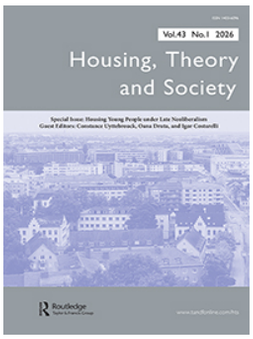

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Student Accommodation in Scotland: Home, Emotions and Diverse Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how emotions intersect with students' experiences of student accommodation and influence their ability to make a home. The expansion of Higher Education in the UK has led to increased student populations, a housing crisis, and a shift towards financialised purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA). However, little attention has been paid to students' lived experiences. Drawing on interviews with 45 students across three university catchment areas in Scotland, the study examines how students navigate PBSA emotionally and socially. It finds that students' relationships to PBSA as "home" are shaped by their housing biographies, the dynamics of shared living, and the material environment. The article emphasises the importance of intersectional experiences, using Ahmed's (2014) theory of how emotions "stick" to bodies to explore how minoritised students can experience exclusion and precarity, undermining a sense of home and belonging. The research contributes a more nuanced understanding of how students inhabit PBSA.

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Students; purpose-built student accommodation; home; emotions; diversity

Introduction

"Home" is a complex and multi-layered social construct shaped by culture, norms, time, politics and emotions (Easthope 2004). The dwelling is typically the starting point for interrogating "home" – the property that someone lives in, its material features, the legal rights of residents, its relation to the wider community and the social and psychological events, harms and emotions that occur there (O'Mahony 2007). These features are at the centre of this paper, focusing on students living in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA).

PBSA, including university "halls of residence" (or "halls"), is:

> . . . accommodation specifically designed, built or adapted for the purpose of housing students. It may be located on – or off – campus, and owned or managed by a university, private or third sector provider. (Gibb et al. 2022, 16)

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In PBSA, students typically have access to private bedrooms but share lounges and kitchens with others in their flat, floor or building. If bedrooms are not en-suite, they also share bathrooms. Living in PBSA often involves support to integrate new students, on-site security staff, swipe card access and shared laundries. Rents usually include utilities, insurance and broadband; this simplicity is highly valued by students (Alamel 2021; Sage, Smith, and Hubbard 2013). Whilst all-inclusive provision in PBSA – rarely featured in the private rented sector (PRS) – makes like-for-like comparisons difficult, generally PBSA is more expensive than other alternatives (Frank 2021; Unipol and NUS 2021). PBSA also varies considerably, with "luxury" accommodation containing amenities like gyms, swimming pools and cinemas through to more basic accommodation with limited amenities (Gibb et al. 2022; Reynolds 2020; Smith and Hubbard 2014). This has led to concerns about PBSA creating "a new set of exclusive geographies" (Reynolds 2020, 9) differentiated by wealth.

Globally, the PBSA sector has significantly grown over the past 20 years. Spain (Garmendia, Coronado, and Ureña 2012), China (He 2015), the USA (Foote 2017), Chile (Prada 2019), Nigeria (Bassey and Olapade 2024), Canada (Revington 2021) and Australia (Lam and Chen 2022) have all reported rapid growth. PBSA has cemented itself as "... an important real estate investment asset class for both private property investors and institutional property developers ..." (Bassey and Olapade 2024, 69). Sanderson and Ozogul (2022) demonstrated PBSA growth across different contexts, detailing an array of investment opportunities. Much academic literature focuses on the drivers of PBSA growth (see Cowan and Boroumand 2025 for a critical analysis).

In the UK, about one-third of students live in PBSA (PWC 2021). Compared to other countries, UK students are more likely to leave the family home to study; only 1-in-5 UK students stay at home, usually those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Whyte 2019). University halls of residence are dominated by first-year students as universities typically guarantee space for this cohort. After their first year, most students move into the PRS, often in a House of Multiple Occupation (HMO) (Farnood and Jones 2021), while a smaller number remain in PBSA (Wilkinson and Greenhalgh 2024). International students (typically postgraduates) also form a large proportion of PBSA tenants (Nakazawa 2017). Since international students pay significantly higher tuition fees than domestic students, the need to attract these students to the UK and accommodate them is great (Naidoo 2007). The resilient nature of PBSA as an investment, then, is in part linked to the historic strength of the international student market (Sanderson and Ozogul 2022), although the decline in this market may see investors pivot to the wider "build-to-rent" sector (Mellor 2025).

Nevertheless, PBSA remains a significant sector within in student housing markets. This article examines students' experiences of living in PBSA with cross-cutting themes concerning the housing biographies of students, relationships with flatmates and material conditions of PBSA. Whilst we include data from students across our full sample, we spotlight specific challenges and experiences of minoritized groups (international students, LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled individuals and those who are estranged from their families). We argue that even in a form of accommodation which is designed to be short-term (i.e. while they are at university), home – in its presence and its absence – still matters because it shapes individuals' daily lives,

including their relationships, identity and opportunities for self-expression, and engagement with the wider University.

