UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

'The Landlord Doesn't Care': Student Housing and the Selly Oak Environment for Supporting Healthy Lives

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Abstract

Throughout housing research, it is clear that the places we live in can affect our health and quality of life. Recently, greater attention has been cast upon ineffective landlords and the challenges of living in the private rental sector; with tragedy and public unrest encouraging housing policy reform. This research investigates the experiences and challenges that face students living within Selly Oak, Birmingham, and the resulting impact on their lives and health; it aims to navigate change by understanding the lived realities and difficulties within the home and the immediate surrounding environment. The study utilises three qualitative methodologies (interviews, focus groups and PhotoVoice) to capture student experience; finding that some students face undeniable challenges whilst living in an area they perceive to restrict healthy lives. Locally, students heavily criticise the health limiting nature of the built environment; whilst inside the property it is agents and landlords that influence their ability to make their house a home, in extreme cases this creates long-lasting issues on their health and education. The research synthesises findings and existing knowledge to conceptualise 'The Selly Oak Housing Pressure Effect' which some students may face. Whilst also drawing upon literature and Luke's theory of power to present a powerless student. It is concluded that action from a range of bodies is required to improve the overall experience for students living in Selly Oak; with recommendations for policy, practice and research outlined.

Acknowledgments: Research Dedication

Awaab, although our paths did not cross during your fleeting life course, your story ignited an inextinguishable motivational anger which bolstered my devotion to this research project.

Your family left Sudan for a better life and our country failed you.

Your narrative presents the stark reality of a society where systemic disadvantage, inequality and social injustice are inextricably bounded with 21st century life. You were an infant, a child with your future shining on the horizon; a life that was stripped from you and your family at the peril of indefensible housing conditions.

Premature mortality should not have to induce reactive change. Proactive change should deter premature mortality.

Rest easy little one.

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Chapter 1: Situating the Research

1.1: Introduction

Housing and living circumstances are features of life which are entwined throughout our communities. The breadth and depth of research falling under the realm of 'Housing and Health' (e.g., Thomson *et al.*, 2009; Gibson *et al.*, 2011; Mason *et al.*, 2013) continues to strengthen the argument for the connection between the settings people inhabit and health outcomes.

Currently within the UK, a brighter light is being shone on the suitability of housing, due to the recent inexcusable premature mortality of two-year old boy, Awaab Ishak (CTJ, 2022; DLHC, 2023). Whilst this tragedy occurred in social housing; continuous media coverage and public unrest is extending the focus to the private-rented sector (PRS); with calls for greater government interventions (The Guardian, 2023). This necessity for change and improvement is something that was clearly outlined in Awaab's 'Prevention of Future Death' report (CTJ, 2022).

This fatality sits within a broader frame of UK housing debates: including a changing and more populous PRS (Ambrose, 2015; ONS, 2018), and a developing review of the 'Decent Homes Standard' to create a reformed PRS (DLHC, 2021); these current socio-political debates strengthen the appropriateness of current, forward-thinking research.

Students are identified as anomalies in the housing market; they are junior recruits to the housing ladder (Rugg and Quilgars, 2015); when dualled with the freedom and excitement of university (Stockton and Baker, 2013; Holton and Riley, 2016), vulnerable characters can be created when negotiating the demands of the PRS; requiring additional housing guidance (Rugg *et al.*, 2004). However, due to the drought of qualitative research withing the student PRS, the true experiences and challenges are hard to identify (Rugg *et al.*, 2004; Soaita *et al.*, 2020).

This research project will aim to close a research gap within this field and add clarity to the experience of students living in Selly Oak, Birmingham. However, it is first imperative to consider current literature that has relevance to this research study. This is covered in Chapter 1.2.

1.2: Literature Review

The importance of providing an in-depth overview surrounding key themes of this research area must not be undervalued (Bryman, 2016; UoE, 2022). Therefore, this section will critically discuss relevant literature that relates to this study. Three themes will be covered in this review: experiences of housing; university students; and healthy environments. Finally, a concluding statement will situate and justify this current dissertation based on current knowledge.

1.2.1: Experiences of Housing and 'The Home'

Whilst studies falling under the umbrella of 'housing research' is plentiful, it is vital to hone in to the relevant sub-divisions for this study. Vast amounts of research focus on the economic perspective of housing, specifically housing markets and which socio-economic groups benefit and suffer in challenging times (Catte *et al.*, 2004; Mason *et al.*, 2013). Another heavily researched area within this field is the relationship between housing and health, identifying that area characteristics, housing condition and housing tenure can all have adverse mental and physical health effects (Evans *et al.*, 2003; Thomson *et al.*, 2009; Gibson *et al.*, 2011). However, the wide-ranging remit of this research area still means that research gaps are existent. The reporting of lived housing experiences from people in key groups throughout society is where gaps prevail.

Thomson *et al.* (2001), recommended for more qualitative research to be conducted to understand the housing journeys that result in damaged health outcomes (Thomson *et al.*, 2001). To some extent, this has been addressed within this field, with studies looking at energy efficiency within the home and its impact on health

(Ambrose, 2015; Butler and Sheriff, 2017; Longhurst and Hargreaves, 2019). Ambrose (2015) comments on the rising number of tenants experiencing excess cold, conducting 30 interviews with landlords from a UK town to determine reasons for not improving the energy efficiency of their properties (Ambrose, 2015). Landlords had the perception that the local housing stock was no longer suitable and that aesthetic improvements ranked higher on their priorities than home efficiency (Ambrose, 2015). However, the study is completed within a small settlement, and doesn't capture the experience of tenants in housing, focusing on landlords only. It could be argued that more research is needed focusing on tenant experiences of energy issues within a larger settlement. Longhurst and Hargreaves (2019) administer qualitative methods to capture the emotional experiences of 16 people living in social housing; uncovering how factors such as stigma and trust issues can create barriers for vulnerable tenants seeking help (Longhurst and Hargreaves, 2019). The study does work towards thickening the literature on tenant experiences; nevertheless, the small sample size and fixation on the social housing sector, means the findings have little relevance to other groups in society, creating research voids.

Additionally, there is a growing body of work capturing the lived experiences of tenants within their homes in the PRS and how this relates to their health and wellbeing (e.g., Fear *et al.*, 2004; Barratt and Green, 2015). Fear and colleagues looked at older tenants in the PRS, uncovering the disparities in landlord behaviour when it comes to required remedial work (Fear *et al.*, 2004). Some of the interviewees commented on how issues such as damp or poorly fitted window frames are often ignored by their landlords, later commenting on how this affected their everyday happiness (Fear *et al.*, 2004). However, the study is limited by key

methodological details being omitted from the article. Followed by the fact that it was only completed on elderly people, it becomes clear that the ability to generalise this study with other age groups is severely limited.

Developing upon this, it would seem beneficial for this literature review to discuss key theoretical frameworks relevant to housing experiences, including the work of Anthony Giddens surrounding 'ontological security' which he defines as 'a sense of continuity and order of events' (Giddens, 1991, p.243), a concept first developed in the 1980s (Giddens, 1984). Part of this theory discusses the notion that humans create routine in our everyday lives to support a consistent sense of their self and identity (Giddens, 1991). The theory has become increasingly linked to housing studies, with Saunders leading these contributions, discussing how homeownership is tied with belonging and security; whereas within the rental market tenants struggle to develop emotional ties to their housing (Saunders, 1986; Saunders, 1989). Nevertheless, the ability to successfully utilise and apply the concept to research has been identified as difficult (HSA, 2021). Whilst the home has been investigated previously as a place where people can develop the feeling of 'ontological security' (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Saunders, 1990; Easthope 2014), The Housing Association within the UK believe that the concept is not currently applied appropriately within research, urging researchers to increase the use of this concept in a more nuanced manner within studies (HSA, 2021).

There has been a rising level of research conducted on 'the home' (e.g., Somerville, 1992; Kearns *et al.*, 2000, Easthope, 2004, Clapham, 2011). Somerville has been a key thinker surrounding the meaning of 'home'. He argues that home is a 'multidimensional concept' which can have six or seven 'key signifiers' as identified in Figure 1 (Somerville, 1992, p.533). Somerville argues that not only does the physical structure of the home provide safety and security but facets such as 'hearth' ascribe deeper meaning to the home, that is personal to that dedicated space (Somerville, 1992). He argues that it is the amalgamation of the six main 'signifiers' which create the ideal notion of 'paradise' within a home (Somerville, 1992, p.533).

| Key signifier | General connotation | Sense of security | In relation to: | |
			Self	Others
'Shelter'	Materiality	Physical	Protection	Roofing
'Hearth'	Warmth	Physiological	Relaxation	Homeliness
'Heart'	Love	Emotional	Happiness	Stability
'Privacy'	Control	Territorial	Possession	Exclusion
'Roots'	Source of identity	Ontological	Sense	Reference
'Abode'	Place	Spatial	Rest	Living/sleeping space
'Paradise'	Ideality	Spiritual	Bliss	Non-existence (?)

Figure 1: Key Signifiers of Home (Somerville, 1992).

Another key area of research on 'the home' is centred around 'materiality'; this is a method of research which involves a study on the existence of ideas, objects and values (Prown, 1982; Crang, 2013). This mode of thinking falls within the realm of sociology and cultural geography with researchers often seeking to further define the meaning of 'home' (Gurney, 1999; Easthope, 2004; Heywood, 2005). Alongside this, other studies have considered embodiment within the home and the idea that the home can be a material artefact (Clapham, 2011; Soaita and McKee, 2019). Within

this area, research has uncovered the challenges and lack of control that tenants face regarding homemaking in the PRS (Lister, 2006).

Soaita and McKee demonstrated this in their study with 36 participants. The study was able to uncover the battles that tenants face surrounding home making, with participants commenting on insecure tenancies that left them feeling unconnected to their living environments (Soaita and McKee, 2021). The later part of the study involved the researchers developing this idea of the 'Invisible Tether' as an anchor that the tenants were caught on, due to their lack of choice, control and power (Soaita and McKee, 2021).

Likewise, the issue of landlords exercising high power and control over tenants has been witnessed elsewhere. Byrne and McArdle (2022) uncover how in the Irish PRS, landlords commonly exercise high control over factors such as decoration within the property, restricting homemaking practices (Byrne and McArdle, 2022). The participants in this study note how the informal relationship between the tenant and landlord mean that there is an ongoing fear of conflict, with a 'power asymmetry' being identified by the researchers (Byrne and McArdle, 2022, p.126). However, since Ireland has a different legislative structure and market, it would be useful to research the tenant-landlord relationship in a UK context. Similarly, Chisholm *et al.* (2020) comment on the poor state of the PRS despite the existence of regulation. Drawing upon the work of Giddens (1991) and Luke's theory of power (Lukes, 2005); they discuss three dimensions of power that landlords hold over tenants, including a hidden power which is not objectionable or visible, yet both parties know it is present (Chisholm *et al.*, 2020).

