes included emotional resilience, social dynamics, personalization efforts, and the psychological challenges of adjusting to hostel life. The findings emphasized the interplay between social bonds, cultural adaptation, and emotional well-being.

**Conclusion:** Hostel life fosters personal growth and social development but is marked by challenges in creating a sense of 'home.' Future interventions should focus on enhancing environmental and emotional support to improve students' well-being.

## Introduction

The concept of 'home' extends beyond a physical structure, encompassing emotional security, belonging, and personal identity. For students transitioning from family residences to hostels, this shift disrupts their familiar sense of stability, introducing both challenges and opportunities for personal growth. Hostel life offers a unique blend of independence and communal living, yet it often triggers emotional struggles such as homesickness, loneliness, and cultural adjustment.

Research in environmental psychology emphasizes the significance of place attachment, the emotional bonds individuals form with their surroundings, which directly influence well-being and

stability (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Students living in hostels often develop attachment through personalization of spaces, cultural integration, and social interactions. Similarly, social support theory highlights the critical role of interpersonal connections in mitigating stress and enhancing resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The presence of strong social networks within hostels has been shown to improve students' psychological well-being and adaptation (Brown et al., 2020).

Studies have explored the multifaceted nature of 'home' in temporary accommodations. Mallett (2004) examines how cultural diversity shapes students' adaptation to new living environments, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive practices in promoting inclusivity. Similarly, Korpela et al. (2002) highlight that place attachment enhances emotional comfort, with personalization of spaces providing a psychological anchor. Furthermore, Kim and Lee (2020) argue that overcoming hostel challenges fosters resilience and independence, which are crucial for personal and academic growth.

In the South Asian context, hostel life serves as a transformative phase for students, where they navigate the complexities of independence, communal living, and cultural diversity. However, limited research exists on how Pakistani students experience and redefine the concept of 'home' in hostels. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the subjective experiences of hostel students, focusing on psychological, social, and cultural factors influencing their sense of 'home.' By examining these narratives, the research provides insights into the dynamic interplay of emotional well-being, social integration, and cultural adaptation in transitional living spaces.

## **Background**

The concept of 'home' has long been a subject of interest in psychology, sociology, and environmental studies. Traditionally, 'home' has been perceived as a physical space offering emotional security, stability, and a sense of belonging. However, contemporary research expands this understanding to include emotional and relational dimensions, making 'home' a deeply personal and dynamic concept. Proshansky's (1978) exploration of place identity underscores that 'home' is as much about interpersonal relationships as it is about physical surroundings. This notion is supported by Moore (2000), who describes home as a symbol of self, tied to happiness, belonging, and emotional fulfillment.

For students moving away from their family homes to live in hostels, the transition often disrupts their existing sense of 'home.' Hostel living, characterized by shared spaces, cultural diversity, and structured rules, presents both opportunities and challenges. Research by Altman and Low (1992) highlights the role of emotional bonds and memories in forming place attachment, a critical factor in creating a sense of 'home' in new environments. Similarly, studies by Scannell and Gifford (2010) suggest that physical, social, and emotional dimensions collectively shape the attachment students develop toward their hostel spaces.

Hostel life has also been described as a "human practical laboratory" by Mishra (1994), where students not only acquire academic knowledge but also develop essential life skills such as independence, resilience, and interpersonal communication. However, this transition is not without challenges. Homesickness, loneliness, and cultural adjustments are common struggles faced by hostel students (Maunder & White, 2005). Environmental factors, such as shared spaces, privacy concerns, and infrastructural inadequacies, further complicate this adjustment (Evans & Lepore, 1993).

In the South Asian context, hostels bring together students from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. This diversity fosters social learning but also introduces cultural

barriers that can hinder the creation of a unified sense of belonging. Studies by Wang and Chen (2020) emphasize the significance of cultural adaptation in communal settings, where shared experiences and peer support systems play a pivotal role in mitigating stress and enhancing emotional well-being.

Despite extensive global research, limited studies have examined the unique experiences of Pakistani students living in hostels. Cultural norms, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic factors significantly shape how Pakistani students perceive and adapt to hostel life. This study aims to explore these experiences, focusing on the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of 'home' in hostel settings, and contribute to the growing body of literature on transitional living environments.