The analysis makes three contributions to housing research. First, it applies the concept of home to PBSA. Second, it focuses on students' lived experiences of their accommodation; this is a significant gap in literature which is more focused on investment patterns and neighbourhood change linked to PBSA (Ruming and Liu 2024; Wilkinson and Greenhalgh 2024). Third, we consciously attend to student diversity and how this informs experiences of home. Much of the debate around student housing has "ignored the heterogeneous voices and struggles of students" (Sotomayor et al. 2022, 1), instead treating students as homogeneous (Ehlenz, Mawhorter, and Pendall 2024). This is despite growing diversity in student cohorts (Bolton, Lewis, and Gower 2024). As a result, there has been limited engagement with diverse student preferences, needs, or experiences, and student housing remains commonly designed with the "ideal" student in mind (Sotomayor et al. 2022). Addressing these gaps in knowledge is important in furthering our understanding of a rapidly expanding form of living among increasingly diverse student and post-student populations. Giving voice to under-represented experiences provides an opportunity to learn lessons about what matters in housing provision, at a strategic policy and a day-to-day management level (this was a key driver of the research, see Gibb et al. 2022).

In relation to the third contribution, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), highlights the need to consider how "identities (e.g. gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class) intersect and are intricately linked to interlocking systems of oppression, privilege and power (e.g. capitalism, heterosexism, racism, and sexism)" (Overstreet, Rosenthal, and Case 2020, 1). Crenshaw (1991) argues for the need to examine differences within groups and to understand these differences within structures of power. This article seeks to understand differences among students as they pertain to varying forms of disadvantage in relation to PBSA. Theoretically, we bring together "home" with Ahmed's (2014) work on emotion, which foregrounds the ways that emotions circulate and "stick" to certain bodies. The next section presents these literatures that underpin the paper: home, diverse experiences, and emotions. This is followed by the qualitative research methods and the main thematic findings.

Home and Student Housing

Home is a construction, a relation between dwelling and feeling (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 44). As Easthope (2004, 135) argues, it is when places like dwellings or neighbourhoods are "inscribed with meaning that they also become homes . . . homes are 'places' that hold considerable social, psychological and emotive meaning". The ideal home is commonly positioned as a sanctuary from the outside world, providing "psychic armour" and constancy (Atkinson and Blandy 2017, 20). Whilst home is commonly associated with feelings of comfort and ease (Ahmed 2014), this does not accord with all experiences of home, which can be violent, insecure and harmful (Gurney 2023; Mallet 2004). The emotions generated through the making and unmaking of home are therefore wide-ranging and fluid, informed by encounters with others and set within the wider context of lives and anticipated futures.

Student accommodation has particular features which shape the development "home", particularly in relation to permanence, privacy, and materiality. As Holton and Riley (2016, 625) explain, the uniformity of institutional PBSA may not immediately lend itself to homemaking. Students must negotiate restrictions on their ability to make a home (Holton 2016), whether due to constrained autonomy, limited privacy, or relative insecurity. Student housing, and PBSA, is also often conceptualized as a transitional form of dwelling which exists in a dynamic relationship with the "family home", complicating home-meaning (Kenyon 1999). This has contributed to the relative lack of attention in housing research to student experiences of home, particularly in more institutional PBSA (Thomsen 2007).

The perceived temporariness of student housing has also contributed to common narratives of low expectations of housing quality, and relative indifference to its home-like qualities (Holton and Riley 2016) despite evidence that students place importance on the homeliness of housing and view it as their main residence (Thomsen 2007). Nevertheless, there are recognized challenges in home-making in housing which is temporary and institutional (Thomsen 2007; see also Hoolachan 2022 in relation to temporary homeless accommodation). The experience of home for students is further complicated because it comes at a key transition point as people move between different identities and futures, such that "the meaning and experience of home becomes diverse, complex and fragmented" (Kenyon 1999, 95), providing insight into how emotions change as positions within a given field shift (van der Graaf 2015).

De-Homogenizing Student Experiences of Home

Although in PBSA students live alongside large numbers of other students, housing provision is often dominated by normative assumptions in relation to students' life-course, race, class, gender and sexuality (Sotomayor et al. 2022). This does not reflect diverse contemporary experiences or different views of "home" within a dwelling (Holton 2016). To feel at home means being at ease, achieving a sense of "fit" (Kenyon 1999), but it is important to ask: who "fits" and what emotions does this create? An emerging literature nuances understandings of student experiences, although further attention to the intersection of identities and layering of student experiences is needed (Costa et al. 2020a).

For disabled young people, finding appropriate accommodation is a key challenge, particularly shared accommodation (Mackie 2012). Disabled students confront highly variable standards of accessibility (Satsangi et al. 2018; Soorenian 2013), but there is a limited understanding of the housing experiences and discomforts of disabled students (Wilke et al. 2019). The common focus on access into accommodation alone does not account for the way in which students engage with the materiality of their homes and wider university life, whilst current approaches to student accommodation are often not flexible enough to respond to the housing needs of a wider set of "non-apparent" disabilities, including chronic conditions, learning disabilities, psychological disabilities, and co-occurring conditions (Wilke et al. 2019).

The experiences of LGBTQ+ people have been neglected by UK housing scholarship as compared to North America (McCarthy and Parr 2025). Research from the US suggests that LGBTQ+ students can face marginalization and isolation within universities, with shared living being particularly challenging, leading to the suppression of identities

(Mollet et al. 2021). LGBTQ people are also at higher risk of parental rejection and family conflict, which are often present in narratives of youth LGBTQ-homelessness and are therefore linked to wider experiences of estrangement (McCarthy and Parr 2025).

