

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AS HEALING SPACES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS MENTAL WELL-BEING AT VEL NURSING COLLEGE, CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

Student mental health has emerged as a major issue in higher education in recent years. Traditionally thought of as knowledge repositories, academic libraries are becoming more often acknowledged as nurturing spaces that enhance students' mental health. The lived experiences of students utilising academic libraries as therapeutic places are examined in this qualitative research. Twelve undergraduate and graduate students participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather data using a phenomenological method. Important themes are telling here "sense of belonging," "silence as comfort," "library as an escape," and "structured environment reducing anxiety" were identified using thematic analysis. According to the results, Academic libraries are essential for improving mental health and reducing stress. To increase the healing power of books in libraries , The report recommends coordinating design and services according to benefits.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Students Mental Health, Therapeutic Spaces, Phenomenology and Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, student mental health has become a significant concern in global higher education institutions. Increasing academic pressure, social expectations, digital distractions, and uncertainties about future career opportunities have played a major role in elevating stress, anxiety, and emotional contests among students. As institutions attempt to address these issues, there is a need to identify and strengthen available resources to improve mental well-being on college campuses. Traditionally, academic libraries were considered primarily as repositories of knowledge, providing access to books, journals, and other academic resources. Over time, this traditional role has been

gradually changing. Contemporary views have begun to recognize the academic libraries as inclusive and supportive spaces that go beyond access to information, supporting the holistic development of students. The calm, resource-rich environments of libraries can help promote attention, emotional stability, and a sense of belonging—factors essential for mental well-being.

In this context, the concept of viewing libraries as "healing" or "therapeutic" spaces has received importance. These spaces can serve as preserves where students seek relief from academic stress, experience peacefulness through silence, and regain their focus within a structured environment. The physical setting, social atmosphere, and accessibility of resources collectively contribute to shaping students' emotional experiences within library environments. Despite this growing recognition, there remains a need for in-depth research into how students observe and experienced academic libraries as supportive environments for mental well-being. Understanding these lived experiences is critical for designing library spaces and services that effectively address the spiritual needs of students.

Therefore, this study services a qualitative and phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of undergraduate students who utilize academic libraries as a therapeutic space. By examining key themes—such as a 'sense of belonging,' 'comforting tranquility,' the library as a 'sanctuary for escape,' and the 'role of architectural environments in alleviating distress'—this research seek out to highlight the potential of academic libraries in enhancing student well-being and to recommend strategies for elevating their therapeutic value. Phenomenological inquiry refers to a qualitative research approach employed to explore and understand how students experience and perceive the academic library at Vel College of Nursing in Chennai as a space that supports their mental well-being. Rather than focusing on assessable data, this approach centers on the students' direct experiences—precisely, their personal feelings, thoughts, and understandings regarding the library environment, such as sensations of peace, comfort, a sense of belonging, and stress relief.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Student mental health stress has become a major concern in higher education, prompting educational institutions to work hard to explore supportive environments beyond traditional services. Educational libraries are increasingly recognized as places that enhance students' mental well-being. Research indicates that libraries are evolving from repositories of knowledge to comprehensive learning environments that support mental and psychological well-being. Brewster and Cox (2023) found that educational libraries promote well-being through activities such as meditation programs and calm spaces. Watson's (2021) study highlights that libraries now support the "whole student" by participating wellness-oriented services, thereby enhancing engagement and

academic success. However, Hunter (2021) reported that, despite challenges such as limited resources, students perceive libraries as safe and comfortable atmospheres. Environmental factors also play an important role; Baumgartner et al. (2022) found that tranquility, adequate lighting, and organized spaces help reduce stress and improve concentration. Additionally, Weiner (2014) emphasized that libraries foster a sense of belonging, which is crucial for students' emotional well-being. Despite these findings, most studies have a habit of focus on services and infrastructure rather than on students' separate experiences. There is a lack of studies employing phenomenological methods to understand how students experience libraries as healing spaces.