### **The place attachment theory environmental psychology and self determination theory as theoretical framework**

This study is grounded in several theoretical perspectives that provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of hostel students as they navigate the challenges of living away from their family homes. Place Attachment Theory (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) highlights the emotional bonds individuals form with their surroundings, shaped by personal, social, and environmental factors. For hostel students, personal belongings and memories create a sense of familiarity, while interactions with peers foster community and emotional security. The physical attributes of hostel spaces, such as room layout and shared amenities, further influence their attachment to the environment. Similarly, Environmental Psychology (Proshansky, 1978) emphasizes how physical surroundings, including shared and private spaces, impact emotional well-being and behavior. For instance, communal areas like dining halls encourage social interaction, while private rooms provide solitude and a sense of control.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) contributes insights into the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are critical for personal growth. Hostel life promotes autonomy as students manage their schedules and responsibilities, while the challenges of communal living foster competence and interpersonal skills. Meaningful connections with peers address the need for relatedness, helping mitigate feelings of homesickness and loneliness. Additionally, Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985) underscores the importance of social networks in managing stress and enhancing emotional well-being. In the hostel context, emotional support from peers alleviates isolation, and practical support through shared responsibilities fosters cooperation and resilience.

### **Data collection**

The data collection process for this study was designed to capture the lived experiences of students residing in hostels. A qualitative approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews to explore participants' perceptions and feelings about their hostel environment as a 'home.' Purposive sampling was used to recruit eight female participants aged 18–28, each with at least one year of hostel residency, ensuring they had sufficient experience to reflect on their adjustment and attachment to hostel life. Participants were selected from hostels associated with various educational institutions in Pakistan to ensure diversity in their experiences.

The semi-structured interviews, guided by open-ended questions, allowed participants to share their unique perspectives while focusing on key themes such as emotional experiences, adaptation challenges, personalization efforts, and social dynamics. Example questions included, “How do you perceive the concept of ‘home’ while living in the hostel?” and “What challenges have you

faced in making the hostel feel like home?" Each interview lasted at least 60 minutes, providing ample time for in-depth exploration of the participants' narratives. Interviews were conducted in quiet and comfortable settings, typically within the hostel premises, to ensure participants felt at ease and could openly share their experiences.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy and were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Transcripts were anonymized to maintain confidentiality, with pseudonyms used to protect participants' identities. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the process, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and safeguarding participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequences. This thorough data collection approach provided rich, detailed accounts of students' experiences, forming the basis for the thematic analysis.

**Table 1: Interview Guide**

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your background?
2. How long have you been living in a hostel, and what helped you choose hostel life?
3. What does "home" mean to you, and how do you feel about living in a hostel?
4. Do you feel at home in the hostel? If yes, why? If not, why not?
5. Have you tried to make your hostel room feel like home? If yes, how did it make you feel?
6. How do you feel when you enter your hostel room after a long day?
7. During your stay in the hostel, how do you cope with feelings of missing your family or home?
8. Can you share any memory—positive or negative—associated with your hostel room?
9. In your opinion, how does the design or layout of the hostel contribute to or hinder your efforts to make it feel like home?
10. How does interacting with your roommates and other hostel residents help you feel at home in the hostel?
11. Do you think the rules and policies of the hostel act as a barrier to feeling at home in the hostel?
12. Do you think our cultural background and personal history influence our efforts to feel at home in the hostel?
13. Looking back, how has your attempt to make the hostel feel like home impacted your well-being and adjustment?
14. If you had to advise incoming students on how to feel at home in the hostel, what advice would you give them?
15. Are there any additional thoughts or experiences you would like to share about your attempts to make the hostel feel like home?

### **Ethical considerations**

This study adhered to ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing data and using pseudonyms. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Interviews were conducted in comfortable settings, ensuring participants felt at ease. Sensitivity was maintained throughout, particularly when discussing potentially distressing topics, with participants allowed to skip questions or terminate the interview if needed.

## **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. First, transcripts were reviewed to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated to identify significant features. Codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed for coherence and alignment with the research questions. Themes were defined and named to capture their essence, and the findings were reported using illustrative quotes from participants to provide depth and context. This method ensured a rigorous and systematic analysis of the qualitative data.

Data collection and analysis were conducted in parallel, and researchers were able to introduce changes during the process. Interviews with women were conducted until data was saturated, and the context was described to the readers to decide if the results could be transferable to other similar settings. To enhance credibility, the analysis was triangulated by two independent researchers (JTMG and MGS). Confirmability of the results has been guaranteed by including literal quotes of the participants support the interpretation of results, and the entire work process was supervised by different members of the team not directly involved in the analysis of results.