1.2.2: Housing Experiences in Marginal Groups

More recently, research involving 'the home' has begun to expand into marginal areas including the rise in Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs). Commonly defined as a building occupied by people who do not form a 'single household' (The Housing Act 2004 Sec 257 (2)(b)); with 'the standard test' detailing other possible HMO configurations. There has been rising concern as these homes are linked with social exclusion amongst disadvantaged groups (Ward, 2015). Barratt and Green assert that housing research within the home is 'underexplored' (Barratt and Green, 2017, p.1). Their study uses PhotoVoice and interviews with 20 HMO residents in a UK seaside town. The researchers identified how residents in these temporary homes use possessions as a key factor for homemaking (Barratt and Green, 2017). The application of these two methods within the study is something which should be applauded; utilising the visual benefits of PhotoVoice to add additional detail to their findings (Barratt and Green, 2017; Soaita and McKee, 2021). However, research surrounding housing experiences and 'the home' commonly seem to focus on economically active adults, outside of education (e.g., Lister, 2006; Barratt *et al.*, 2017; Byrne and McArdle, 2022). A pioneering report within the field, conducted a meta-analysis of studies within the PRS from the UK and five other nations (Soaita *et al.*, 2020). The review uncovered that some marginal groups, such as migrants and students were low in representation throughout housing research (Soaita *et al.*, 2020).

Broadening the literature search can however uncover some international examples of these underrepresented groups (e.g., Huston *et al.*, 2015; Tiwari, 2022). Ruming and Dorling (2017) research the housing experiences of PhD students, with it being identified that students often struggle due to their lower purchasing power (Ruming and Dowling, 2017). Additionally, these challenges have been witnessed within India, where students commented on expensive rents and low-quality properties (Tiwari, 2022). Tackx and colleagues supplement this research area by conducting a study on three American students who were autistic, commenting on the scarcity of research surrounding the housing arrangements of young people (Tackx *et al.*, 2022). The study identified how two of the students did not feel comfortable in the shared spaces of their student housing (Tackx, 2022). However, challenges exist with this research; all three of these studies were completed in other countries; meaning applicability to a UK context is limited. Furthermore, the Tackx *et al.* (2022) study only investigated the experiences of three students, and in the Ruming and Dorling (2017) study only half of the participants were PRS tenants, the other half were homeowners. Therefore, more research is needed on students living in the PRS with a larger sample size, that will provide a more concrete reflection on the current UK situation.

Investigating deeper, a narrow selection of studies capturing UK student housing experiences can be found. Hubbard (2009) conducted a study looking at the increase of purpose-built student accommodation in Loughborough, looking through a gentrification lens; meaning the experiences of living in student housing was only covered in a fleeting sense (Hubbard, 2009). Part of the study involved capturing the experiences of students living in HMOs and the challenges faced sourcing repairs

from landlords (Hubbard, 2009). However, since a large part of the study is focused around interviews, the narratives presented are somewhat limited without visual construction.

Holton and Riley (2016) somewhat build upon this, their Portsmouth study examined the homemaking practices of students in term-time accommodation (Holton and Riley, 2016). The use of photo-elicitation here helps to illustrate narratives of student living; with one of their findings being that belongings used by students helped to support the pressures of homesickness whilst living away (Holton and Riley, 2016). Whilst it is advantageous to understand these lived experiences of students, both these studies have omissions which leave gaps in the literature. Hubbard centres a large amount of his study around purpose-built accommodation affiliated with the university (Hubbard, 2009). Additionally, whilst Holton and Riley include students in the PRS, both their study and the Hubbard study have an overshadowing geographical focus, with their research heavily surrounding urban and cultural geography theory (Hubbard, 2009; Holton and Riley, 2016). Therefore, it seems apt for more research to be completed on students from an Environmental Health perspective that considers the experiences of students and how this has altered their health and wellbeing.

1.2.3: Students and University Life

Historic government strategy aimed at increasing university level attendance from 'non-traditional backgrounds' has seen an increase in student populations across the UK (Andersson *et al.*, 2012). This has seen a significant rise in peer reviewed research studies involving students (e.g., Holdsworth, 2009; Hubbard, 2009, Holton, 2013), with a dominating segment of student research focusing around the rise of 'studentification' (Allinson, 2006; Hubbard 2009). Some studies have looked at the pressures that students place on local communities in key cities such as Liverpool or Birmingham (Allinson, 2006; Holdsworth, 2009). Allinson (2006) completed a case study investigation at the turn of the century. Finding that whilst students had created many benefits to Birmingham, such as a boosted housing market; it was identified that local people had stronger negative perceptions of students than positive ones (Allinson, 2006). Additional research has been fuelled by societal panic over the quantity of available student accommodation at university; presented alongside the Housing Act 2004 adding additional legalities to the use of HMOs (Smith, 2005; Hubbard, 2008); this led to researchers considering the impacts that rising student populations will have on urban locations (Hubbard, 2008).

Additionally, a focal strand of student research relevant to this study is centred around student experience of living in cities. Often falling into the research trend of students' usage of cities; with a particular focus on nightlife (e.g., Malbon, 1999; Wilkinson, 2017; Holton, 2017). Mark Halton has been a key researcher within student geographies with his empirical studies focusing on students' use of social spaces, drinking venues and how this can interact with their enjoyment and sense of place (Holton, 2015; Holton, 2017).

Whilst research within Birmingham on this area is somewhat scarce, recent research from the University of Birmingham (UOB) has aimed to address this research gap, looking at the experience of living in Selly Oak (Lynch *et al.,* 2022). 'The Selly Oak Project' looked at the lives of second year students who were starting their initial independent housing journeys, the study allowed for student to have a voice on issues such as community enjoyment, local amenities and feelings towards crime and safety within Selly Oak (Lynch *et al.*, 2022). Whilst it is positive to see a greater focus on Selly Oak as a research area, there is still scope for more research, including the experiences within the term-time student home; recommended as part of the study (Lynch *et al.*, 2022).

1.2.4: Health Inhibiting Environments

Across health studies, place and neighbourhood are seen as recurrent themes for their impact on health. Scholars contest that health choices and outcomes are related to our surrounding environments (Tunstall *et al.*, 2004; Cummins *et al.*, 2007). Previous research has seen examination of certain local areas to cast a critical eye over the nature and quality of establishments within the built environment and how this can have lasting impacts on diet, food consumption and health outcomes (Rose *et al.*, 2009; Yang *et al.*, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, since the WHO have identified obesity as one of the largest contemporary public health threats (WHO, 2000), an increasing body of research has been centred around the rise of 'obesogenic environments' (Nelson and Woods, 2009; Maley *et al.*, 2010). With research often examining perceptions of the built

environment for supporting health and obesity reduction (e.g., Timperio *et al.*, 2005; Maley *et al.*, 2010). Maley and colleagues administered qualitative research methodologies to determine perceptions of the social, natural, and built environment (Maley *et al.*, 2010). From the research it was identified that desired healthy practices are often conflicted with choices within the environment and identified outlets aimed at encouraging healthy choices were often low in popularity (Maley *et al.*, 2010). However, this study and others of this calibre (e.g., Hansen *et al.*, 2015) are completed in a US context, where the social, built and natural environment is different to the UK situation, creating gaps in the pool of knowledge.

These issues continue when specific demographics, such as students are considered. Stockton and Baker (2013) consider student perceptions of the built environment for health, studying fast food restaurants (Stockton and Baker, 2013). By surveying 300 students, it was found that the freedom of being at university can negate the ability of students to make healthy choices, and there was a lack of understanding amongst students when it came to calories and nutrients (Stockton and Baker, 2013). Similarly, Abraham and colleagues conducted a similar study and found that choice of food boiled down to factors such as taste and convenience (Abraham *et al.*, 2018). There is a gap within research that considers the perception and usage of the UK built environment and how this informs student healthy choices. With UK based research commonly focusing on what students believe a healthy university campus should consist of (e.g., Holt *et al.*, 2015), rather than their perceptions of their local area for supporting health.

1.3: Summary, research gap and justification

This literature review has aimed to provide a detailed account of current research surrounding three key areas: housing experiences, university life and community health. Justification for this research study can stem from a blend of factors. Whilst housing research is in abundance, the subsection of housing experience research provides a narrower collection of studies. Coupled with the fact that housing reviews have identified and called for a higher student representation within housing research (Soaita *et al.*, 2020); the lived experience of students within the UK rental sector, can be identified as a clear research gap. Whilst previous research considered this (e.g., Hubbard, 2009; Holton and Riley, 2016), their research has been heavily tied to certain topics; for example, urban geography. Therefore, from these identified gaps it appears pertinent to research student housing from and Environmental Health perspective, whilst also recognising that there may be determinants outside of their housing that impact on experiences and health.

1.4: Aims & Objectives:

The overarching aim of this project is to explore and understand the lived experiences of students living in private rented housing Selly Oak area and how this has affected their health and university experience.

To achieve the overall aim, the objectives of this project are to determine:

- The experiences and challenges that students face in private rented accommodation and how they think improvements should be made

- The impact that living in private rented accommodation has had on their health and educational studies

- How students perceive the ability of the local area to promote and support healthy lives and choices

1.5: Research Questions:

To support progress towards the overarching aim, there are four key research questions:

1. How do students perceive student housing and the surrounding environment of Selly Oak for supporting healthy lives?

2. What are the lived experiences and challenges of securing, moving, and living in private rented student housing?

3. How do the relations between landlord and student tenants play out within Selly Oak?

4. How do students feel comfortable and 'at home' in student housing?

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter will provide an overview on the project design; sample; project considerations and the data collection and analysis process; which are all vital for a study to convey (Furseth and Everett, 2013); at times it will be paramount to cast a 'reflective' and 'reflexive' lens over the study to identify strengths and challenges encountered that could compromise the research process and findings (Rose, 1997; Berger, 2015).

2.1: Research Design

This study involves an examination of the experiences and challenges students in Selly Oak face; both within the home and the surrounding environment. Focusing on how these challenges may interact with health and university life, this is demonstrated by drawing upon three qualitative methodologies.

Since the study is situated within the broad umbrella of housing research, it It was critical to select research methods that not only allow the collection of sufficient data for the research questions (RQs); but also to supplement the existing pool of research. Researchers have called for a greater quantity of housing research using qualitative methodologies, due to inability of numerical data to capture lived experiences creating restrictions in the quality of data collected (Thomsen *et al.*, 2001; Leung, 2015; Soaita *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it seemed suitable to work on these expert recommendations, whilst ensuring that the methods would support the internal validity of the study (Leung, 2015). This resulted in three methods being selected: interviews, PhotoVoice, and focus groups.

Acting as the principal research method; interviews have a strong ability to gather data in abundance and capture wide-ranging experiences; potentially unearthing issues not considered by the researcher (Silverman, 1993; Valentine, 2005). This creates a strong argument for why they were selected. Since the researcher had already been deterred from quantitative methods due their restrictive nature; structured interviews were not utilised due to their unmalleable structure (Dunn, 2005; Longhurst, 2016). Instead, following research guidance themes were selected around the four research questions, with an opportunity to probe for greater detail where required (Appendix A); the 'Tell me about…' phrasing was deployed in order to encourage free speech and open sharing of experiences (Valentine, 2005, p.110). This semi-structured method allowed for greater freedom whilst also protecting a certain level of external validity that would have been diminished through an unstructured design (Bergelson, 2022).

Since the researcher desired to gain a true and detailed sense of student experiences, it was important to incorporate triangulation into the study design; rather than relying on interviews only - this approach could have potentially encroached on the internal validity of the study (Patton, 1999; Carter *et al.*, 2014; Peters, 2017). Therefore, running alongside the interviews, the use of PhotoVoice (often referred to as photo-elicitation) was administered. This visual methodology involved participants taking photos of their own space to present at interview (Scott, 2009). The researcher hoped this method would provide freedom to participants to share what is important to them, whether that be a personal space or any maintenance issues (Drew *et al.*, 2010; Soaita and McKee, 2021).