Indeed, students are commonly assumed to have significant family support, helping with high renting costs and providing a "family home" during holidays (Bland 2018). However, research with students who are estranged from family members highlights significant negative impacts related to accessing and keeping accommodation, including hidden homelessness and extreme sustained poverty (Bland 2018; Costa et al. 2020a). Estranged students may experience a profound sense of difference in relation to other students, with no access to the unreserved support of a family safety net, but research also highlights the importance of acknowledging positive self-identities such as independence and self-reliance (Costa et al. 2020a, 2020b; Marvell and Child 2023).

Finally, limited research into international students' housing experiences highlights differentiated experiences of risks and precarity (Morris et al. 2023). Rather than their stereotype of being uniformly economically privileged, international students face disadvantages in negotiating student housing markets, including discrimination (Fang and van Liempt 2021) and disorientation (Boccagni and Yapo 2021). Shared accommodation may highlight cultural differences with other domestic and international students, creating significant potential for tension (Soorenian 2013). These emerging literatures into heterogenous student experiences highlight the need to focus on a wider understanding of student experiences of home.

Stickiness and Emotions: The Relationality of Student Housing

Focusing on heterogeneous student experiences of home, the article applies the concept of stickiness to explore emotionality in homes which are shared. Understanding heterogeneous experiences of home requires attention to bodies and the co-construction of material, relational and temporal dimensions of home. As Ahmed (2014, 4) argues, attention to the body is crucial in understanding emotions, since "emotions shape the very surface of our bodies, which take shape through the repetitions of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others". These relational processes of "with-ness" and "against-ness" shape encounters with home as we align or distance ourselves from particular norms, values, and materials (Smitheram 2024; Smitheram and Nakai Kidd 2024).

Exploring emotions through materials and relational encounters means understanding emotions as more than personal or individual, but "as linking biography to power, the circulation of feeling, and the production of spaces and places" (Jones, Jackson, and Rhys-Taylor 2014, 3). The significance for home is that its conceptualization is grounded in the past accumulation of "affective value and past association" (Smitheram 2024, 121). In short, emotions emerge through interactions with objects in the world around us and the meanings we (and others) attach to them (Kebabi 2024, 10). This repetition underpins the embodied dispositions that shape the way we see and engage with the world – as student populations have become more diverse, individuals bring different habitual understandings and encounter spaces which may be more, or less, welcoming. This means that different responses can be generated by the same signs (Jones, Jackson, and Rhys-Taylor

2014), increasing the potential for disconnection with traditionally more dominant cultures (Costa et al. 2020a).

Ahmed (2014, 4) argues that emotions "'stick' as well as move", saturating places and objects with affect, which can then be experienced as full of entangled emotions, tensions, and belonging (Hopkyns 2025). Feelings – whether positive or negative – involve not just contact with an object, but also an understanding of embodied histories, the lingering and layered *traces* or *impressions* associated with emotion, bodily sensation, and thought (Ahmed 2014, 6). Objects, places and texts therefore resonate with measures of social worth and value, accumulated meanings that are read by people as they move through spaces (Hall 2014). These traces are co-constructed through encounters with others, and therefore are relational. Orientations towards "home" depend on past histories that have left their impressions – a process Ahmed (2014, 8) describes as "stickiness", because the work of emotion – generated in the interactions between people – involves the sticking of signs by *some* people to *other* objects and *other* bodies. Individual bodies accumulate the histories of these relationships and interactions because contact has *impressed* upon them. In other words, people bring the traces of past experiences into present encounters, informing the construction of home. Thus, it is the accumulation of layers of experience which come to reconstitute the object (the body) and its orientations within a particular time and space. This personal experience then informs social context, as the effects feed back into the social world (Jones, Jackson, and Rhys-Taylor 2014).

This fundamentally relational process is significant for home spaces which bring individuals into constant contact with others. The communality of the material environment in PBSA can undermine feelings which are traditionally associated with homemaking (control, autonomy, privacy) because the appropriation of space is negotiated (Boccagni and Yapo 2021). It is important to engage with the student home as a dynamic lived space constituted through unfolding everyday social relationships, in which the home is at once public and private, an individual and collective space (Holton 2016). In considering these boundaries, Goffman (1959) distinguishes between the "front region" and the "backstage", the latter being the place where "the performer can relax; he can drop his front ... and step out of character" (Goffman 1959, 122). Sharing facilities and common spaces with strangers offers significant potential for tension as students negotiate a key transition in the development of their self-identify and independence. The ability to construct the boundaries of home, or the "backstage", in PBSA is contingent and unequal. Indeed, Goffman's conceptualization reflects a particular construction of "home", grounded in private/individualized (van der Graaf 2015) and normative experiences which do not reflect diverse and different forms of habitation (Lancione 2019; Mallet 2004). In housing shared with strangers, encounters with others may lead to the construction of imagined "ideal selfs" for different contexts that respond to perceived societal or group norms, to promote positive recognition and a sense of belonging oriented towards different communities (Ahmed 2014). Whilst this negotiation may generate positive emotions, such as belonging, it may also generate shame where there is deviation from perceived social ideals. This can be experienced as "the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence" (Ahmed 2014, 107). However, this pain can also be generative, driving the establishment of new forms of attachment (Jones, Jackson, and Rhys-Taylor 2014).

