



**FORMAN
CHRISTIAN
COLLEGE**
(A CHARTERED UNIVERSITY)

**Third Spaces and Wellbeing: A Perceptual Analysis of Experiences in Third Spaces and
their Impact on the Wellbeing of Urban Undergraduate Students in Lahore**

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Abstract

Existing literature on the issue investigates examples of the adverse impact of the closure of third spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic with evidence that suggests a direct correlation between the need for third space and its impact on holistic well-being. Literature review regarding well-being is in context to the impact on collaboration and productivity. However, there is a gap in the literature for third spaces for university-going urban students, especially in the context of South Asia. This study explores the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding their experiences of adapting to informal third spaces and its perceived impact on their perceived well-being. This research would record the diverse perceptual experiences of students and how they access, construct and navigate third spaces. The ontological position for this research is social constructivism, which helps explore the assigned meaning of third experiences through the intersectional lens of class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. This paper uses third space theory and critical urban theory to analyse the data collected and assess the barriers and enablers urban students in Lahore face when participating in third spaces. The study includes a sample of 9 students from Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), in-depth semi-structured interviews have been used that allowed the researcher to understand the nuances of the urban student experience. The data has been analysed using reflective thematic analysis to identify perceived determinants of third spaces, barriers faced in third spaces, and their impact on the perceived well-being of students. In conclusion, the thematic findings were used to show how urban and pedagogy developers and policymakers can design spaces that are conducive to the well-being of urban students.

Keywords: third spaces, holistic wellbeing, spatiality, university students

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Introduction

More and more young people are opting to take the route to higher education. According to UNESCO, 234 million students have enrolled in higher education universities across the world due to enrollment rates doubling over the past 20 years (UNESCO, 2024). However, the cost of higher education in Pakistan continues to increase despite the government restriction on tuition cost, making it less and less accessible and making universities a niche for the selected few, with most students and their families barely affording to pay tuition in hopes of developing skills and connections that would ensure social and economic mobility (Abid et al., 2023).

University is a transformative period for young adults, as it comes with more autonomy and independence compared to school life. This transition period is critical to developing as an individual, as it comes with new challenges that young adults are unprepared for. These challenges include academic pressures, mobility issues, compromised mental health, financial stress, and, most noticeably, stress regarding one's social identity due to confusion over new social roles. Conley et al. (2020) discuss how identities shift as university students adjust to the new environment and engage with new ideas. This transition to adulthood comes with confronting questions about ethnic, gender, and sexual identity, which disrupts the student's existing social life and relationships as they attempt to navigate new ones with their peers, faculty, and staff (Huguenel & Conley, 2020).

University life and newfound independence expose students to new ideologies that challenge their preconceived notions. This leads to a conflict in the way of thinking that alters one's self-perception and perception of their constructed realities. Third spaces act as hubs for building communities and experiencing new things in a wholesome environment that challenges you and requires applied critical engagement. This enables students to explore their self and identity through intermingling with diverse groups. Third spaces can be

physical or digital spaces that enable collaboration and finding compatible people which enhances the experience of student life. Ray Oldenburg refers to third spaces as places where people spend time between the first place (home) and second space (work) and engage in sociability, spontaneity, community building, and emotional expressiveness while enjoying each other's company (Jeffres et al., 2009).

Students in Pakistan have historically been a powerful group and have acted as a pressure group that influences the country's politics. However, since 1984, the state has imposed a ban on student unions and systematically alienated and depoliticised students. The imposed ban criminalises any political activity by students to mobilise and unionise for their interests, which has hindered the development of the social sphere and informal place for university students to socialise and grow, compromising not only the development of society but also the social and intellectual well-being of the youth (Rashid, 2019). In recent years, literature on the importance of third spaces has increased in the Western context, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of informal spaces. There is a gap in the literature on how third places for university students take form in Pakistan, and how students have navigated the impact, especially post-pandemic with the closure of free or affordable informal spaces.

In his work "The Metropolis and Mental Life," George Simmel, 1903, discusses how a city's characteristics and environment alienate its inhabitants from each other and the culture of urban life. Simmel argues that urbanites use the cover of anonymity to attempt to maintain individuality in a fast-paced environment with an overwhelming number of external cultural forces (Capetillo-Ponce, 2004). In recent years, urban planners and designers have contributed to the multidisciplinary discourse on developing policy regarding third spaces, the impact of urban infrastructure on the quality of life, and how the "constructed

environment” contributes to the “objective conditions of living” of cosmopolitan citizens (Jeffres et al., 2009).

Lee (2022), in his research, found a positive link between academic performance, mental health, and the overall well-being of students who have mobility to access third places. The findings also suggest that third spaces differed for students depending on their sentiments and how they perceived the “restorative quality” of a certain space by assigning positive sentiments meaning that the diversity of students also enhances the diversity of the kind of places the access to spending quality time (Lee, 2022).

Through the spaces students occupy, youth subcultures are formed that are either enabled by the space or formed in reaction to it. Due to factors like class, gender, and ethnicity, students in Lahore who already have limited social capital to support themselves find themselves in a compromised position when they don’t have mobility to access spaces that allow individual and community growth.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To help identify and fill the gap in the literature for third spaces and how they take form in university settings in a South Asian context, specifically in the Urban Cosmopolitan area of Lahore, Pakistan.
2. To investigate the formation and characteristics of third spaces by focusing on the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students in university settings.
3. To identify the needs and preferences of university students regarding the development of third spaces within their academic environment, aiming to understand the factors that contribute to the creation of inclusive and conducive spaces for student well-being.
4. Explore how the absence of third spaces impacts the identity formation process of university students in Lahore, Pakistan, with a particular focus on the role of student spaces of social interaction on and off campus
5. Examine the group dynamics and interactions within third spaces, specifically exploring how university students navigate and construct social relationships in the absence of designated third spaces.