Furthermore, previous successful research utilising this method, heightened motivations for use within this study (e.g., Scott, 2007; Barratt *et al.*, 2017), who have praised the use of photography for capturing what words cannot (Gieryn, 2000). Soaita and McKee, applied this method when studying materiality and comfort within the PRS, they found that using this method created 'thick' descriptions that added extra vibrance and detail to discussions urging for increased utilisation of this method. (Soaita and McKee, 2021, p.295). These positive findings encouraged the selection of this method. Participants were given freedom to select which parts of their homes to photograph, with brief themes provided (Appendix B); resulting in a true sense of what they valued as significant. This enabled the researcher to capture the experiences of participants on a deeper level (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006; Soaita and McKee, 2021).

Finally, since the nature of this research involved a requirement for the collection of views, opinions, and recommendations for improvement. Focus Groups (FGs) seemed highly suitable for this research due to their collaborative framework (Conradson, 2005; Peters, 2017), this method greatly contributed to objective three. Additionally, the potential for FG discussions to be very participant-led, provided encouragement to the researcher to be able to access detailed perceptions of the local area (Peters, 2017); offering the ability to allow a flow in debate whilst also managing tangents; the FGs also followed a 'semi-structured' nature (Breen, 2006). See Appendix C for details.

2.2: Location and Sample

Navigating forwards, this next subsection will provide detail and justification for the research site and sample selection; aiming to define the research in greater geographical and methodological detail.

After identifying a research gap, it was clear that a suitable research site would be required, that provided accessibility to a student population. Selly Oak (Figure 2) is a suburban area situated on the outskirts of Birmingham with a population of approximately 109,000 residents (BCC, 2019). It holds a high student population, with feedback identifying it as the most popular area for students from the University of Birmingham (UOB) to live in (Allinson, 2006); suggesting a suitable sample would be able to be drawn from the area (Sheppard, 2020). Additionally, since the researcher attends UOB and lives in close proximity, it was a convenient site for research; especially when the time constraints of the postgraduate dissertation are accounted for (Furseth and Everett, 2013).
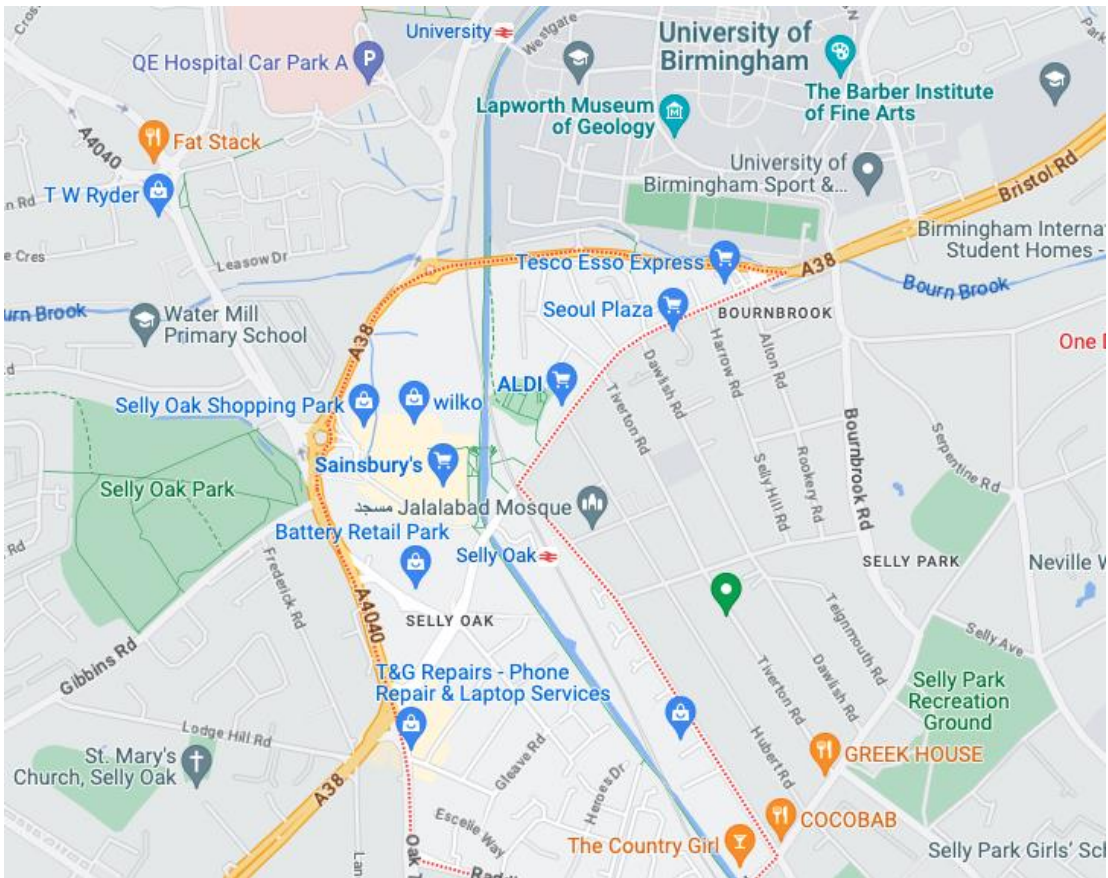
Figure 2: Map of Selly Oak (Google, 2023).

Conducting research on this singular area allows the study to hold elements of a case study research design (Yin, 1989). Where research is conducted on a specific unit or location of analysis (Noor, 2008). And whilst this method of research has been criticised for the lack of generalisability that the results may provide to the wider population (Welch *et al.,* 2020). This did not generate concern or halt research, because a key preliminary target from the outset was to capture data which may improve the student experience within the local area, rather than improving the national picture. Therefore, the ability to hone research to a particular site was deemed advantageous; as experiences and events could be investigated in a location that was specific and manageable (Gummesson, 1991; Noor, 2008).

Next, it was imperative to select a sampling technique, one that was suitable for the study, and the constraints that the researcher faced (Furseth and Everett, 2013). Due to this, 'snowball sampling' was utilised, where a ripple effect is caused by the researcher asking willing participants to reach out to others who may be interested (Bryman, 2016). This method allowed the researcher flexibility to coordinate this project alongside other studies and life commitments (Parker *et al.*, 2019). At the beginning it was hoped that around 20 participants would be recruited to the study from a range of students residing within Selly Oak; however, the study was only able to recruit 15 participants (Appendix D). In some ways this was down to the pitfalls that snowball sampling can create, including a stunting of the snowball effect (Noy, 2008; Parker *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, within this convenience sampling technique, certain groups can be underrepresented (Noy, 2008); this drawback was unfortunately witnessed with only three international students recruited. This therefore limited the quantity of collected experiences from an international perspective. As a result, the researcher has applied caution when discussing these findings in later chapters as generalisability to the international student population is severely limited from this narrow sample.

2.3: Ethical Considerations

Ethical debates and discussions have become inextricably linked with the research process (Bryman, 2016; Peters, 2017); since research that displays minimal ethical consideration is unlikely to be promoted or of high quality (ESRC, 2010), it was integral that correct ethical actions were a strong backbone to the study. Here, the

qualitative nature of the study created barriers for this achievement; as these boundary busting methodologies create issues surrounding harm to participants (Bryman, 2016). This increased the importance of adhering to strict research guidelines and policy (e.g., Bryman, 2016; BSA, 2017). Following the proposal of the current study an ethics assessment was completed and verified by the UOB. Considerations were cantered around four key areas communicated by Diener and Crandall: harm to participants; informed consent; privacy invasion and deception (Diener and Crandall, 1978); the latter of which was easily discarded as it did not relate to the aims of the study.

Firstly, the potential risk of harm to participants was evaluated. It was identified that both partaking in the study and being identified as a study associate could cause harm (Bryman, 2016). To combat this, personal questions that could cause duress were omitted from the stud, and all participants were allocated 'pseudonyms', which would not be shared amongst the research group to further restrict identification. During the recruitment stage gaining 'informed consent' in a moral manner was vitally important to uphold the reputation the research and the institution (ESRC, 2022). Prior to the study, prospective participants were given a participant information sheet (Appendix E) and an informed consent form (Appendix F). Distributing these forms also allowed the researcher to communicate that the study was compliant with GDPR and The Data Protection Act 2018 - this detailed how their data would be stored and utilised securely (UoE, 2023).

Whilst methodologically the use of PhotoVoice pitched benefits for study validity, administering this method involved ethical concerns surrounding privacy invasion; since participants were asked to share personal aspects of their lives (Barratt *et al.*, 2017; Soaita and McKee, 2021); the reflection that participants may not wish to share images of their home was initially noted (Clarke, 2013); with the researcher making special comment both on the participant information sheet and through verbal reiteration that all parts of the study including PhotoVoice were voluntary (Bryman, 2016; BSA, 2017).

2.4: Researcher Considerations

Whilst a study structured around poor ethics has the potential to create sub-par research (ESRC, 2010); other factors can also restrict study credibility. Throughout the process, it has been vital for the researcher to incorporate 'reflexivity' into ongoing reflections (Peters, 2017; Dodgson, 2019). At times, remaining mindful to reflect on these personal attributes that can create a large element of subjectivity and bias proved challenging; yet the researcher viewed these 'reflexive' actions as vital to improving the quality of research and to induce deeper thinking (Mitchell *et al.*, 2018; Dodgson, 2019). A large part of this process involved 'positionality' awareness. The lead researcher is a master's student at UOB, holds a BA (Hons) Geography degree, is approximately 3-6 years older than the participants in the study and does not reside within the research area. Time was required to understand how each of these personal facets fed into the current research to position the researcher with the study (Bukamal, 2022).

Feeding into these considerations was an assessment of the 'insider/outsider' status of the researcher. This helped to signify whether the academic held attributes that strongly relate to the group or area studied (Mohammad *et al.*, 2001; Bukamal, 2022). Whilst at first glance, the researcher may appear as an 'insider' due to their student status at UOB. However, the fact that the leading body of participants were younger undergraduate students, with less life experience and resided in the research site, somewhat diluted the 'insider' status of the researcher; resulting in an 'in-between' paradoxical state (Chhabra, 2020; Bukamal, 2022). It appeared, that to some extent the researcher was able to reap some benefits of an 'insider' status; for example, participants willing to share experiences during data collection due to the narrow age gap - reducing awkwardness (Bukamal, 2022). Whilst also suffering 'outsider' restrictions, stemming from not living in Selly Oak and their postgraduate status providing limited ingress points into undergraduate social circles.

Acting in this introspective manner from the outset, meant the researcher incorporated adjustments that would aim to offset the impact that their 'lens' would have on the credibility and validity of research (Holmes *et al.*, 2020, p.7). For example, FG discussions (Appendix C) began with the researcher presenting three key phrases taken solely form the objectives: 'Selly Oak', 'Environment' and 'Healthy' taking. This was to deter the 'outsider' elements of the researcher potentially inflicting their preconceptions and bias on data collection that would compromise the validity of participant experiences (Furseth and Everett, 2013; Peters, 2017). Additionally, the that the researchers' previous academic study could infringe on collection and interpretation of data was identified. The researcher was heavily exposed to a particular area of social science with geographical underpinnings that

modified their current outlook on the world (e.g. place theory); potentially resulting in stubborn and narrow analysis of the collected dataset, with other researchers from different academic backgrounds unlikely to reach the same interpretative conclusions. To combat this, a robust and in-depth literature search was completed in a methodical manner using academic guidance (Bryman, 2016; UoE, 2022). This extensive wider reading aided the researcher in widening their ability to consider different interpretative 'lenses' during analysis and discussion (Holmes *et al.*, 2020, p.1). It could therefore be argued that these ongoing 'reflexive' actions have aided the robusticity of the research (McDowell, 1992; Berger, 2015).

