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# University Student Perceptions of the Impact of the Social Unrest in Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

Social unrest has a significant impact on all citizens but for university students, little is known about how they thrived through this period with certain disconnection to social support while living in residential halls. Therefore, this study focused on the lived experiences of a group of university students and explored how the social unrest had affected them. Focus group interviews were conducted with 20 university students in Hong Kong. Using thematic analysis, the transcriptions were categorized into four themes: disruptions to daily routines, impact on psychological wellbeing, relationships, and coping strategies. It was revealed that reduced social connections during the unrest impacted their coping strategies and relationships, and emotional distress. This sheds implications on policymaking in residential halls and for university counselling services

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Residential hall; social unrest; coping strategies; anxiety; connections

## Introduction

The rising globalization of protests spread rapidly, causing health burdens to individuals, irrespective of whether they have participated in the events (Labonté et al., 2011). In 2019, the Extradition Bill was proposed in Hong Kong to enable the transfer of criminal fugitives from Hong Kong to mainland China. This initiated an unprecedented period of social unrest in Hong Kong because laws in place before the handover of HK, from Britain to China, in July 1997 prohibited extradition to Mainland China. Social unrest arises from acts of mass civil disobedience and dissatisfaction among a large group of people regarding a particular topic, and in this article, it was the proposed Bill. Ng (2020) reported that the proposed Bill has triggered an extreme reaction in HK which comprised numerous violent demonstrations, with many university students involved. Two universities were occupied by protesters and in one, 4000 petroleum bombs were found on campus (PolyU: Hong Kong police find almost 4,000 petrol bombs on campus, 2019). The protest filled the streets of HK and resulted in massive vandalism and severe disruption to transport links such as the railway system, the highways in the Eastern part of the New Territories, and the Cross-Harbour Tunnel. In response, the police fired more than 16,000 canisters of tear gas and 10,000 rubber bullets. These events have unsurprisingly polarized the opinions of many citizens of HK and have caused conflicts

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within families, social groups, and work colleagues (Chow, 2019). There have also been adverse effects on economic growth, which is lower than predicted, and the unemployment rate has risen sharply). To express how serious the situation was, as a result of the violent conflicts between protesters and police, Ng (2020) created the term “mental health tsunami” to describe the impact of exposure to violence, disintegration of social networks, and the declining economic conditions.

Despite a significant number of individuals reporting emotional disturbance following the social unrest, different ways to cope with the situations were identified to protect against such negative effects. For example, building strong social support against the impact of stress and related mental health issues during life adversity (Kingsbury et al., 2019). Social support is a multidimensional concept, which is referred to as a support provided by others in everyday situations (Santini et al., 2015) or during specific moments of crisis (Taylor, 2011). These concepts originated from Kahn’s (1979) theory of social support which emphasized the existence and the quality of social relationships. The support is mainly derived from three sources: family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). Since then, social support has been widely established as a moderator for stress (Li et al., 2018a; Yıldırım et al., 2017) since sharing stress with others was shown to have enabled individuals to manage stress more easily (Reeve et al., 2013). The type of support can be emotional, instrumental, evaluative, or informative (McLean et al., 2022). Based on Kahn’s (1979) theory, social support has been considered an effective coping mechanism and was later found to be particularly effective for coping with academic stress (Soman et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2017).

Son et al. (2020) previously identified several coping mechanisms varying from healthy to unhealthy behaviours. For instance, Stallman (2020) has identified mindful awareness, relaxation exercise, and social support as healthy coping strategies and have an intermediary role in psychological rehabilitation under outbreak stress. Unhealthy coping behaviours such as denial and disengagement are significant predictors of depression among young adults. In contrast, healthy coping such as acceptance and proactive behaviours are known to impact mental health positively.

University residential halls have long been recognized as a place for fostering a highly interactive environment, facilitating friendships, and network building (Mishra, 2020). Consistently, evidence suggests that students who spend less time on campus during their first year have less access to social support, which can lead to a reduced sense of belonging (McLean et al., 2022). What remains unknown is that this environment may change amidst sudden environmental disruption, such as during the social unrest.