Methods

This research was funded by the Scottish Government as part of a broader exercise to enhance understanding of the role of PBSA in the student housing sector. The research was driven by a number of challenges, such as: growing demand for student accommodation in Scotland (Forrest and Watson 2024); inflexible leases during the COVID-19 pandemic when accommodation fees still had to be paid even if housing was no longer needed due to the suspension of in-person teaching (Brown 2020); and problems of isolation and poor mental health (Unipol and NUS 2021). Whilst the Scottish Government introduced temporary measures to release students from leases during the pandemic (Gibb et al. 2022), all these drivers prompted re-examination of PBSA provision. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Glasgow. The full report from this research (Gibb et al. 2022) made a series of recommendations to Scottish Government, including how to better meet the housing needs of students; these were fully accepted by Scottish Government Ministers (Gibb 2024).

This article draws on 45 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students based in three major University catchment areas: Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Dundee/St Andrews. Fifteen interviews were conducted in each of these places. The geographic focus reflected a clustering of higher education institutions in these locations (4 in Edinburgh, 3 in Glasgow, 2 in Dundee and 1 in St Andrews). Furthermore, the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow are Scotland's largest Universities, while the Universities of Edinburgh and St Andrews both have significantly large international student cohorts, sometimes exceeding the number of domestic students (Forrest and Watson 2024). The decision to group Dundee and St Andrews reflects the interconnectedness of their housing markets; many staff and students at the University of St Andrews live in Dundee due to more affordable housing (MacLennan et al. 2013).

Student experiences were explored through two phases. First, an online survey was distributed with the support of universities, accommodation providers and student associations, via mailing lists and social media. Likert-scale questions asked students to rate their housing experiences, and demographic data was also collected. In total, 908 responses were received. Seventy-one per cent of respondents lived in PBSA, while just over 24% lived in the general PRS. Others lived in university-managed houses, student housing cooperatives, as lodgers, or with families.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted online with a sample of students who had given consent on the survey for a follow-up interview. The use of online interviews was informed by the project timeframe and budget and have been used extensively by the research team. One limitation of this approach is that the research team did not visit homes. However, to provide additional insights, students could opt to provide photos to enhance interview discussions and contextualize conversations. This provided additional understanding of the material environment, including bedrooms, and shared amenities such as kitchens. Nevertheless, we were not able to informally observe homes, limiting our understanding of potentially subtle cues related to shared spaces and their negotiation, which students may not have discussed or photographed spontaneously.

Demographic data were used to sample students and achieve representation of a range of students. The research team regularly reviewed the sample and purposively targeted interviewees to address any under-representation of experience or protected

characteristic, notwithstanding that the sample was inevitably shaped by the characteristics of those that volunteered for interview. Therefore, although we aimed to explore and represent diversity of experience, the sample cannot be representative of the experiences of any one group.

Of the 45 interviewees, 27 were international students, 17 domestic/home students (13 from Scotland and 4 from other parts of the UK) and one respondent who declined to answer. Thirty-two of 45 lived in PBSA, 12 in the PRS, and one in a student housing cooperative. While the study focuses on experiences of PBSA, interviews were undertaken with students in other forms of accommodation to explore their housing choices, including past experience of living in PBSA and reasons why they may choose to live in other tenures. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Interviews explored the housing pathways of students, the factors that informed their housing choices, and the extent to which their accommodation met their needs. All interviews were professionally transcribed and anonymized. Data were analysed in line with the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). Initially, the research team read the transcripts and reflected on any additional notes taken during the interviews. This resulted in the collaborative generation of an initial set of codes, nested under key research questions. These multiple codes were then further refined and grouped into broader cross-cutting themes. This included themes related to tenure security and affordability, feelings of belonging and "home", the material conditions of the accommodation and how students used these spaces.

Findings

Student Housing Biographies

Students consistently reported being offered a place in PBSA before entering year 1 and sometimes as a new postgraduate student, with most describing the process as "easy". They chose between accommodation blocks, en-suite or shared bathrooms, room sizes, and, in some cases, catering or self-catering. These choices were dependent on preference and budget. For domestic students, accommodation was often an afterthought following the choice of University and programme, with the guarantee of PBSA in year 1 largely taken-for-granted. For international students, however, accommodation was of greater importance when deciding where to study. Some international students had prior experiences of living independently and navigating challenging local housing markets:

> My visa got delayed. I was like, okay. I don't need that stress too because renting is [. . .] one of the most stressful activities that I've had in my life. [PBSA] was the easier option. [I would have preferred] to find people to rent a flat because I like to have my space. In student accommodation, you never have your own space. It never feels like your house. (Pablo, postgraduate, international student, PBSA, Glasgow)

Pablo's narrative indicates that he felt the PRS offered more opportunities to establish a home compared to PBSA, yet he compromised on this to avoid the stress of setting up a PRS tenancy in a foreign country. The view that the PRS can be more home-like than PBSA, but that finding an appropriate property was incredibly stressful, was echoed across our sample. However, some students also reported feeling pressured to follow the "normal" route into the PRS after year one in PBSA, with a fear of being labelled for this

if they deviated from the norm, highlighting the affective cost of deviation from social expectations (Ahmed 2014):

> You feel . . . a bit judged if you're living in halls even in second year [. . .] You can't just say, "I live in halls." You have to say, "I live in halls because . . . " Or you feel kind of like, they're judging me . . . they think I don't have any friends so I had to go back to halls. (Charlotte, undergraduate year 2, domestic student, PBSA, St Andrews)

Managing feelings of being "judged" exposes the ways in which interaction with different notions of home can exercise a disciplining function through the generation of emotions of judgement and shame (van der Graaf 2015).