2.5 Data Collection & Analysis

Building upon the justified research design and method considerations outlined above. This final subsection will detail the data collection and analysis process in chronological order.

Following approval by the UOB in March 2023 the data collection process was permitted to begin. Prior to this, background work had begun in November 2023. Easter enabled time for the researcher to reach out to prospective participants via text messages and social media networks - this was done a way that considered 'netiquette' alongside the ethical issues discussed (Bryman, 2016, p.139). The participant information sheet was sent out in messages, alongside the digital infographic (Appendix G) which communicated the headline particulars of the study. To support the 'snowball', recruited participants were then asked to reach out to other prospective students living in Selly Oak who may be interested in the project.

Due to the academic demands following the Easter break for both the researcher and participants (Furseth and Everett, 2013); the data collection occurred in two phases, with a total of 15 participants contributing to the study. The interviews and PhotoVoice were completed in April 2023 and the FGs were completed in June. 11 (Target =14) students were interviewed in April, with all interviewees volunteering to partake in PhotoVoice; 2 FGs (Target = 3) were completed in June following the completion of the Semester 2 examination period. During the gap in data collection 3 of the students were unable to attend the FG discussions in June - two had left university for summer and one had work commitments. Additionally, 7 participants expressed an interest in April; however, they were only able to attend the FGs due to academic pressures.

To increase levels of relaxation and comfort in a potentially daunting dynamic, the location of the interviews was chosen by the participant. It was also hoped that this would support the flow of discussion and reduce the risk of cold and closed responses (Valentine, 2005; Longhurst, 2016). Participants often selected their home, with three requesting to be interviewed on campus. However, since the FGs had higher logistical demands - requiring up to 6 participants present at one time; the researcher selected a mutual space of convenience; this was a UOB private study room. Whilst overall, the data collection process ran smoothly, challenges emerged in FG discussions where group dynamics meant that dominant voices overshadowed potentially useful ideas and suggestions from quieter contributors (Conradson, 2005). In these instances, tactfulness in questioning was required by the researcher to ensure that all participants had an opportunity to share their views (Breen, 2006).

The April-June collection period generated a high volume of rich and diverse

qualitative data; whilst this must be celebrated, the sheer abundance of data was

overwhelming, with a starting point unclear (Bryman, 2016). Following transcription,

qualitative 'coding' was employed to begin thematic analysis in an ordered manner.

This was first done in a basic form through re-reading transcripts and identifying

simplistic 'in vivo' codes that simply represented certain descriptive characteristics

(Cope and Kurtz, 2016). Next, 'analytical codes' were developed with possible

literature links. This led to the development of 'axial coding' where identified

transcripts received further analytical attention relating to a particular theme of

interest e.g., landlord-tenant relations (Cope and Kurtz, 2016; Peters, 2017). See

Interview Extract	In vivo codes	Analytic Codes	Axial codes	Theoretical/ Research links
NM: So, okay. Um, how have you found the process of like securing, like where you live now and finding it? **Frank:** Erm, I think it was a little bit rushed, nothing to do with the housing market or anything. I just think the student renting companies encourage people to choose a house quite early on in the year. I think a lot of students are rushing to sign a contract because they are scared they won't find anywhere… **NM:** Yeah, yeah **Frank:** …we were only shown photos of the inside of the house as they wouldn't let us view the house, erm because they said they were going to sell it, or rent it to someone else rather…	Agents Students Timing Pressure Renting Limitations Restrictions Deceit Virtual Viewings	Notion that student housing agents can be negative actors in the process of acquiring housing. Contention that agents may not always act in an honest or ethical manner when dealing with students.	Negative Interactions between students & agents/landlords Power of landlord/agents	Undeveloped housing knowledge (Rugg et al, 2004). Actor-based power (Lukes, 1974). Landlord power and control (Byrne & McArdle, 2022). 'The Invisible Tether' (Soaita & McKee, 2021).

Figure 3: Developing Coding, adapted from: Cope and Kurtz (2016); Peters (2017).

Whilst researchers wish to tackle analysis with rigor, the 'sporadic' and 'messy' nature of coding prolonged this process (Cope and Kurtz, 2016, p.650) - meaning more time was spent on the data analysis stage than foreseen. Nevertheless, it was vital to extend this analytical work to identify recurrent themes (Breen, 2006; Bryman, 2016). This involved the researcher identifying recurrent codes and trends to develop suitable categories to convey findings (Cope and Kurtz, 2016).

The constant recurrence of certain findings, codes, and topics (Appendix H) led to the development of four key themes in the collected data; these themes form the structure of Chapter 3; where the study results will be stated.

Chapter 3: Results

Leading on from the data collection and analysis of this dissertation. This chapter will present the findings and results; centred around four key recurrent themes: experiences dealing with the landlord and property management; experiences of living within the student home; the impact of housing on health and education, and finally how the Selly Oak environment interacted with everyday student life. Extracts from the three research methods will be presented in unison to demonstrate findings. See Appendix D for a participant breakdown.

3.1: Dealing with the Agent and Landlord

5/11 interviewees discussed positive experiences when dealing with their landlord or property management team (PMT). With multiple respondents praising their landlord for swift and reliable action for maintenance repairs.

> *"But everything else **they've been quite good** with. Like we've had, erm they redid our kitchen. Erm, before we moved in… that was part of the contract **they said they would do, and they did do that**". (Pauline, Y3)*

> *"...**they're quite receptive with like**, say if we've… we need things like, erm, getting fixed. Like I… uh, I emailed them a couple days ago about, erm… A light bulb to be fixed and they came like a couple days later to fix it". (Esme, Y2)*

Three of these five participants additionally reported minimal issues in finding, securing, and moving into their properties, discussing the proactive nature of their letting agents which eased the transition.

*"Yeah, **it was quite quick.** Because we had to put down obviously… it's a deposit and give a lot of details and it's kind of quick, a couple of my housemates looked around it… **it was kind of on the day**. (Barry, Y2)"*.

Nevertheless, unfortunately over half (6/11) of the interviewees referred to wide-ranging negative experiences surrounding their landlords/PMT this was further echoed within FG discussions. Deceit and dishonesty during the primitive stages of the relationship were common narratives witnessed.

Martin: *They want you to sign the contract as fast as possible, and they don't want you to read it or anything.*

Flo: *They want you to do it that day if they can.*

(Extract: FG 1)

*"They can control… **effectively control the narrative.** And say like that example, oh, we've had three viewings. You know, this house might go and as a student obviously you kind of, you might be **panicked** and thinking like, oh, **I need a house, I need a house…**" (Barry, Y2).*

One participant arrived in September to find that promised renovation work was incomplete.

Figure 4: Bella's incomplete house

*"Erm, **it just wasn't built.** So, it was supposed to be a re-build… We were supposed to move in September. And the landlord was just like, oh, it won't be done, and it'll be done in like four weeks' time… **It was like the first week of December,** I think by the time we actually moved into the proper house…" (Bella, PG).*

Some participants also commented on the use of online advertisements and virtual viewings as means for agents to hide the true reality of the current property state.

*"We **were only shown photos of the inside of the house as they wouldn't let us view the house...** Just like… the kitchen looks really nice in the photographs, but the appliances are quite old and sometimes malfunction…" (Frank, Y3).*

*"**So, the pictures looked great**, they had been like CGI'd or something… **But it was like obviously a different house**… And erm, and then we obviously signed on the basis that…" (FG1: Martin, Y3).*

Other students referred to how their peers and student society guided them into making certain choices:

> *Flo: Yeah. You just **do what the crowds doing***

> *Will: Exactly… And also, there's like a pressure to sort of be like, **I don't wanna be the one person** who has to like look for another house cos I'm not happy with these conditions…*

> *(Extract: FG1)*

> *"I guess people are scared that the, the good houses will go. And they'll end up either having to pay ridiculously high rent or they'll end up somewhere terrible… So, I'd say the problem is that the supply, or **people are made to think that the supply isn't good enough.**" (FG1, Rupert, PG).*

During the tenancy a selection of participants reported negative experiences surrounding maintenance requests and poor communication with the landlord, which led them to feeling that their landlords only wanted profit with minimal concern for their welfare.

> *"Like, the only way that can be fixed now is if the landlord does something. But like, this is the only way and… **the landlord doesn't care… cause it costs money**".*
> *(Keith, Y3).*

*Martin: Just the fact that like often… It's done, like the landlords do, the house up so cheaply. And like that obviously impacts the quality of the house. **Which then impacts whether the house is actually a healthy place to live in…***

*George: Or even spending money on things to make the house look nice. But they're not spending any money on sort of **essentials… like having a working fridge…***

(Extract: FG 1)

Around this recurrent theme some participants added thicker anecdotes of this throughout their tenancy, with three unable to peacefully enjoy their rental homes.

*"**Sometimes they would let us know 30 minutes before they were doing like a house showing whatever.** And there's multiple times where **I was asleep, and they would come into my room and unlock it.** And that was very, erm, yeah, it was like weird…" (Will, Y3).*

*"It's a little bit tiresome, because you know, some days if you're in bed, or you've got to think, Alright, well, I can't be in bed then because someone's coming around at nine o'clock tomorrow morning… **It's a bit invasive**, it's like you're **just trying to get on with your life…**" (Barry, Y2).*

3.2: Living within the Student Property

When discussed during individual interviews, 7/11 of the respondents were happy to call their student house a home.

*"In fact, there's been times when I've gone home in the holidays and then caught myself like, oh, **when are we going home? As in like, when are we going back to Birmingham?** Like it feels like your home." (Emma, Y2).*

"I guess it is just like, because I, I just live with like, uh, you know.. my boyfriend.
*But like, it's, yeah, **it's just homely in that way that it's like our own place.***
(Esme, Y2).

However, in some cases it wasn't uncommon for them to refer to their family home whilst describing their thoughts and feelings about their living arrangements.

"It's pretty nice. It's quite good to live with just a few friends. There's more
*freedom, I suppose, than you get at **home home**." (Barry, Y2).*

"It just feels nice to have those spaces. I think it's nice to have like, erm, a home
*outside of your family home as well. **Like the home of your friends**." (Pauline, Y3).*

11 participants discussed the importance of personalisation within the home to help them feel more comfortable and secure in their living arrangements. It was most common for students to do this through displaying memorabilia and images.

*"Um, just cause that's probably like the. Like **my favourite bit of my room**, just cause it's got all the stuff on the wall and like that, err mirror I sort of bought for like two pounds from a charity shop up the road". (George, Y3).*

Figure 5: George's room

Figure 6: Frank's room

> *"Erm…. **it just adds a bit of personality**, it's nice to be reminded of your mates and family". (Frank, Y3).*

Three participants openly discussed how the use of lighting was imperative for them to feel 'at home' within their student living spaces.

*"It just makes it a bit more like warm, homely. Cause like, it's, it's erm, the orange light as well. Cause this one [points to main light] it's **just like a bright white light, and obviously that can be a bit sterile"** (Emma, Y2).*

Figure 7: Emma's room

Whilst bedrooms were the most common room brought up in discussions around the home. Three students had harsh opinions about their bathrooms, identifying them as spaces within their homes that they didn't enjoy the experience of being in.