Research Questions

The research questions in the study are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of undergraduate students about the features and determinants of third spaces?
2. What is the perceived relationship between third space experience and perceived well-being?
3. How are third spaces identified and accessed?

Significance of Study

The significance of this study lies in understanding how undergraduate urban students deal with structural isolation in cities due to urban design challenges and its adverse impact on the student body. The well-being of undergraduate students is a critical issue for higher education as the quality of university life impacts academic performance and institutional standards. This study explores the methods university students of Lahore employ to ensure their well-being and manage the social and architectural barriers as urbanites. This study looks into the youth initiatives and subcultures and what impact commodification has on the identity formation of students to understand their barriers towards wellbeing.

The study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of challenges university students deal with when socialising due to the lack of tangible third spaces. It explores how these third spaces influence the environment on campus and impacts individual, interpersonal, and institutional interactions; which influence the quality of collaboration and academic life (Sevtsuk et al., 2022).

Theoretical framework

This study uses two theoretical frameworks to understand the relationship between third spaces and the well-being space of urban undergraduate students: critical urban theory and third space theory. This study explores the structural challenges students face while navigating the urban environment using critical urban theory to ground the findings using it as a basis to analyse the challenges faced while navigating urban environments. There are four key assumptions of critical urban theory: inequality is socially constructed and produced, and it is unevenly distributed and experienced by people in different parts of the city through lived spaces and diverse cultural, social, and economic contexts Second, the urban environment is inherently political. Third, the built environment reinforces existing social structures. Lastly, Urban theorists also talk about alternative spaces to achieve their goals as

they have the potential for resistance this paper will look at Critical urban theory in light of how the lack of third spaces shapes the urban experience from a social constructivist ontological position that accesses how interactionism within urban spaces creates a shared social reality (Morgan, 2000).

The second theoretical framework for this study is the third space theory which is a theory of spatiality that suggests that third spaces are hybrid spaces which can be transformative as they allow people of different identities to intersect grow and generate enabling the space to form through the meaning assigned to it allowing continuous reimagination of its spatiality as a social hub (Tatham, 2023). This theory gives a framework for encompassing the lived experiences of participants in third spaces.

Both critical urban theory and third space theory help to adequately explain the intersection of structural challenges of urban inequality and individual agency. They provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of third spaces on the perceived well-being of urban undergraduate students.

Literature Review

With the rise of capitalism and the commodification of leisure, the closure of third places has become an issue globally. Public spaces being closed all over the world in light of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused concerns over the impact of this trend on society and the well-being of citizens. Ray Oldenburg coined the term “third places” to refer to informal public places where people can gather aside from home (first place), and work (second place), where people can socialise, interact, and build community. According to Oldenburg, the third place can be cafes, parks, or community centres. He states that these physical spaces can act as hubs that enable and further social connections and give people mobility for civic engagement, which is essential for promoting grassroots politics and constructing patterns of public interaction and association that give psychological support to individuals and communities (Jeffres et al., 2009).

The commodification of leisure in urban centres disproportionately affects certain groups who do not possess capital that allows them access to these spaces due to the elite capture of public places and leisure spots like parks, coffee shops, and cafes, which now have a higher price point and an exclusive crowd that students as a population can not afford (Derosssett, 2019).

This literature review will explore the impact of the lack of recreational “third spaces” on urban students and the youth subcultures that have developed in response to it by looking into the definitions of and constructs of spatiality in context to pedagogy, existing literature on third spaces and student well being, background in context to COVID19, and lastly, global spaces and the impact of existing policy on students of different countries.

Henri Lefebvre contributed towards the understanding of social space and its construction through his post-modern post-structuralist geographic foundational work “The Production of Space,” (1973) which proposed the idea of hybrid and transformative spaces

that bridge the physical, mental, and social aspects of social experiences. Lefebvre talks about the triadic concept of social space. He theorises that spatiality is composed of perceived (material & liminal) spaces, conceived (abstract, planned, and designed) spaces, and lived (experimental everyday) spaces. He talks about how these three influence social interactions and spatial experiences (Hafner, 2012).

Edward Soja, an urbanist political geographer, built on Lefebvre's work and talked about the need for third spaces to ensure the holistic well-being of people (Hafner, 2012). Spatial locations that enable diverse identities to coexist become "in-between" spaces that allow the intersection and extension of resources in the first and second place- this enhances social and educational capital in an educational context.

Bourdieu (1980), as mentioned in Burke et al, (2019) suggests that knowledge is power and "professional space", and "professional code" are tools for maintaining control over students and learning, he states that the design of the syllabus and how knowledge is imparted also controls how it is learned (Burke et al, 2013). In recent years, there has been an increased focus on pedagogical research regarding structuring the educational system to be more intersectional by applying educational theory to diversity. Formulating policies and interventions that strive to affirm intersecting identities of marginalised students ensures holistic well-being and improves academic performance. The third space becomes an important tool for implementing this policy as it enables diversity and experiential (hands-on/active) learning through socialisation with peers. Educators have been working towards hybridity and trying to bring the restorative quality of third spaces within primary classrooms. Research on spatiality and how the infrastructure of educational institutions and the physical design of an educational space impact power dynamics between people of different backgrounds. A physical space either enables or hinders an equitable and inclusive

atmosphere that enables the acquisition of knowledge that shapes the social reproduction of class, race, and gender (Burke et al, 2013).