Other students who did move into the PRS found the transition highly stressful, compounded by two broad issues: local housing market pressures and finding a property that met needs. In relation to local housing markets, students across all case study areas complained that demand for student housing outstripped supply, leading to frantic searching which was extremely time-consuming:

> You could send so many applications and on the same morning [. . .] they'd just reply and say "sorry, we had too many applicants", or they're like, "well, you're a student", and they'd rather take a professional. (Emily, undergraduate year 4, international student, PBSA, Glasgow)

At the time of data collection, several significant events had occurred that compounded local housing market pressures. Many of the students had been searching for housing in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had restricted the PRS market. In Edinburgh, the Fringe Festival and Christmas markets meant that landlords were prioritizing short-term holiday lets. And, the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) took place in Glasgow in 2022 creating, according to one student, a "housing crisis". These drivers limited access to the PRS, placing extra demand on PBSA and further limiting students' options (see Gibb, Lawson, and Dickson 2024).

For one student in Edinburgh, a combination of these events plus her status as an estranged international student created a perfect storm which led to homelessness. Ani's situation captures the importance of taking an intersectional approach to understanding lived experiences of housing precarity (see Bachour 2024). Unable to secure affordable housing before arrival, Ani moved to the UK and stayed in hotels and Airbnbs. University PBSA was fully booked, so Ani turned to the PRS:

> I used *SpareRoom* and *Gumtree*, meanwhile I was staying at Airbnbs . . . moving from place-to-place . . . People are posting the rooms available, they said they were receiving over a hundred messages [. . .] so I started falling behind in my schoolwork because I was spending time looking for accommodation and I couldn't work on the assignments because I needed a place to live. I arrived in Edinburgh the last week of August . . . and there was still the Fringe festival . . . there was no accommodation available, and so a couple of nights I even slept in the park. (Ani, postgraduate, international student, Edinburgh)

At the time of the interview, Ani was still enrolled on her course in Edinburgh but living with a friend in England and she had not attended classes for months. She described harrowing details of feeling scared while sleeping rough in Edinburgh, of an Airbnb host going through her belongings, and developing stress-induced psoriasis which she attributed to her precarious housing situation. As an estranged student, Ani had no financial

support, had spent all her savings on short-term housing, and could not obtain a job without a secure address.

Although Ani's situation is extreme, student homelessness and precarity does exist and estranged students are particularly vulnerable to homelessness and extreme poverty (Bland 2018; Costa et al. 2020a). When asked about ideas of home, Ani expressed sadness for what could have been:

> I wanted it to feel like this is my house . . . you could put your plants there . . . just customise it so it feels like it's your home, like you're living there and you're not just temporary. (Ani, postgraduate, international student, living with a friend, Edinburgh)

Ani's housing biography reveals the stickiness of emotions (Ahmed 2014) arising from housing transitions, which layered up sadness, stress and anxiety accumulated through her housing biography, and reveals the disciplining power of housing market encounters (Jones, Jackson, and Rhys-Taylor 2014). Ani had previously experienced many moves in her home-country due to COVID-19 and she was worried about returning during a severe housing shortage, with no family support. These repeated experiences of housing insecurity became embodied (Ahmed 2014), affecting her university life and shaping her future expectations. This demonstrates the value of understanding the ways in which different parts of the University ecosystem are infused with emotions, from housing to the classroom and beyond (Hopkyns 2025). For Ani, feeling unsettled, stressed and "temporary" – coupled with physical health impacts – was a chronic state. Just as housing can be a source of comfort and belonging for some, for others the layers of past encounters result in negative emotions sticking to places, generating stress, tension and alienation (Hopkyns 2025).

Living in PBSA: Relationality and the Material Environment

For students living in PBSA during data collection, overall views were positive, although there was variation. We asked students about material conditions, what they liked and disliked, and whether they felt "at home". Students highlighted certain features as significant for wellbeing: communal spaces which supported relationship-building, fresh air and natural light, and disability access.

Communal Spaces

Students with access to communal spaces in PBSA typically had shared kitchens, sometimes including a seating area. Others had a TV or games room shared by the entire block, meaning these spaces were often under-utilized as they were not near interviewees' rooms. None of the students in our sample lived in "high-end" PBSA (Kenna and Murphy 2021) although some had visited friends in more luxurious accommodation. Feelings about communal spaces were mixed:

> The common space, I do find sometimes that I'll put off going to cook a meal or leaving my room, if I don't feel like socialising with people because . . . everyone is from a different country . . . so that's six different cultures and we all eat at different times. So there's always someone in the kitchen which is nice if you're feeling sociable and you want to chat with someone, but on those days when you're tired or you just don't want to talk . . . it's kind of

> a mission to go "okay, now I need to go into the kitchen and I know there's going to be someone in there". (Imani, postgraduate, international student, PBSA, Dundee)

> I use the kitchen a lot . . . more so . . . when I start feeling stifled in my own room, when it feels like a small space . . . so that's when the kitchen space feels like a little better. (Saanvi, postgraduate, international student, PBSA, Glasgow)

Imani and Saanvi – both international postgraduate students – indicated that having a space in their block that was not their bedroom was important for socializing and wellbeing. Several students described living in PBSA as "isolating" if they spent too much time in their bedrooms.