During the period of the social unrest, university students were indeed severely affected. They faced dramatic changes in academic structures, examinations, and a battle with limited resources, which may ultimately have exacerbated anxiety, stress, and frustration (Shek, 2020). While these findings are valuable in contributing to the existing knowledge of mental health issues among students, they have not explored students’ experiences and how they coped with the adversities. In addition, most of the studies have adopted a quantitative approach (Teti et al., 2020), with large amounts of data collected in the shortest time frame. Therefore, they did not always capture the reasons behind particular behaviours, and interactions or identified the ways individuals made sense of what was happening in such an unprecedented and unpredictable situation (Leach et al., 2020). Recognizing these limitations, Shek (2020)

suggested that using qualitative research approaches such as focus group interviews may be a better way to explain, address, and plan for improving students' mental health support systems. The more in-depth data that can be collected using qualitative methods enables a deeper evaluation of interactions among group members and allows more opportunities to discuss reasons behind each other's views while interacting. Therefore, the use of a qualitative, focus group method should shed light on how social unrest has impacted residential hall students living away from their families in HK.

The impact of social unrest on university students, in particular, how they thrived through this unique period of disruption has not been fully understood. The university from which participants were sampled was one of the universities that had a great impact from the social unrest. Vandalism within the campus was published in several international news headlines in 2019, and many students and staff have been arrested for participating in some government disapproved protests. These have created a lot of tension and psychological distress for most individuals in the university.

As the disruption caused by the social unrest engenders significant changes in university students' experience, it is important to explore what they were going through and how this has impacted their social networks, coping strategies and mental health. Although the quest to develop supportive networks is an integral part of the residential hall experience, sustaining support networks may be particularly important for those who need to thrive through the difficult period as they are physically and emotionally separated from family and friends. The current research aims to provide a rich insight into the resident student experience during this unique period through qualitative means with a particular focus independent living. By exploring factors that facilitate or hinder coping, we aimed to identify aspects that could be adapted to better support students and to reflect upon how universities can improve to provide more supportive environments. The overarching goal is to offer an integrative perspective for understanding students living experience in residential halls by identifying the main stressors associated with social unrest, (b) exploring how the event relates to students' mental health, (c) exploring what ways of coping were used, and (d) to suggest better university support system in the future.

## Methodology

### *Study design*

The study adopted a qualitative design, in which focus group interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences when living in residential halls, during the period of social unrest that followed the proposal of the 2019 bill.

### *Measures*

Focus group interviews consisted of a demographic questionnaire which included questions on year of study, gender, faculty of study, cultural background, and residential hall residing in (see [Table 1](#) for details). The interview consisted of four open-ended questions: 1) How long (days/weeks/months) did you stay in your hall during this academic year 2019/2020? 2) How did the social unrest disrupt your everyday lives? 3) Did the event affect you in other ways? 4) If so, how did you cope with them?

**Table 1.** Demographics of participants.

Total Number = 20		Number	%
Gender	Male	4	20
	Female	16	80
Student Status	Full-time	20	100
	Part-time	0	0
	Exchange student	0	0
Level of study	Undergraduate	11	91.67
	Postgraduate	1	8.33
Year of study	Year 1	5	25
	Year 2	7	35
	Year 3	3	15
	Year 4	4	20
	Year 5/PG	1	5
Type of student	Local	10	50
	Non-local	10	50

### Participants

A total of 20 participants from one local university in Hong Kong were recruited for the study during the 2019 social unrest. The inclusion criteria were; participants must a) be enrolled as undergraduate students at the university at the time of the interviews; b) be residents in one of the residential halls on campus; c) not have left the hall to return to their own home during the unrest period. The number of required respondents was determined by interviewing students who met the inclusion criteria until the data were saturated and no new topics were generated. The demographic data collected consisted of 4 males and 16 females. Regarding their age groups, 8 participants were aged 18–20, 7 were 20–22, 3 were 22–24, and 2 were 24 or over. All participants were studying full-time, whereby 10 considered themselves as a local student, and 10 as a non-local Chinese student. The participants were selected from five different residential halls with a balance between the number of years living in the residential halls (i.e. 6 with less than a year, 9 for 1–2 years, and 5 for 2–3 years). There was a total of six focus groups (three to four per group). Pseudonyms were assigned to participants in order to protect their privacy.