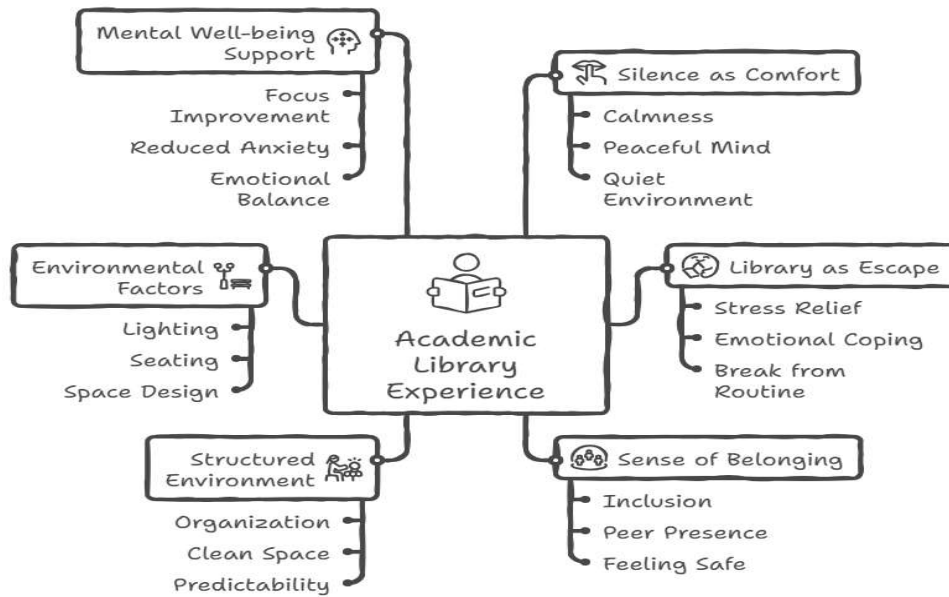
OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore the role played by academic libraries in supporting the mental well-being of students and fostering a mentally comforting environment.
- Exploring Students' Lived Experiences when utilizing Academic Libraries as Therapeutic Spaces
- Identifying key factors that contribute to reducing stress and providing emotional comfort in library environments.
- Analyzing how library spaces impact students' sense of belonging and psychological safety.
- To recommend strategies for enhancing the mental health support functions of academic libraries through design and services.

METHODOLOGY and DATA COLLECTION

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to understand students lived experiences in academic library environments. Main purpose of this study is to capture and interpret students' perceptions and emotional experiences related to academic library use. 123 undergraduate students were taken for sample in this study from the Vels Nursing college (VISTAS) located at Periyapalayam, Chennai (totally 380 students). Purposive sampling method was used, students who frequently use academic library). The data collection tool is in-depth and semi structured interview with face-to-face depending on feasibility, each student approximately 30 to 45 minutes for completed this interview. The main focused thematic questions are “Emotional experiences in library spaces”, “Perceived comfort and stress levels”, “Use of library as a coping or escape space”, and “Environmental and social factors influencing well-being”. Also used the thematic analysis based on the respondents responses. The themes identifying such as, “Sense of belonging”, “Silence as comfort”, “Library as an escape” and “Structured environment reducing anxiety”.

Academic Library Experience and Student Well-being



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DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Students’ Survived Experiences of Academic Library as a Healing Space

Sample Unit (Participant Statement)	Meaning	No. of Res. (out of 123)	Initial Code	Sub-Category	Category	Final Theme
“I feel peaceful when I sit in the library.”		118 (96)	Feeling peaceful	Emotional calmness	Emotional Experience	Silence as Comfort
“The quiet environment helps me relax and focus.”		115 (93)	Quiet helps relaxation	Calm environment	Environmental Influence	Silence as Comfort
“I come here to escape from hostel noise.”		82 (66)	Escape from noise	Avoidance behaviour	Coping Mechanism	Library as Escape
“Library gives me a break from stress.”		120 (98)	Stress relief	Emotional relief	Coping Mechanism	Library as Escape
“I feel like I belong here.”		88 (72)	Sense of belonging	Inclusion feeling	Social Experience	Sense of Belonging
“Everyone is studying, so I feel motivated.”		57 (46)	Peer motivation	Shared academic environment	Social Influence	Sense of Belonging

