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Loneliness within the Home among International Students in the Private Rental Sector in Sydney and Melbourne

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ABSTRACT

We draw on 45 in-depth interviews and a large-scale survey we conducted, to examine loneliness among international students in Sydney and Melbourne within their accommodation. We discuss three features which increase the possibility of loneliness – the physical layout and use of the space; the social composition of fellow tenants, and power differentials between tenants. The interviews indicated that the lack of a congenial common area, having to share with students dissimilar with respect to nationality and language, and being in a situation where a tenant holds disproportionate power, are likely to hinder the development of social connections with fellow tenants.

摘要

我们通过45次深度访谈和一项大规模调查, 调查了悉尼和墨尔本留学生在住宿区内的孤独感 我们讨论了增加孤独可能性的三个特征——空间的物理布局和使用; 其他租户的社会构成, 以及租户之间的权力差异. 访谈表明, 缺乏一个志趣相投的共同领域, 不得不与国籍和语言不同的学生分享, 并且处于租户拥有不成比例权力的情况下, 可能会阻碍与其他租户发展社会关系.

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International students; loneliness; private rental sector; Australia

1. Introduction

This article examines the experience of friendship and loneliness among international students *within* their accommodation in the private rental sector (PRS) in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia. In December 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were 758,154 international students in Australia (Australian Government 2019a). In the university sector, just under one in three students (32.4%) were international students (Australian Government 2019b). Drawing on 45 semi-structured interviews and a large survey of international students in the PRS conducted in the second part of 2019 in Sydney and Melbourne, we argue that accommodation is a crucial space for the formation of friendships in a new city and country and thus a key site for international students forestalling the experience of loneliness. The relationship between housing and loneliness has largely been overlooked in the research on the wellbeing of this cohort.

There is agreement that loneliness is a pervasive and harmful feature of late modernity (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018, Franklin *et al.* 2019, Yang 2019). Loneliness can be defined as "a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one's social relationships" (Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010, p. 1). Individuals may possess many social contacts, but few or no meaningful ones, and thus feel lonely;

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other individuals can lead relatively solitary lives, be socially isolated, and not experience loneliness (Hortulanus *et al.* 2006, De Jong Gierveld and Tesch-Roemer 2012). Nevertheless, social isolation increases the possibility of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld *et al.* 2006). Besides the lack of social connections having adverse impacts on quality of life and mental health (Richardson *et al.* 2017), there is increasing evidence that the physical health impacts of loneliness can be severe. An analysis of 148 studies on social relationships and mortality concluded that the impact of loneliness on the risk of death are similar to those attributed to excessive smoking, alcohol consumption, and obesity (Holt-Lunstad *et al.* 2010).

Although the experience of loneliness affects all ages and cohorts, some social groupings are more prone (Fokkema *et al.* 2011, De Jong Gierveld *et al.* 2015, Morris and Verdasco 2020). International students are particularly vulnerable to loneliness (Orygen 2020, Sawir *et al.* 2008, Wawera and McCamley 2020). Besides having to deal with "acculturative stress" and academic pressures, they usually have minimal or no contacts in their host cities and countries (Berry 1997, Brown 2009, Patron 2015). A proportion of these students, especially from developing countries, suffer from serious financial stress (Forbes-Mewett *et al.* 2009). This can result in them living in inadequate, crowded, and insecure accommodation and having to seek paid employment (Duangpracha 2012, Nyland *et al.* 2009, Berg and Farbenblum 2019). Work obligations adds to time-poverty of students, reducing opportunities to build social ties and friendships. Loneliness, in turn, compounds adjustment burdens, with potential impacts on individual academic performance, mental and possibly physical health, and the degree of homesickness (Bek 2017, Sawir *et al.* 2008).

This article foregrounds accommodation as a crucial space of encounter for international students that impacts on the possibility of them experiencing loneliness in a new country. We focus on the physical structure and organisation of accommodation, the social composition of the tenants, and "power differentials" between household members to show how accommodation in the PRS can both encourage and discourage international students' interactions and connections with others, and thereby contribute to the experience of loneliness. We begin by briefly reviewing research on loneliness and international students. This section is followed by our theoretical framing for the study, which situates the issue of loneliness within the socio-spatial context of accommodation at the household scale and the wider political economy of international student housing. After outlining our mixed-methods approach, we present survey findings on the experience of loneliness of students in different accommodation settings in both Sydney and Melbourne. We then turn to our qualitative interview data to show how accommodation in the PRS creates or limits opportunities to make social connections and contributes to international students' experiences of loneliness.