Urban pedagogy theorists have discussed the impact of campus layout and its influences on communication and collaboration amongst the university community. A study conducted at MIT in 2022 illustrated how spatiality impacts social and research relationships between people who frequent common third spaces like corridors, eating venues, and courtyards on campus (Sevtsuk et al., 2022).

Waters, (2023) talks about the impact of third space on the flow of information amongst students and its impact on social capital. His work discusses how law students find it difficult to integrate within groups as grad school is individualistic. Waters (2023) suggests that third spaces are liminal places to build community away from the home and classroom. He takes the example of libraries as neutral ground that allows students to be autonomous and allows space for forming connections which increase academic performance through community-based accountability (Waters, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine policy to contain the spread of the virus led to the closure of public spaces, which led to people developing mental-health-related issues like depression and anxiety which impacted their well-being. Self-reported data collected from 161 universities across England indicated that when household interaction was prohibited and vaccine rates were low compared to when they were high, the mental health of participants significantly developed over 6 months when access to green third spaces and social connectedness was restored (Lemyre et al., 2024).

Waters' (2023) work on how grad students are individualistic, can be used to build a comparison with George Simmel's idea of how urbanites are hyper-individualistic and alienated from each other. In cities that aren't walkable due to their infrastructure lacks opportunities for wholesome social interactions between citizens. Students in Lahore due to

lack of access to recreational policy and third spaces face loneliness, stress, and alienation which leads to developing mental health disorders, isolation, drug use, and other problems that impact their well-being. This paper will look into what strategies urban students in Lahore employ to cope with unaccommodating campus infrastructures based on their perceived sentiment toward the space (Finlay et al., 2019).

Methodology

Research Design

This research uses a descriptive qualitative research design to collect data from respondents using semi-structured interviews (Appendix D). Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to do qualitative exploratory research, allowing the researcher to explore the interpretations of the experiences of the respondents, and enable the active role of the participants in the research process and outcomes.

To develop an understanding of the perceptions of urban undergraduate students regarding their experiences in third space and the navigation of the lack of third spaces among urban university students, a descriptive and exploratory qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews is used as the primary method of data collection. This method helps understand the perception of well-being through the lens of the experiences of the participants while identifying the recurring themes across the interview. This qualitative approach to research is adapted from Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) where the researcher “seeks to understand the world from the participants’ point of view” (Tenny et al., 2022).

Conceptualization

Third Space

The concept of the third space has been used as a sociocultural term to designate communal space, as distinct from the home (first space) or work (second space) (aquizoncolquitt, 2024).

The “third place” is a term coined by US sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place*. It describes a place outside your home or work where you can relax and hang out. Your first place is your home, a private and domestic space (Khan & Kumar, 2021).

Social Capital

Social networks share the same norms and values and “trust or reciprocal sharing takes place in those relationships” (Waters, 2023).

Consumerist spaces

Elite capture of public space - spaces particularly linked with leisure and personal identity (Shankar, 2006).

Holistic wellbeing

Academic, social, physical, and mental well-being (STEMM et al., 2021).

Spatiality

According to Lefebvre, spatiality is composed of perceived (material) spaces, conceived (abstract, planned, and designed) spaces, and lived (experimental everyday) spaces. He talks about how these three influence social interactions and spatial experiences (Hafner, 2012).

Access and Sampling

The eligibility criteria for the participants of this study are as follows:

1. The participant is currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program

2. The participant is a student of FCCU, Lahore
3. Student is engaged in leadership or engaged in community activities in some capacity
4. Undergraduate students who have taken a leadership position in curating third spaces

This is a small-scale qualitative research study that has used ‘purposive sampling’ and ‘snowball sampling’ to assess the population from which the data would be collected. The aim for data collection was to conduct 15-20 interviews in four months or until theoretical saturation is achieved.

The population was accessed through student social media, online student groups, personal contacts, and referrals. 15 people responded to the socio-demographic survey, out of which 11 matched the eligibility criteria, from which 9 were interviewed.

Limitations

Since this is a small-scale qualitative study, it can’t claim to represent the entire student population of Lahore, especially as the participants are students of FCCU. Secondly, since the ontological frame for this study is social constructivism, there is no tool used to measure well-being and social capital.

Tools

A Google form was shared with the participants which included a consent form (Appendix A) that detailed the guidelines for participation. A 14-question socio-demographic survey (Appendix B) was used to access the intersecting identities of the participants and help contextualise the findings from the data better. This was followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews using an interview guide (Appendix C) which explored the experiences of barriers and enablers of the third space.

Ethics

The participants were provided with an informed consent form (Appendix A), which enabled them to withdraw consent for their information to be used for this study within two weeks of the interview being conducted. The researcher maintained the confidentiality of the participants throughout the study and transcribed the data using pseudonyms. The personal information and identifying remarks of the respondents have been anonymised in the study.

During the interview process, it was made sure to stay vary of how the questions were posed to the respondent to make sure to avoid interviewer bias or leading questions, which would compromise the integrity of the research.

Data Analysis

Data analysis: Braun and Clarke's six-phase qualitative analysis will be used

1. Familiarisation
2. Coding
3. Generating themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Writing up

A follow-up discussion with the participants to review the transcribed data was proposed to ensure that the transcribed data gave an accurate portrayal of their experiences. To ensure that the findings of this study were high in validity, respondent validation or member validation was used where the participants were given an account of the findings and asked to confirm them.

This method ensured correspondence between the researcher's findings and the participant's experiences. Throughout the interview, the researcher's understanding of

responses was consistently confirmed by giving respondents the opportunity to correct them when needed. At the end of the interview, each participant was provided with an account of what they had said in the interview alongside the observations.