However, several others, like Imani, noted the tricky social dynamics at play when sharing spaces. Her statement reflects the tension of having to be present in a shared space and hide her tiredness or not be sociable, instead using the kitchen as place in which she could just be herself (Goffman 1959). This highlights the emotional labour involved in reading and responding to the sticky signs of shared spaces (Hopkyns 2025); whilst this may be reflected in other shared accommodation, the difference in PBSA is that students typically interact with more people, and they are more likely to be strangers with no prior relationship. This lack of privacy compromised feelings of home (Holton 2016). Furthermore, there were reports of tension due to cultural differences, including conflict over food preparation and perceptions of international students. As Lily explained, "they [home students] think that I come from China . . . I'm actually from Hong Kong, but they are not bothered to distinguish the difference" (undergraduate year 2, international student, PBSA, Glasgow). This misrecognition removed an important part of Lily's identity, racially homogenizing her with other East Asian identities. This cultural assumption produced an emotional effect (Ahmed 2014); Lily's frustration and hurt left a mark on her wellbeing and sense of home.

For other students the nature of communal living presented significant challenges which impacted on their ability to feel themselves and "at home". LGBTQ+ students described trying to negotiate communal areas which felt "very intimidating" and "diminished self-expression [. . .] because you don't really want to be hassled" (Chris, undergraduate year 1, international student, PBSA, Glasgow), demonstrating the way in which identities could be suppressed (Mollet et al. 2021). Similarly, Pablo explained additional layers to negotiating shared material environments:

> We only have one common room [for the building]. Sometimes, I was watching Drag Race [. . .] I always get nervous [. . .] I always feel like they're judging me. It's something more personal [. . .] it's about gayness, identity, LGBT, queerness and a stranger passing by. It's intrusive to my safe space of enjoying the things around queerness [. . .] So, I stopped watching those there and I just watch it in my room. (Pablo, postgraduate, international student, PBSA, Glasgow)

Porous shared spaces could disrupt students' ability to feel safe in expressing their identity. In these contexts, the "backstage" of the home could be limited, restricting access to the "safe place to hide" (Goffman 1959, 123) which is so fundamental as a site for self-expression. Common spaces hold different "sticky" signs for people; as people's bodies come into these spaces, alongside their personal biographies, emotional responses are generated (Jones, Jackson, and Rhys-Taylor 2014). In common spaces, this can also be contingent on the presence or absence of different occupants, and the nature

of the relationships between. The implications for students living a non-normative existence, such as by virtue of their sexual orientation, therefore face an "affective cost" (Ahmed 2014, 107) of not fitting normative ideals through discomfort, emotional labour, and spatial isolation.

Windows, Ventilation and the Outdoors

Some students emphasized the importance of natural light, air flow and having views of, and access to, the outdoors (particularly green spaces) for their mental health.

> I would look for a place where there would be at least one semi-open space [. . .] a balcony [. . .] or a window which opens up to be a balcony [. . .] a feeling that you can look out. That really helps psychologically breaking out of your mental load [. . .] It enhances the quality of life. (Saanvi, postgraduate, international student, PBSA, Glasgow)

> The worst thing about the accommodation is [. . .] there is no ventilation in the corridors [. . .] There's no windows [. . .] that air doesn't move [. . .] It's just a constant low level, gross atmosphere, and that is quite draining to live in. (Chris, undergraduate year 1, domestic student, PBSA, Glasgow)

These comments align with evidence of the importance of fresh air and green space for psychosocial health (Morrison, Lowe, and Obonyo 2025). The PRS was more likely to offer this than PBSA according to interviewees, something particularly felt by those spending the COVID-19 pandemic locked down in student accommodation. Students living in PBSA in the early months of the pandemic described feeling "miserable", "disconnected", "isolated", "fed up", "stressed", "lonely", "homesick", "claustrophobic" and "annoyed". Having a large window in this context took on new significance. This experience followed the students when they left PBSA, as the material environment produced echoes of negative emotions in the present (Ahmed 2014), informing decisions when looking for PRS housing, with several students looking for properties with large windows and/or views of green spaces.

Disability Access

For the small number of disabled students in our sample, experiences of student housing were mixed with some PBSA more accessible than others. Students whose needs had been met described feeling happy:

> The good thing about it for me is there's a lift in the building and I have [nerve] damage in my arm [. . .] so that was the kind of thing that attracted me to that certain accommodation [because] I can't lift stuff for a long time. (Maisie, undergraduate year 1, domestic student, PBSA, Dundee)

Others, however, faced substantial problems linked to their housing location, not being able to share a bathroom, and broken lifts. Aoife had narcolepsy and struggled with the location of PBSA in year one as it was a 25-minute bus journey into her university building:

> All the symptoms of narcolepsy are like falling asleep really quickly in the day, insomnia, hallucinating, and so [. . .] I just didn't like being on the bus by myself. (Aoife, undergraduate year 2, international student, PRS, Edinburgh)

Aoife explained that she felt constantly stressed about falling asleep or hallucinating on the bus and missing her stop. This made her first-year university experience extremely challenging.