### Procedures

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University. All participants signed informed consent online. The participants were recruited by mass email sent to all hall residents by the warden and hall manager from five residential halls. After the participants agreed to join by replying to the emails, they were contacted individually with a few suggested timeslots to join a group interview. Participants could choose these slots until it is full (maximum of five per group). After written informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the interview, participants were informed that the following focus group interview would be recorded. It was made clear that the study participants were allowed to withdraw at any time during the interview.

All interviews were conducted during the period in which all HK universities had decided to convert all face-to-face learning to online learning mode (between November to December 2019) in response to social unrest. The interviews were conducted online using software such as zoom, collaborate, or TEAMS. The interview took which took approximately 45 minutes, and participants were then debriefed.

### *Data analysis*

All of the interview recordings were conducted in English. The transcriptions were checked by two transcription checkers to confirm all transcriptions followed the same format, and that the content was an accurate reflection of what the participants had said in the recording. The interview transcriptions were read and reread to increase familiarity with the data and identify general themes. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis to examine how the lived experiences in residential halls influenced the hall residents. There is a six-stage process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for the thematic analysis, which includes data familiarization, coding, collation and theme generation, revising generated themes, defining generated themes, and producing the report. Themes were identified, enumerated, analysed, and reported with rich descriptions of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout the process, two coders looked at all the transcripts and worked individually to generate some themes. They kept in communication and discussed differences in interpretations and their proposed themes. Both coders continually coded and categorized information until notable categories called 'core categories' emerged and no further categories or subcategories were expected to emerge. The coding notes and summaries were exchanged between the coders for discussion on any differences and similarities raised. Through this continuing comparison, key themes were identified with representative quotations from the participants to answer the research questions. The transcribed data were analysed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which means that the data were collected and examined simultaneously as trends, themes, and patterns in the data were ascertained.

Four salient themes emerged and were agreed by the two coders from the analysis whereby all elements and perspectives were treated with equal weight and arranged the data into meaningful clusters. Invariant themes within the data were identified by viewing the data from varied perspectives. Lastly, each theme was described based on invariant themes and the essence and structure of the experiences. To facilitate the process of extracting themes, an overview grid was used, which summarized the main similarities and differences between data from different focus groups.

### *Ethical considerations*

The Ethical Review Board in the university has approved the study. All participants received oral and written information prior to the interview. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could refrain from discussing particular questions and withdraw from the study at any time. The data were deidentified.

## Results

This study explored the lived experiences of university students in residential halls and how they were affected by the social unrest. Based on the thematic analysis, the transcriptions were categorized into four themes: disruptions to daily routines, impact on psychological wellbeing, impact on relationships, and coping with the challenges.

### *Disruptions to daily routines*

#### *Food shortages*

From the interviews, almost all the interviewees (n = 17) have reported having experienced many disruptions in their everyday life, including not being able to buy necessities due to food shortages, disruptions to public transport, etc. These became the most prominent stressors which had indirect impacts on participants' wellbeing.

*... I remember staying in the Welcome [supermarket] for one hour and a half, just to buy three oranges. ... people just lined up for so long, to buy necessities. So, it makes me a little bit stressed and worried, like how people outside react to the situation ... - H7*

Some participants shared their experience of not being able to obtain life necessities, such as food, which was detrimental to their daily life.

*We have a shortage of food because there are not many shops around here, and also, the cafeterias on campus were not open. ... - H7*

Some students agreed with the difficulties faced, but a few of them had developed strategies to overcome the problems.

*From experiencing this kind of situation, the most important thing that I've learned is that I have to store some food for myself ... at that time, I could not get anything from the supermarket so I was very worried. - H2*

#### *Transportation disruption*

Apart from shortage of food, students also experienced disruptions in transportation which interfered with their academic life and access to basic necessities. One student commented that transport disruption had initiated the university's new arrangement of sending hall residents home due to the issues they were having.

*After the public transport service disruption ... many students could not leave the campus. I was trapped in the hall as well. - H6*

*Many students, local or non-local, have left the hall due to the disrupted public transportation - H10*

Social unrest seemed to have exacerbated ongoing stressors (transport disruption) and magnified their mental health problems. Consequently, many students had left the campus and this brought about dramatic changes to the living environment in the residential halls that was once considered harmonious and full of interactive activities.