**Table 2: Participant Demographics**

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Length of Stay in Hostel</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Reason for Choosing Hostel Living</b>
P1	Female	20	2 years	Muzaffarabad	Proximity to University
P2	Female	22	1 years	Rawalakot	For study
P3	Female	26	5 years	Kashmir	For study
P4	Female	21	3 years	Bagh	For study
P5	Female	23	1.5 years	Kashmir	For study
P6	Female	23	2 years	Lahore	For study
P7	Female	24	8 years	Muzaffarabad	For study
P8	Female	24	1.5 years	Gujranwala	For study

## **Findings**

The thematic analysis revealed several key themes that illuminate the experiences of hostel students in creating a sense of 'home.' These themes reflect the emotional, social, and environmental dimensions of hostel living and highlight the challenges and coping mechanisms employed by students.

### **Theme 1: Living Environment and Comfort**

Students frequently reported struggles in adapting to the hostel environment. The initial transition was marked by homesickness and discomfort as they adjusted to new routines and shared spaces. Personalization efforts, such as decorating their rooms with items from home, helped create a sense of familiarity, but these were often limited by hostel policies and space constraints. Despite these challenges, many students described their eventual adaptation to the environment, citing the importance of developing routines to create stability.

### **Theme 2: Social and Emotional Dynamics**

Social relationships played a pivotal role in helping students cope with the challenges of hostel life. Friendships and peer support created a sense of belonging, with many participants describing their roommates as a "family away from home." Emotional support during times of distress, such as homesickness or academic pressure, was a recurring theme. Shared activities, such as cooking or studying together, further strengthened these bonds and contributed to emotional well-being.

### **Theme 3: Independence and Responsibility**

Hostel life fostered a sense of independence and self-reliance among students. For many, this was their first experience of managing daily responsibilities, such as budgeting, cooking, and organizing their schedules. Participants emphasized that these responsibilities were initially daunting but ultimately led to personal growth and confidence.

### **Theme 4: Emotional Vulnerability and Coping**

Feelings of emotional vulnerability, particularly homesickness, were commonly reported, especially during the initial phases of hostel life. Participants developed coping mechanisms such as maintaining regular contact with family through video calls or voice messages. Building emotional connections with peers also helped alleviate loneliness and fostered resilience.

### **Theme 5: Cultural Dynamics and Adaptation**

The diversity of students in hostels exposed participants to various cultural practices and perspectives. While this diversity enriched their experience, it also posed challenges, particularly in navigating cultural differences and communication barriers. Over time, students developed greater cultural sensitivity and adaptability, which contributed to a more inclusive living environment.

### **Theme 6: Personalization and Space Constraints**

Participants emphasized the importance of personalizing their hostel rooms to create a sense of comfort and familiarity. Many brought items from home, such as photos, decorations, and personal belongings, to make their spaces feel more homely. However, space constraints and hostel policies often limited their ability to fully customize their environment. Despite these challenges, small efforts at personalization were described as emotionally uplifting and instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging.

### **Theme 7: Hostel Policies and Structural Influence**

The physical structure and policies of hostels had a significant impact on students' experiences. Strict rules, such as curfews and restrictions on movement, were often perceived as restrictive, limiting students' sense of autonomy. Additionally, infrastructural issues, such as inadequate ventilation, limited privacy, and poorly maintained common areas, contributed to discomfort. However, well-designed common spaces, such as lounges or study rooms, were highlighted as fostering social interactions and enhancing the hostel experience.

### **Theme 8: Academic and Personal Development**

Participants reported that hostel life contributed positively to their academic and personal growth. Time management, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills were enhanced as students navigated

the demands of communal living and academic responsibilities. Additionally, exposure to diverse perspectives and peer collaboration was identified as fostering critical thinking and adaptability, which were deemed valuable for personal development.

**Theme 9: Struggles and Challenges**

Challenges related to hostel infrastructure, homesickness, and adapting to new routines were recurring themes. Students often struggled with limited amenities, such as inadequate lighting and overcrowded rooms, which affected their well-being. Communication barriers and mental health challenges, including feelings of isolation and stress, were also highlighted. Despite these struggles, many participants found ways to adapt and cope, often through peer support and self-reliance.