Katrina suffered from several disabilities including a mobility issue and a condition that meant she needed ready access to a non-shared bathroom. En-suite PBSA is more expensive than shared-bathroom accommodation meaning Katrina struggled to find somewhere within her budget. She eventually found a more affordable third-floor en-suite PBSA with a lift. Unfortunately, this was frequently broken:

> The current lift has been broken since February [. . .] it was fixed, it worked for one trip then it broke again, and they just don't really seem to be bothered [. . .] On my worst days I am housebound [. . .] I can go down the stairs, but I can't get back up. (Katrina, undergraduate year 1, domestic student, PBSA, Glasgow)

Katrina highlights the way in which her bodily interaction with the material environment was imbued with sticky emotions (Smitheram and Nakai Kidd 2024) – a simple act like pressing the button for the lift brought with it all the feelings of frustration, anxiety and pain that accrued in this simple act every time the lift had failed. This experience illustrates the "affective cost" (Ahmed 2014, 107) she bore as a disabled student, with a significant mental load from pre-planning and calculating which activities she could engage in order to have enough energy to climb the stairs on returning home. For disabled students like Aoife and Katrina, home was compromised by accessibility issues. Both students did reflect on aspects of their PBSA that they liked, such as their flatmates and the support they received from wellbeing advisors, but these were overshadowed by the tedious daily battles they faced in accessing their housing (Satsangi et al. 2018).

Home in PBSA

Although PBSA has not traditionally been viewed as a setting for exploring ideas of home, the analysis so far has shown that home permeates many aspects of the interviews. In addition to "home" arising naturally through these discussions, students were also explicitly asked if they felt at home in PBSA. The data reflected mixed views:

> No, I wouldn't call this room my home because I have a very strong definition of home being where my parents live and where I was born . . . But it's just given me a space, a private space that I can do whatever I want in this room. (Jasmine, postgraduate, international student, PBSA, Edinburgh)

Although some students, like Jasmine, did not feel at home in PBSA, others indicated that they did. They identified creative, relational, and emotional dimensions associated with their living spaces, highlighting the complex ways in which home can be experienced within PBSA. In line with extensive literatures on home-making (Holton and Riley 2016; Neumark 2013), personalizing and decorating bedrooms was an important aspect of home-making for several students. Despite restrictions on sticking pictures to the walls, students decorated pinboards, added pieces of furniture and displayed personal belongings. Significantly, bedrooms were the sole focus of these home-making activities as these were the only non-shared spaces available to them, and there may be restrictions on the use of shared space. As Charlotte noted: "I definitely feel my room is my home and I like it

[. . .] it's small but it's home for me" (undergraduate year 2, domestic student, PBSA, St Andrews).

As indicated by Jasmine, many students in our sample contrasted their PBSA home with their family home. But for those estranged from their families, PBSA was the only home they had, which gave it greater significance. Chris explained that the year before starting university, they had been sleeping on their sister's living room floor and it was a "novelty" to have their own room again when arriving in PBSA. Likewise, Katrina explained just how important her PBSA home was both practically and emotionally:

> People always just assume that we've got somewhere else to go [. . .] when I'm filling out forms and stuff, they ask for a home address and a term time address and I've got to explain to them that my term time address is also my home address [. . .] like estranged students, they're kind of an afterthought [. . .] This is my home. I've got nowhere else to be. (Katrina, undergraduate year 1, domestic student, PBSA, Glasgow)

> It's not the best accommodation but I've done what I can with it. It's still my home at the end of the day. I've got my bed, I've got a few stuffed animals I brought with me, I've got a couple of blankets [. . .] because when I had to leave my house I had to travel light as well because I took a Megabus from [place] to Glasgow and I was only allowed one suitcase and one rucksack, so I had to put like everything I owned in that. For me, it means a lot to be able to make a place homely like that. Like, I remember the day my quilt came, I cried. I feel really stupid about it. It was nice to just be able to make it look more like a home. (Katrina, undergraduate year 1, domestic student, PBSA, Glasgow)

For estranged students like Chris and Katrina, the significance of PBSA rooms cannot be underestimated, even when those rooms might not be in "the best accommodation". Homes are packed with a range of emotions and, as Ahmed (2014) argues, these feelings towards home are partly dependent on longer histories and relationships. Exploring the family backgrounds of the estranged students in our sample was beyond the scope of this research, but when speaking to Chris, Katrina and Ani (introduced earlier) it was clear that their experiences of housing and home as students were wrapped up in a range of complex, historical emotions (Costa et al. 2020a, 2020b). These students could experience home differently to those with more normative experiences, increasing emotional labour especially when they did not feel the significance of home for them was understood (Hopkyns 2025).