2. Loneliness and Friendship for International Students

Leaving family and friends behind and endeavouring to make friends in a new country is challenging for many international students (Orygen 2020, Fincher and Shaw 2009, Sawir *et al.* 2008, Wawera and McCamley 2020). There is agreement that the "culture shock" can be severe, making it difficult for students to adjust and develop friendships (Ward *et al.* 2001, Brown 2009). We summarise recent research findings that give important context:

(1) Loneliness is common: one recent study of international students in the UK found that 44 of the 61 university students surveyed (72%) had experienced loneliness since their arrival (Wawera and McCamly 2020). Not surprisingly, the first few months were especially hard. Students spoke about missing family and friends from home and difficulties in making friends in a foreign environment. Despite increasing numbers of international students living in Australia, and their particular risks of loneliness, there is still relatively limited research on this subject. A recent online survey of international students in Australia found that loneliness was a major and prevalent issue. More than one third (36%) of respondents

reported that "loneliness and isolation had affected their mental health while studying in Australia" (Orygen 2020, p. 11). In an earlier Australian study based on interviews with 200 international students, 65% reported that they had experienced loneliness since arriving (Sawir *et al*. 2008). The authors identified three kinds of loneliness experienced: personal loneliness, related to loss of daily contact with family; social loneliness, referring to the loss of their social networks back home and cultural loneliness precipitated by unfamiliar cultural and language environments.

(2) A range of international students are affected: although younger undergraduates are probably more vulnerable, loneliness and depression among international *doctoral* students is not unusual (Bradley 2000; Brown and Holloway 2008; Janta *et al*. 2014). Using netnography[1] to collect primary data, Janta *et al*. (2014) found that many of the comments posted on-line by international PhD students spoke about loneliness and depression and the difficulty of establishing meaningful friendships. This was primarily due to the individualised nature of the PhD and difficulties adapting to a new country without family or close friends. Although the role of accommodation was not a focus of the study, the research recognised the potential importance of the organisation of space: " . . . for example discrete work spaces may be essential when writing up a thesis but may reinforce isolation and social exclusion during earlier stages" (Janta *et al*. 2014, p. 566).

(3) The organisation of space may be a contributing factor. In their study of international students in central Melbourne, Fincher and Shaw (2009) argue that these students are often directed into certain types of buildings and areas which contribute "to the unintended separation of transnational students from the relevant host community of 'local' students" (Fincher and Shaw 2009, p. 1889). Whether minimal social interaction between local and international students translates into loneliness for the latter was not addressed in their study.

3. Framing Housing's Contribution to the Loneliness Problem

We argue that there has been insufficient attention to the role played by *housing* in problems of student loneliness. Some research has suggested that university-supplied accommodation facilitates social connections among students. For example, Paltridge *et al*. (2010) found that university accommodation promoted exposure to "Australian culture" and opportunities to interact with diverse others. One US study found that residential halls were a key site for interaction and building community for Chinese first-year students (Chong Brown and Razek 2018). Other research on US college students (not international students specifically) living in residence halls found those without roommates were lonelier (Henninger *et al*. Henninger, et al., 2016). They caution against inferring causation from this association but suggest that interactions between roommates may reduce loneliness.

Much less is known about the role of private rental accommodation in shaping student loneliness, but existing research is a guide. Sawir *et al*. (2008) note in passing that settlement difficulties, such as finding private rental accommodation, can trigger loneliness in the early days after arrival. Robertson (2018, p. 546) acknowledges accommodation as a key site of international student friendship, noting that "shared domestic spaces such as share-housing and homestays were also extremely common sites for the development of more intimate types of friendship for student-migrants".

While these insights offer an initial guide, we argue that a significant gap in our knowledge needs to be addressed. This article aims to add significantly to this literature, using a framework focused primarily on international student experiences of shared accommodation in the PRS. Despite propinquity no longer being necessary to develop social ties (Raine and Wellman 2012), cohabitation can still be an important site of contact with others, particularly for international students in a

new place. We show how the socio-spatial arrangements of accommodation play a central role in shaping social interaction and hence the (im)possibilities of connection within non-related shared households.

Following on from seminal studies on what is required for a neighbourhood to facilitate strong social ties (see, for example, Young and Willmott (1957), Gans (1962) and Jane Jacobs (1992), scholars associated with the new urbanism movement emphasised the importance of the physical environment in creating community. The underlying principle is that mixed land use and the design of homes, streets, and public spaces should encourage social encounters: " ... resident interaction and sense of community are cultivated via the organising power of space" (Talen 1999, p. 1364). New Urbanism has since sought to distance itself from accusations of physical and spatial determinism by recognising that the physical features of a neighbourhood rarely create community or encourage neighbouring in themselves. There is acknowledgement that non-spatial features of neighbourhoods need to be considered (Talen 1999, Grant 2006, Congress for the New Urbanism 2013) and that the key conditions that foster neighbour interaction include homogeneity of the resident population and length of residence (Talen 1999).