## Impact on psychological wellbeing

Some students (n = 13) reported feelings of loneliness, stress, and anxiety partly because they were living away from home, and peer interaction was their major form of social network.

### Loneliness

Feeling lonely was one of the main emotional distresses reported by the participants. It was mainly brought about by the decreased number of hall residents, and the perceived lack of social support in the hall community.

*I feel so stressful, [especially] because my roommates went home for the Chinese New Year . . . So, I've been living alone for more than three months. I would say hi to my other hall mates but we don't really talk to each other often. . . . it's hard to live alone because it feels so lonely . . .* – H18

*We had less time to talk (to each other) because my floor has a few students who have decided to stay at home . . . I still feel lonely. There's always only one person in the room, that is me.* – H14

Following the disruptions to public transport, many students left the hall. Those left behind, therefore, had to adapt to a further set of changes in circumstances. There have mixed feelings about these changes.

*. . . in the residence, there weren't as many people, and the whole emotional status of people who were there wasn't exactly positive.* – H15

*It [the social unrest] affects your social mood because basically, you have to stay in and walk in the same place. This might make you feel a bit bored, a bit sad.* – H1

### Anxiety

Due to the social unrest, classes, assessments, and most residential hall activities were cancelled or changed. Students were anxious about all these uncertainties about their personal safety and academic progress.

*I needed to return to school as early as possible because I just could not predict what would happen, especially during the night.* – H12

*. . . many courses were cancelled or postponed due to different reasons, so I feel so worried and could not study smoothly. Sometimes, I could not catch up . . . it really affected my academic study.* – H11

One student felt that their lack of knowledge about university arrangements, and policy unfamiliarity triggered a feeling of helplessness.

*I was very confused with the arrangement of every course, and I did not know how they would arrange the exams and assignments . . .* – H5

Not all students were badly affected by the situation though, as some commented that they were more focused on their studies without any distractions.

*. . . there are almost no activities and I (have been) just studying and eating. I just live my life with no interaction with others. I spent more time studying instead of joining activities. . . . I had more time communicating with my teachers talking about my individual papers and I also had video calls with my friends . . .* – H20

### Impact on relationships

Following a significant decrease in the number of students staying in halls, many have lost their social connections. When students were asked to reflect on their current social life and relationships, it was noted that they had less contact with each other but more online communications with people outside residential halls.

*I felt that the connection between my roommate, me and my neighbours was very weak because there were no activities provided for us to meet and join together . . . – H16*

*Residents will also avoid any gatherings due to the social unrest in Hong Kong. there is a lack of socialization in my hall life this year. – H9*

### To cope with this situation, I tried to stay in touch with my family [online] . . . – H5

*I talked about it [my loneliness and distress] to my parents as well, but I didn't like to because they would tell me that what's in my mind is wrong". They will just give me more pressure. – H18*

Even when the hall mates could meet each other, the atmosphere, depth of interaction, and the peer relationship were not the same as what they were before the unrest.

*The atmosphere between her [hallmate] and I was not so good because we were always concerned about many things and she always talked about the issues faced by Hong Kong. . . . – H11*

*Even when we were greeting each other, it was not in a happy tone like last year. It feels like we are not friends anymore . . . . – H13*

Whilst there has been a long history regarding local students' preference for interacting with other locals and non-local with other non-local students, one student commented that this division between the two groups became more apparent during the social unrest. Their conversations often revealed in group (i.e. our) and out groups (i.e. their) comparisons

*There was no social interaction between the two groups(local and mainland Chinese students). Sometimes I felt nervous because I didn't know if they would get mad or have conflicts with [our] non-local students. H13*

### Conflict with peer

Students had different interpretations and views about the social unrest and some felt that these differences limited their expression as they felt intimidated to convey different political stands to their peers. They worried that this might create conflict and argument with their peers who are living under the same roof as them.