**Theme 10: Interaction and Support**

Interactions with peers and the formation of support networks were integral to students' adjustment. Participants described how shared experiences, mutual support, and collaborative activities helped build a sense of community. Positive peer interactions not only alleviated stress but also provided motivation and emotional support, contributing to their overall well-being and sense of 'home.'

**Table 3: Overview theme, subtheme with quotation**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Representative Quotations</b>
<b>Living Environment and Comfort</b>	Initial Struggles with Hostel Life	<i>"We can never feel at home in the hostel because people come from different backgrounds, making adjustment hard."</i>
	Compromised Living Conditions	<i>"The hostel environment is restrictive with inadequate facilities, making it hard to feel comfortable."</i>
	Personalization of Space	<i>"I decorated my room with lights and family pictures to make it feel more like home."</i>
	Environmental Adaptation	<i>"You learn to adjust to the hostel rules and routines over time."</i>
	Feeling of Temporary Space	<i>"Even after making physical changes, the hostel feels like a temporary arrangement, not a home."</i>
	Restrictions and Policies	<i>"Hostel rules, like curfews, make it hard to manage your own schedule freely."</i>
<b>Social and Emotional Dynamics</b>	Friendship and Peer Support	<i>"My roommates became like family, helping me in studies and emotional matters."</i>
	Emotional Anchors	<i>"Whenever I feel homesick, I call my family or look at their pictures to feel better."</i>

	Social Interactions and Engagement	<i>"Daily conversations and shared activities with peers make the hostel feel less isolating."</i>
	Emotional Support from Peers	<i>"My roommates and I support each other during tough times, which helps me feel secure."</i>
	Unexpected Emotional Bonds	<i>"I formed connections with people I never thought I'd get close to."</i>
	Creating Family-Like Relationships	<i>"The friendships here feel like a new family, reducing my homesickness."</i>
<b>Independence and Responsibility</b>	Journey to Independence	<i>"Hostel life taught me to manage my schedule and become independent."</i>
	Developing Self-Reliance	<i>"Living here has made me responsible for my own well-being and routine."</i>
	Growth through Responsibility	<i>"Taking on daily tasks helped me grow and feel more capable."</i>
	Self-Discovery	<i>"I've discovered my strengths while managing life on my own in the hostel."</i>
	Embracing Solitude	<i>"Spending time alone has taught me to understand myself better."</i>
<b>Emotional Vulnerability and Coping</b>	Homesickness and Emotional Struggles	<i>"The initial days were difficult; I missed home and my family a lot."</i>
	Coping Mechanisms	<i>"Talking to my family over video calls helped me deal with loneliness."</i>
	Emotional Relief through Memories	<i>"Looking at photos and remembering home brought me comfort."</i>
	Impact of Room Condition	<i>"The room environment can either increase stress or provide relief, depending on its condition."</i>
<b>Cultural Dynamics and Adaptation</b>	Challenges of Cultural Diversity	<i>"Adjusting to different cultural practices was initially hard but later became enriching."</i>
	Learning from Cultural Diversity	<i>"Living with people from various backgrounds taught me adaptability."</i>
	Embracing Cultural Identity	<i>"Sharing our traditions made me feel connected even in a new place."</i>
<b>Hostel Policies and Infrastructure</b>	Impact of Room Design and Policies	<i>"The design of common spaces influenced my social interactions and comfort."</i>



	Structural Challenges	<i>"Inadequate lighting and ventilation affected my comfort in the hostel."</i>
	Balancing Privacy and Communal Living	<i>"The lack of privacy was difficult, but I learned to adapt over time."</i>
	Strict Rules and Freedom Restrictions	<i>"Hostel rules like curfews limit our ability to manage time independently."</i>
<b>Academic and Personal Development</b>	Time Management and Routines	<i>"Hostel life taught me to balance my academic and personal responsibilities better."</i>
	Continuous Learning	<i>"Living here has been a constant process of self-improvement and learning."</i>
	Interpersonal Skills	<i>"Interacting with diverse people helped me improve my communication and problem-solving abilities."</i>
<b>Struggles and Challenges</b>	Infrastructure and Facilities	<i>"The bathrooms are poorly maintained, and that creates daily struggles."</i>
	Mental Health Challenges	<i>"Sometimes I feel isolated and overwhelmed, but I've learned to cope with peer support."</i>
	Financial Constraints	<i>"Managing hostel fees and daily expenses is a challenge."</i>
<b>Interaction and Support</b>	Positive Peer Relationships	<i>"Working together on shared tasks created a strong bond among us."</i>
	Collegial Cooperation	<i>"Collaborating with peers helped in both studies and emotional matters."</i>
	Building Support Systems	<i>"Peer support played a major role in helping me overcome challenges in the hostel."</i>
	Social Motivation	<i>"Encouragement from friends helped me stay focused on my goals."</i>