Figure 8: George's bathroom

*"But then, you know, just like slugs coming in from, like.. there've been a few times, they only come out at night…**like on the bathroom floor.**"*
(George, Y3)

Figure 9: Will's bathroom

*"It's not the most homely bathroom you could have…I wish it was better. I mean, **I wish it was just less dank and dirty.**" (Will, Y3).*

Some participants discussed how their enjoyment of living within student homes was somewhat halted by their tenancy restrictions, maintenance issues and quality of furniture - hindering their ability to feel 'at home'.

> *"The paints just quite cheap so it rips off...We didn't wanna have to pay for that and stuff. So **I think that probably stopped us want, like, doing what we wanted to do…"** (Will, Y3).*

> *"Yeah, I suppose it's just **difficult to call somewhere a home** when you know you're gonna **move out within a year"**. (Martin, Y3).*

Figure 10: Pauline's room

> *"Like on a daily… It's too small to really eat like all of us together. Not that we all have meals together, but like it's nice to be able to sit at and have the option too…I just feel like they look like they've been taken from primary school and **just shoved in here. And they're so hard and uncomfortable…"** (Pauline, Y3).*

*Yeah, I would have it differently in my own house…
like, In the future when I'm not just like… living here
for a year. Like… **definitely get more quality
furniture cos it is… if you can't use certain drawers
or it just, you know, again, it removes the idea of
like, it's your home, it's your place…"** (Will, Y3).*

Figure 11: Will's broken furniture.

One student had to endure a severe ongoing maintenance issue that resulted in their
ceiling collapsing whilst they were in the house.

Figure 12: Dale's leaking ceiling.

*"Oh, basically during the morning, **err, the ceiling collapsed and almost like, hit me
when falling…** But because I have this hanging wire here and just sort of like holding it
a bit and preventing it from directly hitting us, **if there isn't this we'd actually have
been hit by that ceiling."** (Dale, PG).*

3.3: Housing, Health & Education Studies

All but two students mentioned they had been exposed to mould and damp to some extent, with pest activity an occasional experience presented. When these issues were reported to their landlords they received disparaging responses, with damp and mould not being assessed or resolved in any way.

Figure 13: Emma's mouldy drawers

*"I had mould, In my room, so that was a big one. Yeah. **It was like underneath every single one of these drawers…** They were just kind of like… we'll come and have a look at it. But then it was a holiday, **so then nothing really happened."** (Emma, Y2).*

*"Erm, the house next door... Put a bunch of poison into this hole **and all the rats have done is run underneath the floorboards underneath my friends room where they've just died**... it smells like death... but the exterminators have said that the only way to fix the problem is if the landlord authorises like the garland to be ripped up and you know... but the landlord doesn't wanna do that cause it costs money." (Keith, Y3).*

Figure 14: Keith's corridor

Thankfully, the majority of cases where students mentioned damp and mould, the health effects were short term and self-limiting.

*"Well, you just **get like stuffy nose and cough** and, yeah, not very well, and I just, it was like December, so I was like, oh, I've got a cold." (Emma, Y2).*

However, sadly in some anomalous cases it has created longer lasting effects on their health, triggering further health interventions. For one student, a possible CO leak has led to prolonged anxiety requiring CBT.

NM: What, what happened in the end then?

Keith: Uh, nothing. Nothing. Well, that argument is that actually it's the carbon monoxide outside the. Is being blown in from by the wind. So if you close the window it'll be fine. But even when you close the window, it still goes off.

NM: Did that not make you concerned?

Keith: Oh no, it did. It's the reason why I have health anxiety.

NM: Okay.

Keith: It's, it's, it's that exact reason why I have health anxiety. Cause that's what triggered it, that experience.

<div align="right">*Interview Extract*</div>

In other cases, participants discussed how poor housing conditions resulted in home avoidance and lack of motivation to complete university studies.

*"**I had to move back home for a week.** Cause I was just very stressed out with where I was living…". (Will, Y3).*

*"It can sort of affect your mental health a bit as well. Like especially being like if you're doing a lot of work like. **You just sort of feel like you're stuck in one place**… and then if it's not a nice environment anyway, you're kind of just like [sighs]" (George, Y3).*

3.4: The Selly Oak Environment

Across the interviews and FGs, positive perceptions on Selly Oak for promoting healthy choices were scarce. Bristol Road in particular was referred to in abundance.

*"Erm well, **Bristol Road is just full of takeaways** and, um, so there's not really any healthy eating places there. Um, **there's a lot of alcohol.** There's a lot of pubs, which obviously don't promote healthy choices." (Bella, PG).*

*"I wouldn't say it's the most healthy area, I think, Like the High Street is full of takeaway shops and, err, **I have been inclined to buy takeaways probably more than I would've** if they weren't available."* (Pauline, Y3).

__Barry:__ Bristol Road is particularly bad though, for takeaways and, and things like that.

__NM:__ And are these attractive to you as students?

*__Barry:__ Absolutely, yes. (laughs). No, I mean, they're attractive. They're attractive after a night out, but, err, in terms of daily sort of living, **I suppose it's not really ideal cause it's sort of a temptation.***

(FG2: Extract)

When further questioned on their opinions surrounding Bristol Road - price, affordability and convenience were all recurrent reasons for visiting takeaways.

__"It's so much easier__ as well though…. than like going to the shop buying the stuff then cooking it…" (FG2: Emma, Y2).

Students could identify that that takeaways may not equate to healthy eating, yet it was clear additional facets such as cost of living played a pivotal role in healthy choices.

*"Plus, I'd argue even if they did like shut down all the chicken shops and open up a load of healthy food shops, **no one will be able to afford them anyway**. Cause it's a student area…. The chicken shops would come back cause that's what people can afford…"* (FG2: Rupert, PG).

*"I would not say that there's great healthy options like in *supermarket name* … like the fruit and the salad and stuff, as much as I would like to buy it a lot of the time, like **the dates on it are so bad**... Which is why I'm like, well then, I'm not gonna buy that…" (Pauline, Y3).*

Whilst discussing the Selly Oak environment, five participants discussed issues surrounding noise within Selly Oak, which they linked with heavy alcohol consumption.

*"…Cause they did a pre-party like every Wednesday and you like the walls are really thin and you can basically hear everything from next door… So that is a bit annoying. Erm, and I think **if you are someone who doesn't really go out,** that would probably affect you more like…" (Bella, PG).*

*"Well, we just know that like the **certain days it's gonna be like really, really loud** or like…. like y**ou might feel a bit less safe** like you are going out in the evenings and you know that like everyone's like drunk or...you know". (FG1: George, Y3).*

When Selly Oak was atypically discussed in a positive manner, it was often the people not the place which created positive descriptions.

*"So it's like **everyone's really close to each other.** Err everyone's like really… like my friends are really close to where I live. Which I like cos I can just go and visit them…" (Pauline, Y3).*

Generalist negative overtones surrounding the housing stock in the area featured within their descriptions of Selly Oak. With an overarching feeling of apathy and injustice conveyed by students.

*"Like just in general, like landlords just don't really care. It seems like quite a common thing for people to have, like rats, mice, mould. **It seems like that's just something you kind of have to accept if you live in Selly.**" (Martin, Y3).*

*"…**That you kind of deal with it,** I guess, you know, you deal with some of the erm, issues of student living… I think that we're just usually told is part and parcel with student living." (Will, Y3).*

*"I mean, the agents and the landlords have so much money behind them, like, yeah, **you're never gonna get anywhere with it**. They'll… **there's no point**…" (FG2: Barry, Y2).*

Three participants discussed they had concerns about accessibility within Selly Oak, with parking and mobility within the area being the key concerns.

Figure 15: Bella's street

*"What I don't like about my house is that **there's no parking**. Like yesterday when I got home, it's [her car] three streets away…" (Bella, PG)*

Martin: *Like if I was a wheelchair user, I don't know how I would be able to navigate around Selly or… if I was blind, like, I don't know how I'd be able to get around…*

NM: *Why?*

George: *Especially some of the student streets, like all the bins and stuff.*

Martin: Yeah. But Bristol Road in particular, like the trees, the roots like to grow and then it makes the pavement sort of weird and uneven…

Flo: …Yeah. And like the traffic lights, there's like one traffic light around there. It goes off for like five seconds and like if you are… I know a blind student who lives there and imagining her trying to get across that road is extremely hard…

(FG1: Extract)

Two students presented issues surrounding waste management in Selly Oak, with the contention that the council should be held accountable for this.

*"They for some reason just keep forgetting to like, take out the erm like wheelie bins like every week. So, I guess **that's causing me stress** because then there's like, Bin bags outside in the courtyard where they shouldn't be, and then there are rats and stuff." (Esme, Y2).*

Students were able to suggest improvements that could be made to improve the experience of living within Selly Oak, this was mostly demonstrated through the FGs. Due to their previous constructed narratives around landlords and Bristol Road, these were where many suggestions laid.

Popular suggestions involved key organisations including the university and the local council being more proactive in supporting students living in Selly Oak.

*"So, the university could take up some private housing as councils do, and **they can rent it to the students for a cheaper price**. They can do that…" (FG2: Andrew, PG).*

*"I think it's more like, like local councils and the, if they were actually seen the state of some of these houses…Like if there were **more environmental health people going around doing spot checks of houses** and like asking tenants, do you mind if we look around. If they have that right, hat would like scare landlords…" (FG2: Frank, Y3),*

However, six students held the view that larger interventions were required.

*"Because a lot of it ties to like just **student landlords nationwide**…being bad, and then regulations around like that industry and landlords, which is sort of the government, **like the uni can't really do anything about that.** It's sort of a government thing to like to put **those regulations in place**" (FG1: Martin, Y3).*

This chapter provided an overview of the key findings from the present research study, focused around four pertinent themes following data analysis. Chapter 4 will progress deeper, aiming to provide exploration and discussion to these findings using empirical research and theory.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Taking each research question in turn, this chapter will draw upon existing knowledge, literature, and theoretical frameworks to situate these findings. A dominant part of this section will introduce and explain a model aiming to aid the explanation of student experience; supported by identified findings and prior research; before arriving at study reflections, limitations and concluding remarks.

4.1: Key findings

The previous chapter outlined the main findings from this research project. Students within the study had variable experiences of dealing with landlords and agents, with the majority communicating negative perceptions and experiences– both pre-tenancy through deceit and added pressure, and during tenancy through dismissive and inactive behaviours. Living within the student property saw participants being exposed to conditions such as damp and mould to a certain extent, with their perceptions on the property inhibiting how comfortable and 'at home' they felt. For a small selection this has negatively affected their mental health and educational studies. Finally, it was found that the use of personalisation and decoration within their homes allowed some students to feel an increased sense of comfort in their transient living conditions.

4.2: How do students perceive student housing and the surrounding environment of Selly Oak for supporting healthy lives?

Chapter 3 demonstrated that whilst there were flurries of positivity surrounding the Selly Oak environment, there was an overbearing negative attitude conveyed towards certain unhealthy hotspots.

4.2.1: Food Outlets and Bristol Road

For Bella, Bristol Road is a place 'full of takeaways', communicating a strong and recurrent perception that Selly Oak 'doesn't promote healthy choices. Research stemming from the University of Southampton, looking at diet consumption across England previously identified suburban areas of Birmingham, including Selly Oak as an area which would benefit from dietary interventions (Smith *et al.*, 2021). The current findings not only support prior research but also create concerning questions about local diet quality (Smith *et al.*, 2021).