Findings

The aim of this study was to identify:

- (i) the features and determinants of third spaces
- (ii) challenges university students face in accessing and using third spaces
- (iii) perceived impact of third spaces on well-being

The following three areas of findings are reported:

1. Features and determinants of third space
2. Challenges of accessing and using third spaces (Table 2)
3. Perceived impact of third spaces on well-being

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Sociodemographic Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	24	4	44.4
	23	1	11.1
	22	2	22.2
	21	1	11.1
	19	1	11.1
Gender	Queer	4	44.4
	Man	3	33.3
	Woman	2	22.2
Year of Study	Senior	7	77.8
	Junior	1	11.1
	Freshman	1	11..
Major	Political Science	3	33.3
	Philosophy	2	22.2
	Psychology	2	22.2

	Sociology	2	22.2
Monthly Income	Above 200,000	5	55.6
	100,000-200,000	2	22.2
	Prefer not to say	2	22.2
Regional Belonging	Urban	6	66.6
	Rural	3	33.4
Provincial Belonging	Punjab	7	77.7
	KPK	1	11.1
	Gilgit-Baltistan	1	11.1
Leadership Role	Yes	9	100
	No	0	0
Living Arrangement	Nuclear family	6	66.6
	Hostel	3	33.4
Relationship Status	Single	7	77.8
	Committed	2	22.2
Religion	Islam	4	44.4
	Atheist	2	22.2
	Agnostic	2	22.2
	Prefer not to say	1	11.1
Mental Health Issues	Yes	6	66.7
	No	3	33.3

1. Perceived attributes and expectations of third spaces

1a. Familiar spaces that ensure a safe and restorative experience

Participants talked about how they look for familiarity and the role it plays in third spaces offering them a restorative experience. They mentioned that they do not need to have their guard up, can freely interact in the space, and use it for the activities personalised to them without fearing for their safety or facing judgement and social pressures. One student mentioned:

“If we do the activities we do in third spaces on campus we would face social pressure to stop. So, for example, we aren’t safe to talk and sit as we wish in cafes” -Ahmed (393-402)

1b. Quiet isolated spaces like the mosque and botanical gardens

Participants discussed their preference for mosques and botanical gardens as third spaces where they could find peace, and solitude and have sufficient alone time. However, some students mentioned they were unable to access these as frequently due to chronic diseases (n=3). One student mentioned:

“There are some places like mosques and botanical gardens that I prefer. I don't mention these places to people as I prefer to be alone there and have time to myself to think and be at peace”. – Noor (2174-2178)

1c. Affordable roadside cafes

Most participants talked about affordability being an important feature for them to have a restorative experience in third spaces, and how roadside *Dhabas* (cafes) were a preferred choice. One student mentioned:

“Roadside cafes and cheap dhabas are affordable and good options” -Hania (1863-1866)

1d. A safe environment like a friend’s house

Mostly women and ethnic minority participants expressed the need for the assurance of safety being an important feature of third spaces for them. One student mentioned:

“As a female, I prefer my friend’s home, which is safer compared to public third spaces.” -Hania (1895-1897)

1e. Impact of Infrastructural design of third spaces

Participants stressed the importance of urban design and how good designs influenced their choice to visit third spaces. One student mentioned:

“I choose third spaces based on design and infrastructure. For example, I like spaces with circular benches, private corners, and comfortable furniture and sufficient lighting.”-Taqi (49-60)

2. Challenges of accessing and using third spaces

2a. Excessive stimuli in third spaces (smell, noise, light and traffic) which is stress-inducing

Participants mentioned that excessive stimuli such as smells, noise, lighting, and traffic chaos negatively impacted their experience of third spaces. One student from Gilgit Baltistan mentioned:

“Overall, the environment of Lahore has somehow impacted me and other students from rural areas negatively. The noise and ambience of third spaces disturbs us even more.” -Ali (518-522)

2b. Unsanitary conditions in third spaces

Participants described that many third spaces are unsanitary and unhygienic, possibly contributing to the rising infectious disease burden. One student mentioned:

“...often these places are filthy and do not smell very pleasant. So, last week I went to one of these roadside cafes at the Androon Lahore and we left from there without even ordering chai because of the traffic and an Urs (death anniversary of a Sufi saint) was going on too, so because of unpleasant smell ...because cleanliness is just not a priority, and even the utensils you are served in are dirty” -Hania (1867-1878)

2c. Monetized third spaces with high entrance fees & requiring purchases to stay

Participants stated that most third spaces were costly and required them to purchase something to stay. For students with no income and little spending money, this meant restricted access to third spaces. One student mentioned:

“But again, the places where I feel safe are also expensive and spending money doesn't give me a restorative feeling and acts as a barrier to me feeling at ease. There have been times where I, like there

is this coffee shop called Third Culture and I went there with a friend and we didn't have money so the waiters, the staff there asked us to leave after 30 minutes because we weren't buying anything from them, so they wanted other customers who were paying, to take our place.” -Hania (1842-187)

2d. Lack of public transport or accessible third spaces at walking distance

Participants shared how most third spaces could not be accessed by walking and required them to pay for transport. In the absence of free and quality public transport, this was a cost burden for students. One student mentioned:

“So, it is quite difficult to find transport or walk to third spaces.” -Ali (544-551)

2e. Restriction of diverse social experiences (ethnicity, class, gender, academic backgrounds) and harassment of minorities

When inquired whether they had noticed any difference in how students of different backgrounds interact with each other and socialise, participants commented on the lack of integration in third spaces due to ethnicity, class, gender, and academic differences. They described those students preferred to socialise with people from their own backgrounds. One student mentioned:

“I think it's important for students to mix with people who are not from their backgrounds. This way they will learn about different people, their values and traditions.” -Ali (544-551)

Some minority participants even mentioned that they were harassed and bullied in third spaces:

“So, my identity is Pashtun, and I'm from KPK. For the past 4 years while living in Lahore, I have faced some difficulty participating in social events due to the lack of third spaces, because in most places I would go to, you'd have to pay. So, even if I get to these spaces, I have to face a lot of humiliation and sometimes harassment due to the way I sound and the way I look” - Ahmed (437-441)

2f. Use of intoxicants and substances in third spaces

Participants reflected upon the use of intoxicants and substances as a recreational activity in third spaces. Some mentioned that the use of intoxicants was important to build a bonding experience with one's peers. One student described:

“Smoking and consuming alcohol in third spaces helps to break a lot of social barriers and develop more friendship bonds between men and women, which we cannot do on campus.” -Hania (1966-1973)

2g. Inability to use third spaces for social mobilisation (student fee hikes, political voices)

Participants commented on how third spaces did not provide them the environment to support discussion and debate, which was needed for students were to develop ideas for social mobilisation for relevant issues such as school fee hikes and rising inflation. One student described:

“Long debates and discussions are only possible in open spaces, but there are no seating areas or shade in open spaces....and due to high temperature, we couldn't sustain the flow of our initiatives for social change.” -Ahmed (332-339)

2h. False identity formation to belong in third spaces

Participants reflected on how individuals formed identities and sometimes changed them in third spaces to belong and gain social status. One student described:

“I feel like you need to be different in third spaces to be accepted. I get my social capital from third spaces, where I pretend to be different, or I pretend to be better than everyone around me. Like arranging my hair, a certain way to develop a persona and an attitude so I am perceived as popular.” - Fatima (1512-1523)

2i. Surveillance and scrutiny from proctors on campus third spaces

Participants described the excessive surveillance and scrutiny from proctors on campus third spaces, which prevented students from developing social capital and gaining the intended well-being from third spaces. One student described:

“A lot of third spaces on campus, because of the proctors become useless for us. The proctors are always suspicious of you, and then you have to be vigilant, even if you're not doing anything wrong, even if you're not breaking any policies, it feels like you're doing something wrong, because you are always looked at suspiciously, like, oh, this group is doing something because they've been sitting here for so long” -Minahil (1758-1763)

3. Perceived impact of third spaces on wellbeing

3a. Mobilising for student politics and how it prevents them from representing their interests

Participants expressed how the lack of accessible third spaces acted as a barrier in mobilising with their peers to represent their interests as a group, often enabling the university authority and policymakers to proceed with decisions not made in the best interests of the students.

One participant shared:

“ We see students not having spaces to sit etc. and this doesn't let them mobilise for the issues they face like we tried organising students against the fee hike issue in fc, but due to the unavailability of physical space students ... we couldn't sustain the flow of our initiative”- Ahmed(332-341)

“Often university proctors would come and dictate how to sit and morally police us creating unnecessary conflict that would ruin our unwinding time.” - Hania (1950-1957)

3b. Long-term well-being and career opportunities through networking

Participants reflected on their experiences of enhanced long-term social and economic mobility through networking in niche third spaces that enabled them to find opportunities and

support systems that furthered their professional growth. One graduating student talked about their experience:

“I went to Olomopolo and I made a few friends there and I am still friends with all those people, and that is a third space, I went to see a stand-up comedy show, and that has helped me in my career as well because now I am reaching out to those people for job opportunities and to help me with my thesis or my writing and connect me with other people” – Hania (1915-1922)

3c. Intellectual well-being

Participants expressed that the experience of higher education has been underwhelming due to a lack of intellectual stimulation accessible outside the classroom. They commented on the lack of infrastructural ability of the buildings to accommodate intellectually stimulating interactions:

“The one thing which I can assume a person’s interest is if they are reading any book if they are reading any book, but what happened is, what happens here that students don't read books in the in the even because classrooms are not free, they don't read in the noisy corridors..., so I can assume about those students, that these students are like-minded so that I can have a conversation.” - Noor (2200-2207)

3d. Loneliness and mental health

A common theme that emerged when talking about well-being was mental well-being; participants reported emerging patterns of loneliness and isolation that adversely affected them. One student expanded on how it impacts them and people around them:

“ The first thing you learn is man is a social animal and if you are not going to be social then you would think of other ways to fulfil that. You always require people no matter what you do even if you have terrible coping mechanisms such as smoking or drug use. Even if you have those you are still going to need to be in touch with people. So yes, I think the lack of third spaces takes a toll on your mental well-being.”- Fatima (1595-1599)

3e. Financial stress and drain

Participants talked about financial stress and pressures students face to keep up with an urban lifestyle which impacts their academic performance. One student reflected on the experience of their peers who are not from financially well-off backgrounds and how these students work extra hours on jobs or work-study on financial aid:

“They usually pull a night shift and then come in the morning for classes due to which they have disturbed sleep patterns so they can support their education and lifestyle and this negatively impacts not only their education but also their social life, ... all day which, of course, has an impact on their overall wellbeing.” -Ahmed (373-378)

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the experiences and challenges of university students who access and utilise third spaces. Three broad themes have been found- the features urban students look for to access third spaces, the socio environmental challenges students face within these spaces, and the impact of third space on their perceived well-being. The findings suggest that third spaces become an important determinant of the social experience as a whole and are an important catalyst in the overall perceived well-being and productivity in the first (home) and second spaces (classrooms on the university campus), as third spaces become restorative spaces to escape to for students.