“Everything is organized; it reduces my anxiety.”	61 (50)	Organized space reduces anxiety	Structured environment	Physical Environment	Structured Environment Reducing Anxiety
“Proper seating and lighting make me comfortable.”	108 (88)	Comfortable facilities	Physical comfort	Environmental Factors	Structured Environment Reducing Anxiety
“Library helps me concentrate better.”	68 (55)	Improved concentration	Focus enhancement	Cognitive Impact	Mental Well-being Support
“I feel safe and undisturbed here.”	79 (64)	Feeling safe	Psychological safety	Emotional Security	Sense of Belonging
“It’s a calm place compared to other areas.”	120 (98)	Calm place	Peaceful atmosphere	Environmental Influence	Silence as Comfort
“I come here when I feel stressed or anxious.”	119 (97)	Coping with stress	Stress management	Coping Mechanism	Library as Escape

Table 1 presents a thematic analysis of students' lived experiences about the use of the academic library as a therapeutic space. Participants' statements were coded and assembled into sub-categories and broader categories. Subsequently, key themes emerged, such as 'Comforting Silence,' 'The Library as an Escape,' 'Sense of Belonging,' 'Structured Environment for Stress Reduction,' and 'Mental Health Support.' The frequency of responses indicates that many students perceive the library as a calm, safe, and structured environment that helps alleviate stress, enhance focus, and support overall mental well-being. Thematic analysis reveals that academic libraries play a pivotal role in supporting students' mental well-being through various interconnected experiences. The most prominent theme identified is "Comforting Tranquility." A significant number of respondents (118 and 115) expressed feelings of peace and relaxation within the quiet library environment. Furthermore, 120 respondents described the library as a peaceful space when compared to other locations. This demonstrates that silence and a tranquil environment serve as key factors for emotional stability and mental relaxation.

The theme of the library as a "place of escape" also emerged strongly. Among the respondents, 120 stated that the library provides relief from stress, while 118 reported using it as a coping space during moments of anxiety. A significant number of individuals (82) highlighted the opportunity to escape from hostel noise. This demonstrates that the library functions as a psychological sanctuary where students can temporarily withdraw themselves from stressful or distracting environments.

The theme of "sense of belonging" is reflected to a moderate degree; 88 respondents reported feeling included, while 79 stated that they felt safe within the library. However, the level of encouragement received from fellow students (57 respondents)—while contributing positively to social engagement—indicates that its influence remains relatively limited when compared to emotional and environmental factors. This suggests that the library fosters both individual comfort and a shared academic environment.

The theme "A Structured Environment That Reduces Anxiety" highlights the significance of the physical and structural aspects of the library. Approximately 108 respondents emphasized the comfort derived from proper seating and lighting, while 61 noted that organized spaces help alleviate anxiety. These findings demonstrate that a well-designed and orderly environment not only enhances users' psychological comfort but also facilitates focused study.

Finally, the theme of "mental health support" is reflected through cognitive benefits; 68 respondents noted that their concentration had improved. This suggests that, beyond providing emotional comfort, the library contributes to academic proficiency and mental clarity.

Overall, these findings indicate that academic libraries function as multifaceted, therapeutic spaces. Within them, tranquility, orderliness, safety, and peace of mind converge to contribute to stress reduction and the enhancement of students' mental well-being. The high volume of responses received across key themes underscores the growing significance of libraries not merely as academic venues, but also as environments that support emotional and psychological health.

Table 2: Ranking of Identified Themes Based on Student Responses

Themes	Ranks
Silence as Comfort	1
Structured Environment Reducing Anxiety	2
Mental Well-being Support	3
Library as Escape	4
Sense of Belonging	5

Table 2 presents a ranking of the key themes identified through thematic analysis, based on the frequency and significance with which they appeared in the students' responses. It highlights 'soothing silence' and a 'structured environment that reduces anxiety' as the most critical factors contributing to students' mental well-being within the library setting. The ranking of themes provides insight into the relative importance of different aspects of academic libraries in supporting students' mental well-being.