Barry discusses the 'temptation' of the takeaway due to their location. This conviction of ease and convenience influencing food choice has also been witnessed by Abraham and colleagues, who interviewed 121 US students finding that factors including taste and convenience affected food selection (Abraham *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, as Stockton and Baker argue, students are in a defining stage of life, away from the parental home, with freedom to make choices (Stockton and Baker, 2013). Therefore, it is possible that some students like Bella and Barry, away from the shackles of parental guidance on what to consume and when, are more affected by the continuous presentation of unhealthy food options on Bristol Road that they discuss. However, it is important to remember that the US position that these two studies convey may not be replicated in the case of Birmingham students.

Nevertheless, since high consumption of fast food has been linked with higher BMI and obesity (Lake and Townsend, 2006; Burgoine *et al.*, 2014), it is critical to consider why the Bristol Road outlets are so attractive to students to protect health outcomes.

'Food deserts' are areas where there is a lack of food which is affordable and nutritious (Acheson, 1998; Cummins and Macintyre, 2002). Since it was continually reported that there are two supermarkets within Selly Oak, it would be unfitting to attribute this stamp to the area. However, based on student perceptions there is a possibility that Selly Oak could be described as a 'food swamp'. Rose *et al.* (2009) coined the term 'food swamps' with the idea that poor urban communities have wide-ranging fast-food establishments (Rose *et al.*, 2009, p.20), which then 'swamp out' the healthy food alternatives within a local area (Yang *et al.*, 2020, p.139). Within FG1, participants identified healthy food outlets as 'the minority' within Bristol Road, yet it was unanimous that there was an abundance of unhealthy takeaways. This could therefore suggest that Bristol Road might be a location where high calorie, unhealthy fast-food options outweigh or 'swamp out' the health promoting alternatives, resulting in this area possibly requiring health interventions (Rose *et al.*, 2009; Hager *et al.*, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2020). However, this sole explanation requires further research on Bristol Road to reach a definitive conclusion, meaning caution is required in this interpretation.

4.2.2: Students and Alcohol

Feeding into these health-preventing discussions, participants identified Selly Oak as a 'loud' environment, with alcohol inextricably linked with the student residents. This heavy alcohol consumption is something that is recurrent in literature surrounding 'studentification' (Wilkinson, 2017; Holton, 2017), with this being a key aspect in the lives of students on their transitional path to adulthood (Andersson *et al.*, 2012).

Emma discusses the issues people who do not 'go out' may face when trying to fit in with the trend of high alcohol consumption. This is an issue which has been previously identified as a definitive way to damage student relations and cause a segregation between drinkers and non-drinkers (Bartam, 2007; Andersson *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, this somewhat supports Barratt *et al.*'s previous finding about excessive noise from surrounding HMO residents, preventing tenants from quiet enjoyment of their homes (Barratt *et al.*, 2015). Seeing this result in another demographic suggests that this could be a larger issue that requires further action in the community.

Pairing these issues with outlets and alcohol creates concern as to whether Selly Oak depicts an area with characteristics of an 'obesogenic environment'; a place that promotes unhealthy options, weight gain and minimal physical activity (Swinburn *et al.*, 1999). Considering the high volume of takeaways identified on Bristol Road, and the promotion and expectation of alcohol consumption communicated by participants, it is easy to identify there are traits in the environment that are obesity inducing. Furthermore, participants suggested that 'more green space' would improve the environment, suggesting that this is something Selly Oak is currently lacking in their opinion; adding to this pertinent concern as to whether Selly Oak can

promote healthy living and activity – which are key diagnostic measurements for an 'obesogenic environment' (Swinburn *et al.*, 1999; Lake and Townsend, 2006; Black and Macinko, 2008).

4.2.3: Perceptions of Housing

The negatively shaded perceptions of Selly Oak listed in CH3 often rooted from views on the local housing stock, with Will identifying damp and mould as 'part and parcel with student living'. However, the level of landlord disinterest reported by participants regarding these issues was surprising; especially since a heightened political agenda surrounding damp and mould has been witnessed following recent tragedy (CTJ, 2022; DLHC, 2023). This perception of inaction surrounding damp and mould supports research conducted by Fear *et al.*, studying the experiences of elderly tenants within the PRS sector, they found that when damp issues were reported by tenants, they were often dismissed by landlords (Fear *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, this finding also supports the work of Lister, who studied young adult experiences within the PRS, finding that 11/15 participants reported issues with damp and mould; yet all their landlords ignored their requests (Lister, 2006). Since these current findings echo previous research, pertinent questions over the inactive nature of Selly Oak landlords are created; as a more positive result was expected due to current socio-political debates (DLHC, 2023), and the continually publicised link between housing conditions and health outcomes (Evans *et al.*, 2003; Garnham and Rolfe, 2019).

Research conducted by Shelter may provide some explanation. Their review into the conditions in the private sector concluded an array of reasons 'why poor conditions prevail' (Gousy *et al.*, 2014, p.1). The report states how many landlords receive high

rent yields and have the financial capabilities to complete a lot of repairs and maintenance. This is especially the case in the student PRS when landlords can gain higher profit. However, due to current legislation and a market with increasingly high rent, it is feared that many are not incentivised to improve property condition (Rugg *et al.,* 2002; Gousy *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, perhaps the perception from the participants is true; that the Selly Oak landlords hold the financial resources to improve housing conditions, yet simply view their properties and students as a 'cash cow' for profit (Soaita, 2022), with no intentions of completing remedial works to bring their properties further in line with the 'Decent Homes Standard'; as they continue to hold a superior condition in a market driven by a housing crisis (Crook and Hughes, 2001; Gousy *et al.*, 2014; DLHC, 2021). This creates concern as to whether policy reform will actually create a more equal PRS.

However, alternatively it is possible there are deeper rooted issues surrounding motivations to improve. Ambrose investigated why landlords were neglecting energy efficiency improvements (Ambrose, 2015), finding that landlords displayed a 'sense of hopelessness' towards improving energy efficiency, arguing the desired results were unattainable due to the severity of the issues and low-quality housing stock (Ambrose, 2015, p.918). Landlords of Selly Oak may mirror this restricted desire to change. Due to the widespread nature of damp and mould throughout the PRS, they may not believe that change lies in their hands (Ambrose, 2015; DLHC, 2022); meanwhile disgruntled students do not witness desired corrective actions.

4.3 What are the lived experiences and challenges of securing, moving, and living in private rented student housing?

With it being uncovered that the primitive stages of the tenancy may cause a range of issues and mistreatment for students, it is clear this is where a lot of the experiences and challenges relating to this RQ lay.

4.3.1: Viewings and Deceit

Greater discussion is required surrounding issues relating to the presentation of properties, with participants holding the contention that they look 'a lot better in pictures'; this was not expected, as even though the creation of deceit through online advertisement has been researched by scholars in arenas such as online dating (e.g., Hancock *et al.*, 2007); it had not been considered that this would be evident within the Selly Oak housing context. Additionally, Frank discussed his experience of the agent not allowing him to physically view the property, despite COVID restrictions having ceased; the accounts of Frank and George fit into a larger theme presented around the deceit of students by estate agents. This is a finding that has been witnessed before, Ruane *et al.* studied lying in an occupational setting following the daily lives of 19 Estate Agents, from observations it was identified that the presence of lying within their job was 'undeniable', as part of their sales driven role (Ruane *et al.*, 1994, p.94). Additionally, since the development of estate agent marketing tools has seen the advancement of house presentation through features such as colour, decoration, and light prior to online advertisement (Young, 2004), it seems understandable why deceit could form part of everyday practice for the letting agents of Selly Oak.

Nevertheless, in many of these instances, students did not turn away, quoting the desirability of living in Selly Oak in contrast with alternative areas like Harborne. Therefore, the parameters of location and choice may play an integral part here. Through research on young tenants, Lister found that lack of choice was a deciding factor for accepting housing (Lister, 2004). Perhaps, the students in Selly Oak hold reservations over choice and availability within the area, leading to them being more susceptible to this deceit. Additionally, an undercurrent of power relations potentially plays a part in this dishonesty and coercion witnessed. In their Irish rental sector study, Byrne and McArdle discuss how the lack of control that prospective tenants have on viewing arrangements instils the power dynamic between the two parties and creates a sense of dependence (Byrne and McArdle, 2022). In this case, it is possible, that Frank and other students in similar situations, starting their journey on securing their student home, depend on the agents and have to follow the rigid viewing terms presented to them or face being turned away in a demanding market; faced with restricted options and a 'power asymmetry' in favour of agents and landlords (Lister, 2004; Bryne and McArdle, 2021, p.139). However, since other students paint positive illustrations of securing their properties, it is vital to remember that these experiences may not align with the greater body of students within the area.

4.3.2: The Selly Oak Housing Pressure Effect

'Pressure' from various outlets was continually evident within the results. This subsection will therefore synthesise these findings with research to cast a concept aiming to aid explanation surrounding additional stressors.
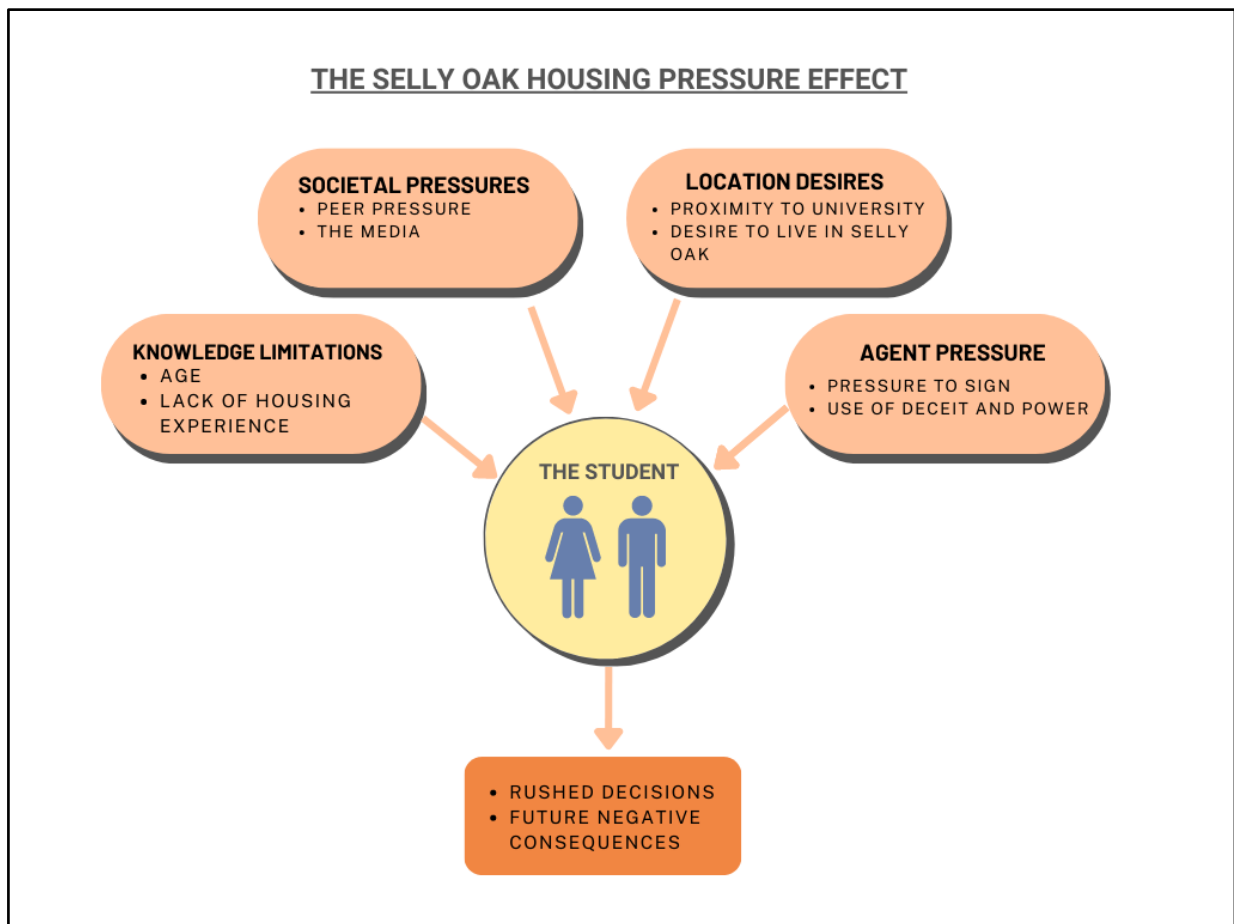

Figure 16: The Selly Oak Housing Pressure Effect.