With regard to the first broad theme, it was found that students look for familiarity in third spaces, be it places they can regularly frequent or certain features that ensure familiarity and comfort, as the safety and security make up for a restorative experience for most participants. To escape urban stimuli many participants expressed the need for quiet and isolated third spaces, as they reported how it is hard to formulate third spaces in their second spaces (work/ classroom) due to infrastructural barriers in place that amplify the noise pollution and overstimulate the participants. Students mentioned parks, mosques, and gardens they frequent in search of quiet, isolated spaces. Other students who were hostelites also mentioned that cost and safety were issues due to which they chose affordable roadside cafes to wind down; however, while these cafes satisfied the affordability requirement, they failed to provide a restorative experience. This was especially reported by participants who belonged to gender, sexual, and ethnic minorities as they felt a threat to safety which was disruptive of their third space experience. Due to this, a few participants said they opted to use their friend's personal spaces that offered them safety, but at the cost of restricting their social experience.

Participants reported the unique infrastructural barriers in place in urban spaces pose a barrier in curating third spaces or utilising them to their optimal capacity, stating that these places aren't designed to be vulnerable and prioritise certain functions like enabling a hierarchal teacher-student dynamic over creating a space to build connection. This lack of inclusivity not only restricts social mobility for students but also leads to greater social isolation undermining the functionality of third spaces as well. The existing literature on urban design uses the term "hostile architecture" which refers to an approach to urban design that is built to limit certain behaviours. These kinds of designs are used to specifically alienate minorities and stop social mobilization that hinders community building by discouraging social interactions creating an unwelcoming environment that leads to social isolation. This undermines all public spaces' inclusivity and functionality, suggesting the need to work on urban designs to enhance community cohesion (Roberts, 2023).

The second broad theme explores the socio-environmental challenges students face within the third space they frequent which keep them from having a restorative experience or if the spaces they visit don't satisfy their needs. Most respondents, two of whom also labelled themselves as neurodivergent, expressed how urban third spaces are overcrowded and this traffic creates an unseemly environment with excessive urban stimuli such as smell, noise, light, and traffic which is stress-inducing. Findings also suggested how these stimuli become even more of a burden for women who have mobility issues accessing these spaces, and ethnic minorities who reported cultural shock and language as an added barrier. Various environmental distractions affect your cognitive performance across different tasks highlighting that distractions can significantly disrupt focus suggesting that creating a distraction-free environment is important for enhancing students' engagement in third spaces (Vredeveldt & Perfect, 2014).

Students also mentioned that the third spaces they have available to them as affordable options tend to be unsanitary and unsafe environments that don't promote health and safety. On the other hand, with more expensive third spaces, students are offered not only a restorative environment but also networking opportunities for social mobility. At the same time, even students who could afford more expensive third spaces reported that the financial strain they face from going to such spaces makes the whole experience counterintuitive. Existing literature highlights how limited third spaces have also evolved and created a division as wealthy people have their own private third spaces furthering the social divide, meanwhile people with lower income are left with limited unsafe options (Aldrich et al., 2023).

Another study looks at how the global financial crisis of 2008, led to the decline in traditional third spaces such as libraries and community centres, which are often critical for people with lower socioeconomic status. Although new third spaces have been curated, they mostly cater to people with higher socioeconomic status, exacerbating inequalities in access to these spaces (Bogue & Ouillon, 2023).

Gender presentation emerged as a crucial dimension within this study with differences in the experiences of male, female, and queer students. This reflects the critical urban theory and the uneven distributions of experiences based on identity and lived spaces as context-influencing how individuals interact with the space and within the space through the lens of their identity. Female and queer respondents and one Pashtun male student talked about the accessibility of spaces in terms of the cost of commuting, permission, and harassment they have to face on the way and sometimes within third spaces. Lack of diversity was another emerging theme, and participants talked about lack of exposure, which limits social mobility, which for ethnic minority students also translated to "cultural shock" and resorting to

networking in their ethnic group which impacted their sense of belonging and adjusting to moving to Lahore for higher education. Studies confirm that pedagogical third spaces can either promote inclusion or enforce exclusion for minorities and LGBTQ in educational settings. It shows that without intentional design to include diverse voices, these sites can become aggressive and hostile toward marginalised groups (Souto-Manning & Lanza, 2018).

Monetary constraints were a recurring dimension through all three themes.

Participants also talked about how due to monetary constraints, they opted to visit secluded spaces like parking lots and botanical gardens. Participants mentioned how this can sometimes be unsafe where social capital is engaging in taboo behaviour and substance abuse which reinforces their social circle and doesn't offer new experiences. However, participants also talked about their experiences of substances acting as catalysts for social interactions, giving them the opportunities for vulnerability and making connections, as well as being a restorative activity. It was found that many students prefer taking a smoking break between classes as eateries, sporting activities, and other recreational activities are at maximum capacity and lack resources to accommodate the large student population. Other literature confirms that some third spaces can become breeding grounds for intoxicant use and may also lead to mental health issues (Vist, 2016).

Student voices and autonomy being restricted was another finding, this problem played out in both on-campus and off-campus third spaces, as students lack a platform to present their problems, and are systematically denied space to gather and take initiatives regarding their well-being. Students as stakeholders in university campuses and the city, as they face constant surveillance from proctors and are policed regarding their behaviour; this issue presented to be more prominent in women and gender minorities who had to deal with moral policing by the proctors- this becomes a structural issue and restricts the restorative

third space experience. According to third spaces theory, restorative third spaces offer the potential for resistance as people of different identities can intersect and grow and generate a new space, that keeps on changing form through the meaning assigned to it, allowing continuous reimagination of its spatiality. Excessive surveillance of students can prevent them from developing agency and meaningful interactions; research indicates that the monitoring itself may have a deleterious effect on students mental health, as many students reported that they felt uncomfortable knowing that they are being watched which led to a chilling effect that smothers self-expression prominently in minorities (Quay-de la Vallee, 2022).