## **Discussion**

This study explored the subjective experiences of hostel students, focusing on how they perceive and create a sense of 'home' in an environment far from their family residences. The findings revealed a complex interplay of emotional, social, and environmental factors that influence students' adaptation to hostel life, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for personal growth.

The transition from home to hostel often involves a period of emotional vulnerability, marked by homesickness, loneliness, and discomfort. Consistent with previous studies, this research found that students initially struggle with adjusting to unfamiliar routines, shared spaces, and limited

personalization options (Altman & Low, 1992). However, over time, students demonstrated remarkable resilience by developing coping mechanisms, such as personalizing their spaces with items from home and building daily routines, which aligns with Scannell and Gifford's (2010) place attachment theory. These efforts were instrumental in helping students create a sense of stability and familiarity within the hostel environment.

Social interactions emerged as a critical factor in fostering a sense of belonging and emotional security among hostel students. Participants frequently described their roommates and peers as a "family away from home," providing emotional support and companionship during difficult times. This finding supports the principles of social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which highlights the protective role of interpersonal connections in managing stress and enhancing well-being. Furthermore, shared activities such as cooking or studying together were not only practical but also helped students form deep bonds, reflecting the importance of communal living in transitional environments (Brown et al., 2020).

Hostel life was found to be a transformative experience, fostering independence, self-reliance, and personal growth. For many students, this was their first exposure to managing responsibilities such as budgeting, cooking, and time management without the immediate support of their families. These findings align with Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy and competence in fostering personal development. Participants reported that these challenges, although initially overwhelming, eventually led to increased confidence and a stronger sense of self.

The diversity of hostel communities introduced both challenges and learning opportunities for students. Adapting to cultural differences required patience and openness, as participants navigated varying social norms and practices. Over time, these interactions promoted cultural sensitivity and adaptability, echoing Berry's (1997) acculturation model, which suggests that cultural integration fosters social harmony and mutual understanding. Despite initial difficulties, many students valued the exposure to diverse perspectives, viewing it as a significant aspect of their personal development.

The findings also highlighted several challenges associated with hostel policies and infrastructure. Strict rules, limited privacy, and inadequate facilities often compounded students' stress, making the adaptation process more difficult. These results are consistent with Evans and Lepore's (1993) findings, which emphasize the impact of environmental factors on mental health. Addressing these issues requires institutional efforts to improve hostel infrastructure, provide private spaces, and balance freedom with necessary regulations. Mental health services, such as counseling and peer support programs, should also be made accessible to help students manage the emotional challenges of hostel life..

### **Limitations and strengths of the study**

The study presents several limitations that affect the generalizability and depth of its findings. First, it focused exclusively on female students, which restricts the ability to apply the results to male students or other gender groups in hostel settings. Additionally, the research was conducted in Pakistan, and its findings may not fully reflect the experiences of students in hostels from different cultural or regional backgrounds, limiting its external validity. The relatively small sample size also hampers the ability to capture a wide range of experiences, potentially skewing the outcomes. Furthermore, the study relied on short-term observations, which may not accurately represent the long-term adjustments or challenges students face in hostel life. The self-reported

nature of the interviews introduces the possibility of bias, as responses could be influenced by participants' personal prejudices or emotional states.

## **Conclusions**

By exploring students' subjective experiences of being "at home" in hostels, this study revealed valuable insights while facing inherent limitations. The small sample size and potential researcher bias caution against broad generalizations, emphasizing the need for cautious interpretation. Despite these limitations, the semi-structured interviews provided depth, revealing nuances in how students construct their "home" away from their family environment. However, the qualitative nature of the data presented challenges in terms of broader applicability beyond the demographics studied.

Going forward, future research should target larger and more diverse samples, potentially combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Such approaches will enrich our understanding of how students perceive "home" in hostel settings, providing a more comprehensive view of this complex and subjective concept

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