Whilst private and stable space to call home could therefore be highly important, the relational and emotional aspects of PBSA life were also significant. Specifically, some students described the strong friendships that PBSA had enabled:

> Even if the actual building doesn't feel like a home [. . .] I've built up a really nice friend group in halls and we're all going to be living together next year. And they really do feel like an almost, sort of, family, and that's quite nice. Even if the place doesn't feel homely, it feels more like a home when you have people [. . .] who are like really solid. (Chris, undergraduate year 1, domestic student, PBSA, Glasgow)

Students who identified as LGBTQ+ emphasized the importance of their flatmates and feeling safe and accepted. Being thrust into a shared living environment with strangers meant that some students felt anxiety over whether they would face homophobia:

> I'm a member of the LGBT community, so when I moved into [name of PBSA] a big thing for me was how accepting people would be of me being gay. I was accepted immediately, and

> even one of my flatmates was gay as well. (Alex, undergraduate year 1, international student, PBSA, Dundee)

> In terms of self-expression [. . .] I would say that there's a lot of very different people who've been put into the same flat and that creates difficulties [. . .] I identify as part of the LGBTQ community [. . .] I'm not big on sort of ultra masculine like culture [. . .] But there were a few guys who very much were, and it does feel very intimidating just being in the same space [. . .] I don't want to get homophobia or be bullied or whatever so I'd just keep my head down. (Chris, undergraduate year 1, domestic student, PBSA, Glasgow)

Despite Chris explaining above that they had developed a strong friendship group in halls which they associated with feelings of home, this was tempered by other flatmates who they perceived to be "ultra-masculine". Whilst Chris did not report homophobic incidents, the emotional fear existed due to the shared nature of the material environment, and they suppressed aspects of self-identity until they could move into the PRS with people they felt more comfortable with. The signs and emotions of spaces shared with strangers were therefore read very differently by Chris than other students, impacting on their ability to express their authentic identity (Kebabi 2024), fostering anxieties through the "against-ness" of forming a boundary against this communal space (Smitheram 2024). This reveals the difficulties that some students encounter with "home-making" in PBSA, highlighting the challenge of achieving a "sense of fit" (Kenyon 1999), particularly where students are randomly assigned to flats. Chris' experience challenges the assumption that students are a homogenous group that share similar preferences for the constitution of their living spaces.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that PBSA is far more than an investment opportunity or a temporary dwelling for students. As with any form of shared living, within PBSA a complex set of emotions, relationships, inequalities, and practices unfold among a diverse group. Students arrive with personal histories of "home" that carry emotional and embodied memories (Ahmed 2014), which inform their ideas of home-making and shape whether they feel "at home" in PBSA. As Smitheram (2024, 130) argues, this reveals how different ideals of "home, family and the 'good life' chaperone experience". Although temporary, PBSA can foster positive emotions and a sense of home, influencing students' wellbeing and university experience. Its material and social spaces can support or hinder feelings of happiness and homeliness. Students' bedrooms are crucial as their only private spaces. When students decorate them, they report greater feelings of wellbeing and homeliness, as echoed in the PRS (Hoolachan et al. 2017). However, without adequate communal spaces, bedrooms alone can feel stifling, compressing people's ability to comfortably take up space in the home (Smitheram and Nakai Kidd 2024) – a problem intensified during COVID-19 lockdowns. PBSA designed with good ventilation, windows, outdoor access, and decent communal areas foster student wellness and connection. Notably, students value these basic features over the "luxury" amenities like cinemas in high-end PBSA (Reynolds 2020).

One aim of this paper was to ensure that the heterogeneity of the student population was highlighted to demonstrate that students from minoritized groups can have different experiences in PBSA compared to others. Here, Ahmed (2014) and Crenshaw (1989, 1991) works provided valuable theoretical lenses for situating students' emotions – including feelings bound up with home – within broader cultural and structural layers of disadvantage. Specifically, the research highlights the nuanced and intersectional experiences of international students, disabled students, those estranged from their families, and students from the LGBTQ+ community. These groups are under-represented in student housing research, yet all experience challenges in PBSA which reflect broader inequalities. Their stories demonstrate the difficulties of navigating unfamiliar housing markets and cultures, of finding affordable housing that is accessible, of being a young person with no family support, and of navigating the complex dynamics of shared living. The emotions of housing and feelings of home take on additional layers for students from these groups and more research is needed to fully unpack the depth of challenges they face in navigating housing in general, and student housing in particular.

The research suggests several other directions for future research. Although case study areas were carefully selected based on local university and housing markets, geographical variation did not significantly affect the findings. However, regarding broader issues of student accommodation, local context certainly matters (Gibb et al. 2022). Temporary pressures on housing markets from events like the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and COP26 led landlords to prioritize short-term lets, with devastating consequences for Ani, who experienced homelessness and long-term housing insecurity. Further research is therefore needed to understand how geographical and temporal housing market variations, combined with intersectional disadvantages, contribute to student housing precarity and homelessness. Although this article focuses on PBSA as an under-explored form of student housing, the research indicated that there are other housing forms which would also benefit from additional research. In particular, student housing co-operatives offer a different model – although this is a relatively small sector, emerging research (Macias and Ruiz 2018; Schwittay 2024) indicates that it may offer important insights into alternative ways of making and doing the student "home". Finally, future research could enrich the evidence base by exploring the materiality of shared homes using a range of creative methods, including via home visits, diary methods, and "go along" interviews in common areas.

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