Participants identified the perceived impact on their short- and long-term well-being of third spaces and the impact of challenges they faced while utilising them. Some students strongly advocated for increased student autonomy and their recognition as stakeholders in policy-making and urban planning through student unions that enable the student population to represent their interests. Participants talked about how third-space networking access provided them with social opportunities, long-term career opportunities, and academic support and guidance. Students who frequented third spaces complained about deteriorating intellectual well-being because of not being able to find like-minded people due to infrastructural barriers as they complained that the noise in third spaces does not enable just conversations. Mental health emerged as a crucial dimension, especially when talking about short-term well-being where students reported loneliness as onset signs of deteriorating mental health. Financial stress was also reported as a determinant of mental stress and low academic performance for students. Students who had to work to support their education and lifestyle were assumed to have higher levels of loneliness and isolation due to the lack of availability of on-campus third spaces.

Implications

This study would help fill in the gap in the literature for third spaces in South Asia, focusing especially on Lahore, Pakistan, which is a developed cosmopolitan area, and an educational hub compared to the rest of the country and is well-positioned for the advancement of its Urban pedagogical policy. Lahore is an academic hub with a significant student population which is not only the interest group for urban pedagogical development but also connects with the emerging job market that influences the economy and society at large. As suggested by the findings, higher education is a transitional period that comes with a unique set of challenges, and due to a lack of tools for support through this period, students struggle to develop social capital that enables upward mobility. The findings of this research highlight challenges faced by students while navigating third spaces, and how these challenges impact their well-being. This study has implications in three major areas:

- i. Urban planning and pedagogical development
- ii. Community support and mental health
- iii. Social integration

Urban planning and pedagogical development: According to the findings, one of the major obstacles in creating and accessing third spaces was infrastructural barriers ranging from lack of functionality of space to lack of purpose. The findings of this study could inform urban planners of students' specific needs, such as accommodating for reducing sensory characteristics of third spaces and opting for design that would highlight the social aspects of third spaces that would amplify accessibility and functionality. Studies have found that urban planning and the layout of spaces influence vulnerability levels and interactions within the space (Aprea et al., 2018). Also, the spatiality of a place and its aesthetic outlook have been shown to impact the levels of perceived comfort in the experience of space (Etlin, 1998). In pedagogical research, it has been demonstrated that campuses where third spaces exist overall

have better sociocritical literacy with an enhanced learning experience compared to those who don't (Gutiérrez, 2008).

Community interventions and social programs: This study highlights the need for non-commodified places as essential for student third spaces. Findings suggest that urban students struggle with the financial stress that comes with networking, which is associated with opportunities for social mobility. Many students reported feelings of loneliness that adversely impacted their perceived mental well-being. Inclusive third spaces can inspire community-based programs that support student well-being through productive socialisation and prevent them from developing harmful behaviours like substance use. These social programs can include recreational activities that are intellectually stimulating and challenging in a way that is conducive to student well-being. Studies show that interdepartmental interaction increases academic collaboration among faculties (Veles, 2024).

Social integration: Since higher education is a transformative period where many students seek to discover or reinvent themselves, they struggle with social acceptance. Rural students, as suggested by the findings, experience cultural shock and even bullying and harassment when navigating the social and cultural barriers in place. The development of third spaces through partnerships with external organisations can help reduce barriers for women and minority student groups. This can be done through city-wide youth zones and the development of public transportation. The findings of this study would also enable organisations to create specific grants that can enable universities to support student-led third space initiatives.

Concluding Recommendations

In this study, the aim was to understand challenges faced by university students primarily accessing third spaces. The third space for this study translated to be parks, gardens, mosques, cafes, recreational spaces, and isolated spaces on campus. The three broad findings suggest that students face challenges in accessing preferred features of third spaces and that they also face socio-environmental barriers that impact their perceived well-being. With regards to the features, students need quiet, safe, private, and affordable spaces. Concerning the socio-environmental factors, students need support for sanitary third spaces which have less stress-inducing urban stimuli (traffic and noise). Additionally, based on the findings of this study it is recommend that third spacea are created and encouraged for university students to promote inclusivity and respect for diversity. By providing opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between students of different socio-economic backgrounds, these spaces can be university funded activity based clubs and lounges which, according to third space theory gives third spaces the potential to counteract structural challenges and inequalities (Rhubart et al., 2022).

According to the findings, students are also facing problems with exposure to intoxicants and substance use and possibly even pressure to consume substances themselves to belong to third spaces and change their identities to fit in. In lieu of this, it is recommended that more wholesome third spaces are promoted, for example third spaces that have physical activity and other healthy recreational activities like playing chess and board games that intellectually challenge and stimulate students (Jankovic & Novak, 2019). Lastly, campus-based third spaces need to be invested in by university administration with regards to specifically planning their privacy, and safety, and encouraging a wholesome quality environment where students feel safe and are not bullied or discriminated against.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet explaining the purpose of the research
2. I have voluntarily agreed to participate in this research.
3. I understand that I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer.
4. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview.
5. I agree to my interview being audio-recorded for transcription.
6. I understand that my audio recording will be deleted after the interviews have been transcribed.
7. I understand that all information I provide will be treated confidentially.
8. I understand that in any report on the results of this research, my identity will remain anonymous.
9. I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification and information.