*I think the biggest problem is how to stay with others who have different opinions with you because sometimes I don't feel comfortable staying with them – H1*

*Our student association in the hall set up a democracy wall, and different people posted different things representing their own stands on that wall, . . . sometimes I saw some students, maybe with opposite stands, destroying and damaging the things posted on the wall, which really hurt me because I think it's about freedom but not about whether you agreed or disagreed. . . . I didn't take any actions to handle these situations. – H3*

Not everyone was afraid to voice out though. Two students reported that this had given them a opportunity to share feelings with their hall mates and have a closer friendship.

*I tried to share with my roommates . . . we found that both of us had a similar idea and concern, which reassured us . . . we had each other and the floor members. One of our common thoughts was regarding the political stand. – H16*

*we talked a lot about politics and justice, and even police brutality. We had more understanding towards each other. . . . I think I grew as a more critical thinker. – H5*

## Coping

In light of the daily routines disruption, impact on relationship and emotions, students still seek social support from their hall mates, rooms mates, friends, and family as their main coping strategies in university residential halls.

*When I encounter some issues, I can talk to my roommates. I also have some friends, so I can play games with them to avoid political issues. – H4*

*I got some friends and their parents were supportive to me so they provided some daily necessities for me. If I don't have any friends or their parents at that time . . . I think it's a bit worrisome. – H10*

Some prefer to cope with the matter independently, and adopt self-management, but very few affected said they would seek help from professionals.

*[stress] . . . and just chose to do something which could let my hair down. – H7*

*Never thought about calling the counsellor, how can they help with a situation like this? – H20*

A few students preferred using unhealthy coping strategies such as avoidance, suppression, or social withdrawal when facing peer conflict that do not know how to resolve.

*I would try to escape from other problems.1 . . . I chose to eat at my own room for my safety concern. I was afraid that we held different stands towards this issue. So, I was afraid that we would have some arguments if we eat together and discuss this issue. – H2*

When facing potential conflict, many students did not know what to do. It was common to feel that avoidance was their best coping strategy to reduce dilemma.

*Before the unrest I would sit in the living room. . . . and eat together. But during the social movement, . . . I chose to eat in my own room for my safety concern. . . . I was afraid that we [the local students and me, from mainland China] held different stands towards this issue. So, I was afraid that we would have some arguments . . . I chose to eat and stay more frequently in my room instead . . . my contact with my hallmates became less intimate. I chose to solve this problem in this way. – H17*

Avoidance is not just applied to peer interaction, sometimes students used avoidance when exposed to stressful events on the news and social media.

*I just didn't look at the news of current affairs through the internet . . . disturbing images that made me feel tense – H19*

Examining the transcription and students experience in more detail, there is a pattern whereby students used social support as long as they were available when living in halls. However, it doesn't apply to situation that may be considered as too confrontational, or to some who do not have someone close to talk to. It is possible that some students' social support system has weakened and as a result, they have chosen to use other coping strategies.

## Discussion

The present study provides rich detail of the lived experience of students in residential halls during the Social unrest period. The main objectives were to identify the major stressors associated with social unrest, (b) explore how the event relates to students' mental health, (c) to explore what ways of coping were used, and (d) to suggest better support system in the future.

### *Stressors associated with social unrest*

Students first expressed their first concern as the disruption caused by the unrest on their daily routines which exacerbated other emotional distress. Student's reported difficulties while living in residential halls are consistent with Shek's (2020) postulation that many educated young adults undergoing the social event in 2019–2020 experienced disruptions to their academic, leisure, family, and social life. These disruptions have been shown to frequently cause frustration, anxiety, fear, and a sense of isolation (Son et al., 2020). They concluded that negative everyday life experiences predicted psychological distress in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings.

### *Students' mental health*

Loneliness, anxiety, and feeling stressed were the three main emotional distress reported by students in the interview. These were due to the disruptions, change of atmosphere in the living environment, and uncertainties about their academic progress. Some stressors may be partly due to decisions taken by the university which included changing the mode of learning, modifying the assessment structure, cancellation of event and hall activities, sending students home for their personal safety, etc. These decisions were made based on student's needs and safety as their priority. These arrangements have become increasingly common as many universities have done during the global pandemic (Son et al., 2020). Some universities allow students to choose a pass/fail option for each course instead of a regular letter grade. Actions taken by the university, such as reduced course loads, open-book examinations, and other allowances relating to grading requirements, were aimed to alleviate some stress. However, students living with many uncertainties in halls during the social unrest may have been offset by negative emotions, at least to some extent.