The first aspect of the pressure effect is 'Knowledge Limitations'. The extracts from Will and Martin documented in CH3 were not uncommon in occurrence, with students stating that they lacked the knowledge and skills to be able to navigate the complexities of housing. Rugg *et al.*, discusses how students leave the parental home with limited housing knowledge and begin to mould their housing paths (Rugg *et al.*, 2004). These findings go towards supporting this and have gravity because a lack of knowledge may inhibit their ability to find suitable and safe housing as they develop their student identities (Holton and Riley, 2016).

The second facet, 'societal pressures' may encompass a range of extrinsic factors which may steer students to certain housing options. Participants described a 'rush' to find suitable housing in a panicked frenzy, and how their peers influence housing decisions. Academic work around 'student life' has previously identified a pressure put on students to perform in certain ways e.g., through the heavy consumption of alcohol (Clayton and Harris, 2009; Dempster, 2011); so, it is clear that pressure to fit in is something that can be inherent in university life (Clayton and Harris, 2009). This may aid the explanation of why students just 'do what the crowd's doing' and succumb to their peers when selecting housing; potentially having future ramifications on their university experience. Alongside this, mediums such as charities and media outlets relentlessly broadcast the pitfalls of UK housing (e.g., Berry and Thompson, 2022; Walting and Breach, 2023), as the government continually promise to improve the quantity and quality of dwellings (DLHC, 2022; Barton *et al.*, 2023). This discourse may have grappled the attention of these students; when this is combined with pre-existing negative beliefs about housing and

landlords (Lister, 2006; Bryne and McArdle, 2022), this synthetic fear and anxiety about local housing stock is created, as Rupert outlines in FG1.

The third element of the effect is the locational desires of students. It has been previously identified that the opportunity to reside near campus and the 'studentified' area is a high-ranking factor for decision making (Allinson, 2006; Hubbard, 2009). Pauline's views align with this previous finding as she quotes the social benefits of living in Selly Oak; therefore, this requirement of living in a certain area may mean that students like Pauline waive a certain level of choice due to their locational preferences, adding potential constraint onto their housing options.

Finally, as stated previously, the quantity of the narratives surrounding unjust pressure from letting agents towards students not only consolidates the stated financial motivations that landlords and agents hold (Gousy *et al.*, 2014; Ambrose, 2015); it also causes greater cause for concern for the power dynamic at play here. The work of Lukes may add some light on this situation. His theoretical work argues for the presentation of power within three dimensions (Lukes, 2005). Within this power, manipulation and agenda setting can instil deception which aids the encouragement of a certain action that they deem as beneficial to themselves (Lukes, 2005). In this instance, it is possible that some agents are instilling this power and deceit as a way of controlling 'the narrative' like Barry and others experience; dreaming of their potential commission as they encourage students to agree to a property, irrespective of its suitability (Lukes, 2005).

Arguably, it is the culmination of these four factors that can administer wide-ranging stress on students, making this a point of significance. External stressors, location desires and knowledge restrictions result in students under duress, and at risk of selecting flippant housing decisions. Agents hold the role of actors with the ability to deceive and misinform students (Ruane, 1994; Lukes, 2005). Further concern lies when the vulnerability of students is considered; perhaps for adults later in their housing careers with advanced market knowledge, this pressure can be easily discarded. However, students require support to navigate the perplexing structure of the housing market (Rugg and Quilgars, 2015), as they embark on adulthood; making these pressures potentially harder to dismiss. Resulting in students potentially guided by this four-pronged force that may have repercussions on their health and experiences during occupancy.

4.3.3: Lived Experiences: Health and Education

The discovery of tenant discontent surrounding lacklustre housing conditions supplements previous research completed by Butler and Sheriff, who studied energy vulnerability in young adult households, finding that damp and mould was present to a varying extent in all cases (Butler and Sheriff, 2017). This varying extent was something that was witnessed in these results; and aids the cemented notion that there are varying degrees of housing quality in the PRS (Soaita *et al.*, 2020; DLHC, 2022).

Whilst, for many the impact on health and educational studies ranged from non-existent to minimal, the anomalous cases require further assessment. George and Will suffered in poor conditions, with it being possible that their lack of control over their living situation created psychological pressures (Evans *et al.*, 2003; Barratt *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, while it is common to visit the previous home during university as a 'breathing space' (Rugg *et al.*, 2004, p. 33), these returns were unnatural and inflicted by the health issues linked to housing. Maslow identifies basic 'physiological needs' that humans require to be able to function, these include food, water, and shelter (Maslow, 1943, p.371). If there are issues surrounding these basic requirements, motivational behaviours are halted (Maslow, 1943). It is possible that for students like Will and George, that the experience of being 'stuck in one place' in adverse housing standards – can potentially result in their physiological needs not being met. When coupled with other factors such as their junior and vulnerable status within the housing sector (Rugg and Quilgars, 2015), it is pertinent to consider that students could arrive at a state of melancholy, lacking motivation to study, fleeing away from university to seek comfort in the safe and secure parental home (Rugg and Quilgars, 2015).

Nonetheless, this singular interpretation may not elucidate the experiences and pressures that the main body of students face in the area. Likewise, further rigorous research is required to cement these relationships.

4.4: How do the relations between landlords and students play out within Selly Oak?

It was pleasing when participants introduced experiences surrounding positive relations with landlords. This led to a stronger sense of safety and comfort - a finding which has been witnessed before (Lister, 2004; Garnham and Rolfe, 2019). Lister discusses how the earliest interactions between landlord and tenant, creates the foundations for the landlord-tenant relationship (Lister, 2006). This was something that shone through amongst the results; if students presented a positive experience in securing a property, they continued to refer to their landlord in a positive light; with the opposite also evident. And whilst from a surface level it appeared promising that none of the students had experienced direct conflict with their landlord or PMT, greater concern arises when finer nuances of their relationships are assessed.

Upon deeper exploration, students were aware that during the tenancy the landlord or PMT hold the gauntlet of power for the tenancy duration. Researchers have previously stated that this undeniable power is present due to the legal ownership the landlord holds over the property - resulting in their ability to influence the living experience of tenants (Desmond, 2016; Chisholm *et al.*, 2020). This negative outlook surrounding the landlord or PMT, lead to the conclusion that substandard conditions and inefficient landlords are something 'you have to accept' in Selly Oak. These accounts give strong support to this idea of disparities in power between landlords and tenants (Soaita and McKee, 2021; Rolfe *et al.*, 2021). Lister also identified this finding of acceptance in their young renter's study, where long wait times for repair were commented upon but not protested about (Lister, 2006).

Once again, the work of Lukes' can aid understanding of these power relations. He discusses a dimension of 'hidden power' whereby both parties know this power is present, yet it is unspoken by either party (Lukes, 2005). He refers to this power as 'supreme' and 'insidious' as it operates in a way that seeks to avoid conflict (Lukes, 1974, p.23) This type of power has been previously witnessed in landlord tenant-relationships, with tenants fearful to report issues at the risk of conflict or termination of the contract (Lister, 2004; Byrne and McArdle, 2022). Therefore, this may be a factor which has an integral role in the landlord-tenant relations within Selly Oak; this may explain why discontented participants restrained from conflict creation; perhaps the control of this 'invisible power' has crated their awareness of the 'power differentials' within the landlord-tenant relationship (Lukes, 2005; Rolfe *et al.*, 2021: 128). Arriving at a state of acceptance and apathy, students like Barry potentially feel like there is 'no point' standing up against poor landlords and lack the resources to assert their rights (Rugg *et al.*, 2002; Chisholm *et al.*, 2020). Signifying a possible avenue for change.

Moving onwards, the recurrent contention of a lack of 'care' from the landlord's behalf often affected how they discussed the relationship. Participants including George and Pauline communicated their issues of living in furnished accommodation with low quality furniture that had just been 'shoved' into their houses; Búriková and Miller examined ethnographies to detail the relations between au pairs and their employers. The live-in carers commented on the cheap melamine IKEA furniture within their rooms, creating feelings of 'replaceability' whilst being welcomed in a 'cold' and 'mechanical' manner (Búriková and Miller, 2010, p.174). Whilst students and au pairs lead seemingly different lives, they hold the commonality of temporary residence in a home that they do not own (Tackx *et al.*, 2002; Búriková and Miller,

2010; Barratt and Green, 2017). In this case, the landlord and tenant hold conflicting interests, with the property being an 'asset' for one, yet a 'home' for the other (McArdle and Byrne, 2022, p.217); making it possible that the landlords might not care about the quality of furnishings knowing the relationship will never be prolonged; holding the assumption that no tenant would object in such a demanding market (Rolfe *et al.*, 2021; Byrne and McArdle, 2022).

Whilst avoiding simplicity, it would almost appear that students encountering positive landlord-tenant relationships could be simply coincidence, with luck being a definitive factor between a landlord channelling proactivity or laxness. These findings add greater support to previous findings on varying degrees of landlord relations (Fear *et al.*, 2004; Sherriff and Butler, 2017). Arguing for further intervention in the way landlords act with the aim of levelling up this playing field.

4.5: How do students feel comfortable and 'at home' in student housing?

Finally, whilst credit must be given to the PhotoVoice methodology for allowing the creation of visual narratives within the home (Barratt and Green, 2017; Soaita and McKee, 2021), it was positively overwhelming the quantity of information that participants were willing to communicate surrounding homemaking practices. Personalisation allowed students to sprinkle 'a bit of personality' into their dedicated term-time spaces, with the use of images, posters, and memorabilia integral to creating warmth within the home. These findings prop up prior research conducted on student living including the work of Holton and Riley, who conducted research on student homemaking practice finding that the use of imagery and personalisation allowed links to be drawn to their relationships and familial ties

(Holton and Riley, 2016). Additionally, research conducted within an HMO setting found positive links between displaying personal belongings and feelings of security and comfort (Barratt and Green, 2017). Therefore, these newest findings support the broadening of knowledge for student homemaking practices.

Nevertheless, while personalisation was heavily championed by participants for creating an 'at home' feel; for some, contractual restrictions severely restricted their ability to create a sense of comfort and identity (Easthope, 2014). Academics argue that the structure and control of rental contracts enforces barriers to homemaking practices (Barratt and Green, 2017; Soaita and McKee, 2021; Byrne and McArdle, 2022). Soaita and McKee found that a selection of tenants were 'tethered' to a space with 'reduced agency' in their ability to alter their spaces to create a material home (Soaita and McKee, 2021, p.17). This was a distress which a small selection of participants within this study communicated through comments of disapproval, quoting strict written agreements aimed at protecting paint over tenant happiness; when combined with the transient nature of the student tenancy, this restricted the level of 'care' students had to their living spaces, resulting in an inability to call their student house a 'home'.