"Comforting Silence" (Rank 1) emerged as the most critical factor. This indicates that a quiet and peaceful atmosphere is the primary reason students perceive libraries as places of healing. It highlights the pivotal role silence plays in fostering relaxation, alleviating stress, and enhancing concentration. The finding that an "Organized Environment Reduces Anxiety" (Rank 2) demonstrates that the physical layout of the library—including seating arrangements, lighting, and general orderliness—exerts a profound influence on student comfort. A well-structured environment helps mitigate anxiety and fosters a sense of control and stability. "Mental Health Support" (Rank 3) reflects the cognitive and emotional benefits students derive from the library environment—specifically, improved focus and reduced feelings of depression. This suggests that libraries contribute not only to emotional well-being but also to academic performance. The concept of the library as a "Place of Escape" (Rank 4) signifies that students utilize the library as a sanctuary to retreat from stressful or distracting surroundings. While significant, this factor remains secondary to the library's intrinsic environmental attributes, such as silence and structural organization. A "Sense of Belonging" (Rank 5), though relevant, occupied the lowest position in the ranking. This suggests that, within this specific context, social factors play a relatively minor role; students appear to value the library primarily for its individual and environmental benefits, rather than for opportunities for social interaction. Overall, this ranking suggests that environmental and psychological factors hold greater significance than social aspects; furthermore, it underscores that the prevailing quiet atmosphere and structured environment within academic libraries contribute significantly to students' mental well-being.

DISCUSSION

This study indicates that academic libraries contribute significantly to the mental well-being of students. The findings of this study align with the results of existing research that emphasizes the importance of the physical environment in psychological health.

Libraries function as:

- **Therapeutic Environments:** Academic libraries can function as therapeutic environments by offering calm, safe, and quiet spaces that promote emotional comfort. Elements such as natural light, comfortable seating, and minimal noise help students feel relaxed and mentally refreshed.
- **Supportive Learning Spaces:** Libraries function as supportive learning spaces by providing access to resources, collaborative workspaces, and guidance services. This supportive environment enhances students' self-confidence, motivation, and overall academic engagement.
- **Stress-Reducing Zones:** Spaces within libraries—such as quiet reading areas, relaxation corners, or green zones—specifically designated for stress reduction

help students cope with academic pressures. These areas contribute to alleviating anxiety and enhancing mental well-being.

IMPLICATIONS

For Library Management / Library professionals

Academic libraries should be intentionally designed and managed as healing-oriented environments that support students' mental well-being. Based on students' lived experiences, the following measures are recommended:

- Creation of Wellness Corners
- Comfortable Seating and Appropriate Lighting
- Introduction of Relaxation Zones
- User-Centered Space Design

For Institutions

Educational institutions play a crucial role in recognizing and promoting libraries as integral components of mental health support systems:

- Integration into Student Support Services:
- Promotion of a Supportive Learning Environment: .
- Training and Awareness Programs: For Policy Makers

Policy-level interventions are essential to institutionalize the role of libraries in student well-being:

- Inclusion in Student Well-being Policies
- Funding and Infrastructure Development
- Guidelines for Healing-Centered Library Design

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of interview data from 123 undergraduate students revealed that academic libraries function as important spaces that support students' mental well-being. The study reveals that academic libraries play a significant role in supporting students' mental well-being. Five key themes emerged from the analysis. Such as:

- 1) **Silence as Comfort:** Most students reported that the quiet environment of the library helps them feel calm and relaxed. A majority indicated that silence improves focus and reduces stress, making the library a peaceful place for study.
- 2) **Library as Escape:** Many students use the library as a space to escape from stress and distractions. It serves as a coping environment where they can manage anxiety and find relief from academic and personal pressures.

- 3) **Sense of Belonging:** In the library, students felt safe, comfortable, and included. Although interactions with fellow students had a moderate impact, the overall environment contributed to a sense of belonging.
- 4) **Structured Environment Reducing Anxiety:** It has been found that well-organized spaces, proper seating arrangements, and good lighting reduce anxiety and enhance comfort. A structured environment enables students to focus better and exercise self-control.
- 5) **Mental Well-being Support:** The library demonstrates its role in supporting both emotional and cognitive well-being by enhancing focus and academic performance.

Overall, the findings of this study confirms that academic libraries function as 'healing spaces' that lighten stress and enhance students' mental well-being. This study emphasizes the necessity of recognizing libraries as integral components of campus mental health support systems. By integrating well-being-centric design approaches and user-centered services into libraries, their role in nurturing a healthy learning environment can be further strengthened.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Future research should includes,

- Conduct Larger Multi-Institutional Studies
- Integrate AI-Based Mood-Support Systems in Libraries
- Develop Mental Health-Focused Library Services

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