Hall students' concerns about their residential lives were consistent with other studies which examined non-local college students. For instance, a study by Liang et al. (2020) in China Guangdong Province explored large-scale stressors such as an infectious disease outbreak (COVID-19) in university students' lived experiences. Based on the 4164 responses to a cross-sectional survey, 27.2% of the student population reported having mild depression, 16% reported having too much fear, and 17.3% detected some form of PTSD. Notably, the findings also found that a lack of social support was a contributing factor to poor psychological wellbeing when students undergo stressful life events.

### *Impact on relationships*

Countermeasures that were put in place in residential halls may have caused negative impact and triggered significant changes in students' lives. For example, a vast majority of the participants noted changes in their peer relationships because many students returned home as recommended by the university. This further limited the already disrupted physical and social interactions among students living in the halls, despite losing connections with their families and friends. In a similar situation, such as the Umbrella Movement which was another social unrest triggered by the strong opinions of HK citizens against their government in 2014, Lau et al. (2016) noted that the loss of social resources such as relationship intimacy and connectedness was associated with higher levels of anxiety and poorer self-rated health by 10–94%. The present findings revealed that more than half of the participants felt stressed and anxious during the social unrest. These negative emotions could be attributed to the impact on their relationship (e.g. a loss of intimacy) due to the changes experienced on campus.

Besides the issue of decreased interaction with peers, many students faced additional concerns in their relationships, such as confrontation between their peers. Some students expressed that they were afraid to express their opinions and chose to conceal their struggles from friends and others because they would add to further risk by impeding what is left in the relationship. Consistent with the findings, Mutz (2002) argued that exposure to opinion-challenging information could make people uncertain about their positions. Disagreements between individuals in one's social network could induce anxiety because they threatened social relationships and harmony. According to a report by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey by Lau and Zhao (2014) which explored public opinion about the movement and found individuals' opinions were seriously split. The polarization created severe disagreements, conflicts, and tensions between individuals and their significant others similar to what was evident among students residing in halls in the current study. However, Zhu et al. (2016) interpreted that selective avoidance in discussing sensitive topics can create a supportive network and promote interaction with like-minded others. They added that individuals tend to discuss politics most often with their spouse, partners or closest friends, but the literature shows that strong ties with the discussion partners may also increase the likelihood of disagreement. When this situation occurs in a residential hall, it can create tension and it is important for hall staff to be more proactive in getting to know their students during this critical time.

Hou et al. (2015) explained that individuals going through The Umbrella Movement in 2014 often engaged in spirited debates and developed polarized opinions which often disrupted social harmony. However, they also noted that discussions could increase the probability of agreement among close social partners which was also reported by some students in the current study.

### *Ways of coping*

When stressed, individuals may adopt coping strategies to promote psychological balance, maintain everyday routines, and seek social support (Hou & Bonanno, 2018), and this was evident in the present study. In light of all the stressors experienced, students

mainly cope by talking to their friends and family either face to face or online. This shows the importance of having strong social support during difficult times. Similarly, McLean et al. (2022) also claimed that the range of social supports that students receive from their families, friends and the academic community could directly influence their ability to deal with the challenges associated with university life. They supported the idea that social support is an effective way for students to deal with stressors associated with the challenge at university especially when they are distant from home (e.g. university students living in residential halls). However, as for the current study, not everyone was able to maintain such high level of social support, it is suggested that the effects of stress and anxiety induced by the social unrest are likely to be much more severe in those who lack strong and accessible social support. In this situation, few students exhibited social withdrawal and suppression which were considered unhealthy coping behaviour. Students who do not have sufficient social support to safeguard themselves from ongoing stress can be at risk of burnout and adoption of other coping strategies they can find (e.g. avoidance and suppression).