Drawing upon theoretical work, it has been argued that a sense of identify and meaningfulness need to be channelled throughout the home to inhibit 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991; Somerville, 1992; Easthope, 2004), This security results from the ability to hold control over the home and who has permission to enter (Hulse and Mulligan, 2014; McArdle and Byrne, 2022). These students in question hold temporary contracts, in homes where they cannot add their desired personal

flair, reporting incidences of where their landlord has shown up without providing the 24 hours' notice as outlined in the Housing Act 2004, Sec 239 (2). The combined weight of these factors may mean the key indicators of housing security, warmth and comfort are not satisfied, resulting in tenants who may not be ontologically secure in their homes, arriving at a state of 'rootlessness' - lacking bond to their temporary spaces (Somerville, 1992, p.534; McArdle and Byrne, 2022). From learning this, it appears it may be suitable for landlords to be more proactive in helping students feel welcome in their term-time accommodation.

4.6: Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 has given deeper examination to the results outlined in the previous chapter through drawing upon various literature and theoretical work. At this moment it is important to refer back to the methodological challenges outlined in CH2 and remember these interpretations and explanations may not imitate the true experiences that the main body of students within Selly Oak possess; as factors such as the restricted sample and case study design restrict external validity of findings. Additionally, even after the 'reflexive' changes in the research, bias and positionally could have still influenced the collection and analysis, creating robust arguments for caution when considering these findings with the wider student context.

Following on from this, Chapter 5 will provide concluding remarks followed by recommendations and limitations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Recommendations & Limitations

5.1: Conclusion

In summary this dissertation has aimed to uncover and understand the array of experiences students face whilst living in the PRS, considering impacts on health and university life. The study has been able to uncover the broad experiences that some students face; with results suggesting that living in the PRS may not be simple nor stress-free for students, as challenges intersect with their daily lives.

Initially, it was encouraging to find that for the majority there was not a direct impact between housing and reported health; with a proportion of participants able to speak positively about their housing in some respect specifically surrounding personalisation and the social aspects of residing in Selly Oak. However, whilst horrifying accounts surrounding impacts on health and education were in minority; this is not a cause for celebration. The immoral and unjust overtones in their narratives create concern for the everyday living challenges in what is a young and vulnerable population. When faced with poor conditions, participants were faced with limited resources, knowledge and hierarchical disadvantage resulting in them feeling powerless, accepting substandard conditions as innate features of student housing. This acceptance created difficulties for students to envision and suggest improvements, yet they were able to convey a belief that their experiences mirrored other areas of the nation, and that central government action was the key remedy for improvement.

5.2: Recommendations

5.2.1: For Policy

Currently, the lightly regulated nature of the UK PRS favours landlords over tenants. Action is required in a swift and future-proof manner that will implement and assess policy interventions against robust performance indicators that can create a framework for continual improvement.

- Enlist a wider reform of housing policy including further extension of damp and mould policy, The Social Housing Act 2023, and Awaab's Law to the PRS.
- Continue the advancement of "A fairer private rental sector' to get The Renters Reform Bill passed in parliament and enacted into law - with a robust framework of restriction and enforcement for landlords who fail to join the required ombudsman scheme.
- Further develop education reform to extend the 16-18 RSHE and Life Skills curriculum - providing guidance to students on housing markets, processes, and their legal rights. With the aim of instilling increased knowledge and resilience in young people.

5.2.2: For Practice

- Increased government spending to support local Environmental Health (EH) teams to run an increased array of local health projects. Birmingham City Council should then complete a 12–24-month student housing improvement project that will support students and hold landlords to account.
- Increased UOB funding for 'The Renters Union'. This money should support the re-design, ongoing advertisement, and accessible advice for students.

5.2.3: For Research

Identified below are future recommendations for research:

- Studies focusing specifically on Bristol Road and the health impacting nature of the built environment here
- Specific research to investigate 'The Selly Oak Housing Pressure Effect'
- Compare and contrast research looking at Selly Oak Housing and a similar 'studentified' area
- Compare and contrast research looking at landlord behaviour in different locations
- Research from the perspective of Selly Oak student landlords to gain their viewpoint on the housing stock

5.3: Study Limitations

Whilst the qualitative design of the study collected a diverse range of data; it is feared that this design lacked the rigidity and replicability that a quantitative study could provide. The sheer amount of data collected consumed a lot of the researcher's time during analysis meaning all possible interpretive avenues were not fully explored.

Additionally, due to the conversational and relaxed nature of the methodologies; there was not an even balance of data collected for each research question. Furthermore, sampling challenges meant the study is only based on 15 participants, meaning generalisability of findings to other students in the area is severely limited.

Finally, the inability of the researcher to recruit a suitable sample of international students means their viewpoint and experiences are not strongly voiced throughout the study.

Total word count (CH1-CH5): 14,822

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Supporting Information

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Themes

So tell me about…
What has your experience been of…
How have you found…?

1. So tell me, what is your year of study and what course are you on?
2. What is your background? How would you define the class of your family?
3. Tell me why you decided to live in Selly Oak? Would you say you're happy living in this area?
4. What are your views on the Selly area for promoting healthy choices?

Sourcing, securing and moving into student housing
- How did you find the process of finding a private student house?
- Tell me about…securing and moving into a student house in Selly Oak, what was your experience like?
- Tell me about… your everyday experience of living in your student house
- Tell me about… your experience of dealing with your landlord or agent whilst living in this property
- Conflict with landlord / agent
- Repairs & maintenance
- Since living in student housing, have you ever been exposed to a housing hazard that has affected your health?
- Ill health and housing conditions…
- Tell me… has your housing or issues related to housing ever affected your university studies?

Living in the house: homemaking practices
- How comfortable do you feel in your student home, how does the house in general make you feel?
- Would you say you would be able to call your student house 'a home'?
- How does your room make you feel?

PhotoVoice discussions
- Tell me… why you like this part of your house?
- Tell me… why you don't like this part of your house?
- Tell me why you decided to take a picture of this part of your room?
- Tell me about… how you've changed your space to make it comfortable.

Appendix B: PhotoVoice Themes

Brief standardised guidance given to participants:

- Things you like about your student house
- Things you don't like about your student house
- Any maintenance issues you currently have
- Your living space

PhotoVoice discussions
- Tell me… why you like this part of your house?
- Tell me… why you don't like this part of your house?
- Tell me why you decided to take a picture of this part of your room?
- Tell me about… how you've changed your space to make it comfortable.

Appendix C: Focus Group Themes

1. What comes to mind if I give you these words/phrases: 'Health, Selly Oak, Environment'?
2. The Environment of Selly Oak – likes/dislikes/issues
3. The Built Environment of Selly Oak – likes/dislikes/issues
4. The Natural Environment of Selly Oak – likes/dislikes/issues
5. Housing within Selly Oak – likes/dislikes/issues
6. Student Voice – likes/dislikes of living in Selly Oak
7. Suggestions for Change and Improvement
8. Researcher Ethical Debrief

Appendix D: Participant Summary

Allocated Pseudonym	Age	Year of Study	National or International Student
Alex	22	Masters	International
Andrew	22	Masters	International
Barry	19	2	National
Bella	21	Masters	National
Dale	22	Masters	International
Emma	19	2	National
Esme	20	2	National
Flo	21	3	National
Frank	22	3	National
George	22	3	National
Keith	21	3	National
Martin	21	3	National
Pauline	20	3	National
Rupert	23	Masters	National
Will	21	3	National

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet

Version number: 01   Version date:
April 2023

Title of the research project: Exploring Student Experiences of Housing and the Selly Oak area for Supporting Healthy Lives.

Researcher: Nathan Matthews

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask the researcher if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you wish to.

What is the purpose of this study?	This research project aims to uncover the experiences and challenges that students face living in Selly Oak: with a special focus on housing and the area of Selly Oak for supporting healthy student lives.
Why have I been chosen to take part?	You are a university student who lives in Selly Oak or the immediate surrounding area. You live in private rented housing not managed by any of the universities in Birmingham.
What will happen if I take part?	**1) Individual Interview:** 20-30 minute semi-structured interview with the researcher around three key themes: Living in Selly Oak; Experience of Student Housing and Feelings towards the home. **2) PhotoVoice:** to supplement the interview you will be asked to provide a selection of images within your home to discuss in the interview. **3) Focus Group:** with 4 or 5 other students (30 minutes) to discuss the experiences of living in the Selly Oak area for promoting healthy lives.
Will I be offered any incentives to take part in the research?	I am not able to offer any payment or expenses for undertaking the research.
Are there any risks of taking part?	There are no identified risks to taking part in this interview. This project has acquired ethics approval from UOB. Questions have been designed in a manner to avoid distress. You are free to decline questions or withdraw from the interview or focus group at any time, without a reason required.
What If I am unhappy or have a question?	Please contact either: Principal Researcher: Nathan Matthews – nkm215@student.bham.ac.uk OR Dissertation Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Zena Lynch - z.lynch@bham.ac.uk
Will my participation by kept confidential?	In accordance to GDPR and UOB policy. Data will be held securely on a password-protected computer. Each interview / focus group will be transcribed, with all identifying information removed and responses anonymised. All transcribed data will be stored electronically and destroyed upon completion of this research and any accompanying projects.
What will my data contribute towards?	Data and results from this study will be used as part of a 15,000-word dissertation project, and may also be used for academic publication at later date.

Appendix F: Participant Consent Form

Version number: 01   Version date: April 2023

Title of the research project: Exploring Student Experiences of Housing and the Selly Oak area for

Supporting Healthy Lives.

Researcher: Nathan Matthews

This information is being collected as part of a research project concerned with MSc dissertation project / student experiences of housing and Selly Oak by the Department of Earth & Environmental Sciences in the University of Birmingham by Nathan Matthews. The information which you supply and that which may be collected as part of the research project will be entered into a filing system or database and will only be accessed by authorised personnel involved in the project. The information will be retained by the University of Birmingham and will only be used for the purpose of research, and statistical and audit purposes. By supplying this information, you are consenting to the University storing your information for the purposes stated above. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. No identifiable personal data will be published.

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the participant information sheet dated April 2023 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the interview/focus group and up to two weeks after the interview/focus group without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any questions I am free to decline.

3. I understand that I can withdraw at any point of the research study and don't have to take part in any part of the study if I do not wish to do so.

4. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded for the purpose of producing an anonymised interview or focus group transcript.

5. I understand that my quotes and images from the interview/focus group will be used to write research outputs, but that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and it will not be possible to identify me in any such outputs.

6. I understand that my personal data will be processed for the purposes detailed above, in
   accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

7. Based on the above I agree to take part in the study.

_____   _____   _____

Participant name   Date   Signature

SINGED BY RESEARCHER: Nathan Matthews – 19/04/2023

Principal Researcher: Nathan Matthews

Dissertation Supervisor:

Assoc Prof. Zena Lynch, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, B15 2TT

(0)121 414 5556, z.lynch@bham.ac.uk

Appendix G: Project Infographic

Appendix H: Recurrent Codes

Positive	Negative	Lack of care/quality	Deceit
Maintenance requests	Securing the home	Place attachment	Restriction
Use of light	Images and Memory	Bathrooms	Furniture
Excess cold and pests	Cost of living	Mental health	Physical health
Stress	Home avoidance	Noise	Accessibility
Choices	Bins and refuses	Improvement	Green space