Appendix B: Sociodemographic survey

Age (in years): _____

Gender:

- Man
- Woman
- Non-binary
- Transgender
- Other

Sexuality: _____

Year of study:

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

Major: _____

Degree:

- Undergraduate
- Masters
- PhD

Household income:

- 100000 - 200000
- 200000 - 500000
- 500000+
- Prefer not to say

Regional belonging:

- Urban
- Rural
- Suburban

Are you native to Lahore?

- Yes
- No

Provincial Belonging:

- Punjab
- Sindh
- Balochistan
- Azad Kashmir
- Gilgit-Baltistan
- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- Islamabad Capital Territory

Current living arrangement:

- Joint family
- Nuclear family
- Single-person household

- Single-parent household
- Hostel
- Shared apartment
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Relationship status:

- Single
- Committed
- Divorced
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Religion:

- Islam
- Christianity
- Hinduism
- Atheist
- Agnostic
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Do you struggle with mental health issues

- Yes
- No
- Diagnosed

Are you a part of any formal/informal group or organization that consists of more than 5 people?

Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Section 1: Experiences and Perceptions of Third Spaces

1. What places do you visit between home and class?
 - Why do you choose these places?
2. Can you describe how students typically interact and socialize in urban spaces around the university?
 - Have you observed any particular patterns or behaviors in group dynamics within these spaces?
3. What activities do you do in third spaces, and what are the perceived short-term and long-term impacts?
4. Do these places offer a restorative (refreshing/therapeutic/stimulating) experience?
5. How does your identity impact your accessibility to these spaces?
 - Are you the curator of the spaces you are a member of?
 - How do third spaces create, affirm, or invalidate your identity?
6. What is the social capital in your third space?

Section 2: Barriers and Challenges

7. What is your experience with excessive urban stimuli?
 - How does it impact you?
8. What places would you prefer to visit instead?
9. How does social capital impact your ability to access these places?
10. How do you prevent spending money and consumerism within these spaces?
11. Can you share an experience where urban spaces influenced your interactions with others, either positively or negatively?
12. Have you noticed any differences in how students from different backgrounds navigate the absence of third spaces?

Section 3: Impact on Belonging and Identity Formation

13. How do you think the absence of third spaces affects students' sense of belonging and identity formation?
14. How do you think the university could better accommodate students' social needs through physical spaces

Appendix D: Face sheet Information

Alias	Age	Gender	Year of Study	Major	Household income	Living arrangement	Relationship status	Religion	Regional belonging
Taqi	24	Man	Senior	Philosophy	200000>	Nuclear	Single	Atheist	Urban
Ahmed	23	Man	Senior	Political Science	200000>	Hostel	Single	Islam	Rural
Alina	22	Woman	Senior	Psychology	Prefer not to say	Nuclear	Single	Islam	Urban
Ali	22	Man	Senior	Political Science	200000>	Hostel	Single	Islam	Rural
Minahil	24	Queer	Senior	Philosophy	200000>	Nuclear	Committed	Agnostic	Urban
Fatima	19	Queer	Junior	Psychology	200000>	Nuclear	Single	Prefer not to say	Urban
Hania	24	Woman	Senior	Political Science	100000-200000	Hostel	Single	Atheist	Urban
Hiba	24	Queer	Freshman	Sociology	Prefer not to say	Nuclear	Single	Agnostic	Urban
Noor	21	Queer	Senior	Sociology	100000-200000	Nuclear	Committed	Islam	Rural

Appendix E: Thematic Analysis (Themes and Sub-Themes)

Table 2: Summary of thematic challenges identified in study	
THEME	Sub-themes
1. Perceived attributes of third spaces	1a. Familiar spaces that ensure a safe and restorative experience 1b. Quiet isolated spaces like the mosque and botanical gardens 1c. Affordable roadside cafes 1d. A safe environment like a friend's house 1e. Physical and social features of third spaces: Impact of infrastructural design of third spaces and the impact on interactions within
2. Challenges of accessing and using third spaces Socio/environmental challenges	2a. Excessive stimuli in third spaces (smell, noise, light and traffic) which is stress-inducing 2b. Unsanitary conditions in third spaces 2c. Monetized third spaces with high entrance fees & requiring purchases to stay 2d. Lack of public transport or accessible third spaces at walking distance 2e. Restriction of diverse social experiences (ethnicity, class, gender, academic backgrounds) and harassment of minorities 2f. Use of intoxicants and substances in third spaces 2g. Inability to use third spaces for social mobilization (student fee hikes, political voices) 2h. False identity formation to belong in third spaces 2i. Surveillance and scrutiny from proctors on campus third spaces
3. Perceived impact of third spaces on wellbeing	3a. Mobilizing for student politics and how it prevents them from representing their interests 3b. Long-term wellbeing and career opportunities through networking 3b. Intellectual well-being 3c. Loneliness and mental health 3d. Financial stress and drain

Appendix F: IRB Approval Certificate



FORMAN CHRISTIAN COLLEGE
(A CHARTERED UNIVERSITY)

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

IRB Ref: IRB-632/01-2024

Date: 04-06- 2024

Project Title: Third Spaces and Wellbeing: A Perceptual Analysis of Experiences in Third Spaces and their Impact on the Wellbeing of Urban Undergraduate Students in Lahore.

Principal Investigator: Mahjabeen Bilal

Supervisor: Ms. Sharmeen Bano

The Institutional Review Board has examined your project in the IRB meeting held on 04-06-2024 and has approved the proposed study. If during the conduct of your research, any changes occur related to participant risk, study design, confidentiality or consent, or any other change then IRB must be notified immediately.

Please be sure to include the IRB reference number in all correspondence.

Dr. Sharoon Hanook
Convener-IRB
Chairperson Department of Statistics
Forman Christian College
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