According to Son et al. (2020) postulation on coping mechanisms of healthy and unhealthy behaviours, it was argued that these coping strategies might be appropriate when the stressor is out of their control (e.g. social event). This is consistent with what students reported in the present study that although some used social support as a coping strategy for academic stressors, they feel that avoidance was the best coping strategy to use in face of confrontation about some political or controversial topic. In support of this assumption, studies from other countries with similar social movements and events have shown evidence of similar avoidance coping behaviours. For example, Dvir-Girsman (2015) observed during the Israel-Gaza armed conflict in 2014 that public contestation in times of political crisis might promote selective avoidance on social media. Participants reported that they talked less about politics and were less likely to be exposed to disagreement in a politically stable environment than during a major political event.

Despite the arisen of the social unrest that is physical and mentally disturbing, most students did not seek mental health service even when they face a significant loss in social network. A few students feel there is no clear need for it but some were confused about what it is for. This is consistent with the statistical report of Liang et al. (2020), who found that with the increase in mental health issues reported by students during the pandemic, only 457 (11%) of them actually sought psychological help. Reasons for why they do not seek professional help for common psychological distress include negative attitudes towards seeking help, stigma, coping style, self-efficacy, social withdrawal, suppression, worry about the evaluation of others, lack of understanding, and unrealistic expectations of psychological counselling (Zhang et al., 2019). Therefore, it is vital to promote clearer mental health services to tackle the effects of a sudden event such as the pandemic (Matthews et al., 2019).

### Limitations and future directions

In awareness of the current qualitative research design, several limitations should be noted. Firstly, as the sample size was limited it was not possible to obtain a fair representative of students living in each hall. There were also not many hall residents still living in halls during the social unrest which restricted the number of participants.

Although participants were recruited from various residential halls, they were from the same university, making generalization to other institutions difficult. Some students reported having emotional distress during the social unrest, but they have not used the university counselling service. The current study has not explored further on the underlying reasons behind their choices of support which could help policy-making and improve future uptake of available counselling support.

In terms of future directions, although interviewees have elaborated on their lived experience and coping strategies used, there is a need to explore how these have correlated with their current psychological wellbeing and which coping strategies they used more often in different situations. Conducting a mixed-method approach would help address the missing information (e.g. measuring psychological wellbeing and coping objectively). Follow-up study would be useful to determine the effects of the social unrest on students' mental health and wellbeing in its later phases beyond the peak period.

The current study is among the first to adopt a qualitative approach to documenting the psychological impacts of the social unrest on university students living in residential halls. From the current findings, students' stress and anxiety may relate to their choice of coping strategies adopted and that itself is determined by what's available to them. Although universities and residential halls have been well known for enhancing connectedness between individuals living in close geographical proximity (Kingsbury et al., 2019) which is linked to better physical and mental health (Araya et al., 2006; Echeverría et al., 2008). However, it should be noted that this is not always the case, as reported by students in the current study. In some unforeseen circumstance such as during the social unrest, social support may be disrupted which may impact how students deal with adversities. In this situation it is imperative for universities to provide other sources of support. Students may access support from academic staff to a lesser extent than that from other sources and these relationships were still deemed important for both wellbeing and transition to university (Casapulla et al., 2020).

There is a clear need to reduce feelings of isolation during the critical time and more frequent pastoral support should be offered to students to enable them to feel comfortable and supported. This could involve meeting with students on a one-to-one basis to foster a trusting relationship, and to ensure that they feel comfortable in their accommodation environment. This may also imply expansion of university counselling services during times of acute, large-scale stressors such as social unrest. Social media networks can be an effective means to screen for students' mental health by administering a standardized scale and identifying students with emotional distress. Interventions should especially target students experiencing lots of stressors and at high risk for developing mental health problems. This should focus on promoting healthy coping strategies, monitoring students' psychological adjustment to stressors, and evaluating intervention efficacy. An individual may seek and receive high-quality mental health support, but additional attention must be directed towards the reforming of the community.

## Conclusion

In the present study, students living in residential halls have been shown to be isolated from their social connections, family, and others. This has made them especially vulnerable to mental health concerns and consequently, a majority of the student residents were

experiencing increased stress and anxiety due to the social unrest. Despite the rapid spread of social unrest, it has become vital to promote mental health support. Mental health support is important in the unrest, especially for those with limited access to social and familial support networks and difficulties accessing relevant information in a potentially unfamiliar context.

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