We draw inspiration from this body of research exploring empirically the *lower* scale of the spatial context – the home itself. We show how the physical and social features of the homes occupied by international students potentially contribute to the experience of loneliness within their accommodation. We examine three key aspects shaping the capacity of international students to develop social connections in their accommodation: the physical structure and use of the home; the social composition of student housing; and any power differentials within shared housing. We approach shared accommodation as "spaces of encounter" that have the potential to foster both connection and disconnection for international students. Framing accommodation in this way draws attention to how the physical and social configuration of accommodation shape possibilities for interaction and connection. This framing speaks to ongoing interest in urban studies of how "the spaces and infrastructures of the city shape the conditions of possibility for interpersonal ties" (Kathiravelu and Bunnell 2018, p. 494). It also resonates with scholarship in housing studies that view households as "configurations of connections, transactions, and unfolding relations" that occur within domestic space (Desmond in Heathercote 2018, p. 263).

The micro-level of social interaction within shared rental accommodation is contingent on the wider political economy of international student housing. There is no provision of subsidised housing for international students in Australia. Purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) in Australia accommodates less than 10% of international students, and charges market rents (Ruming and Dowling 2017, Savills. 2020). Most students are dependent on the lightly regulated PRS for their accommodation in Australia (Fincher and Shaw 2009, Judd 2014, Berg and Farbenblum 2019). Strong demand for rental accommodation, combined with the lack of regulation, means that rents are high. In December 2019, the median weekly rent in Melbourne was $430 for houses and $420 for apartments; in Sydney, the median weekly rent was $525 for houses and $510 for apartments[2] (Heagney 2020). In the inner-city areas, close to the colleges and universities where many of the international students reside, rents can be much higher than the median. Thus in Randwick, an inner-ring suburb close to a major Sydney university and popular with students, the median weekly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the December quarter in 2019 was $500 per week, whereas in Blacktown, in Sydney's outer ring, a one-bedroom apartment was $320 per week (New South Wales Government 2019). In our survey (see below), conducted in the second half of 2019, when students were asked, "Roughly speaking, how much income do you receive each week from all sources", 27% said less than $300 a week, and 56% said less than $500 a week (Morris *et al.* 2020). These income statistics suggest a high incidence of severe rental stress for students living close to inner-city universities, unless students rely on overcrowded and or poor quality housing to lessen financial hardship.

International students are more likely to live in marginal accommodation within the PRS, such as sub-lets or even boarding houses, in which informal tenure arrangements and exploitation by unscrupulous landlords are more likely (Obeng-Odoom 2012, Ruming and Dowling 2017, UNSW Human Rights Clinic 2019, Morris *et al.* 2021). Economic need and pressure to find somewhere to live in a new country and unfamiliar rental market can land international students in makeshift and over-crowded accommodation, often with people they do not know (Kornkanok 2012, Ruming and Dowling 2017). The analysis below shows how the socio-spatial arrangements in international student housing in the PRS potentially shape the interactions that take place within it and contribute to the likelihood of loneliness within their accommodation.

4. Methodology

The study involved an online survey conducted in the second half of 2019 (before the Covid-19 pandemic) and 45 interviews with international students enrolled in all three post-secondary sectors – universities, vocational education and training (VET), and English language colleges – in Sydney and Melbourne. The survey and interviews data collection were guided by an endeavour to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the situation of international students in the PRS in the two cities concerned. The survey closed in early December 2019. A total of 43 institutions (ten universities, 24 VET providers, seven English language colleges and two foundation course programmes) cooperated in the recruitment of participants, resulting in 7084 valid responses. Institutions were encouraged to send a link to the survey to all enrolled international students to better approximate conditions of "randomisation" (Agresti 2018) in responses and to mitigate sample biases common with availability sampling approaches. The data was analysed using a combination of univariate and bivariate descriptive statistical approaches with SPSSv.27 software.

This article draws primarily on the in-depth interviews. Loneliness and friendship were among the key themes explored. Other themes included finding accommodation; living conditions; quality of the accommodation and neighbourhood; landlord-tenant relations; rental affordability; insecurity of accommodation; and paid employment and financial stress. These 45 interviewees were recruited from shortlists of survey respondents who indicated that they were prepared to be interviewed. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom as the pandemic made face-to-face interviews impossible. An initial shortlist of 120 contacts was developed based on a composite "precarity score" and divided into low, middle, and high groups. Gender, city, and education sector were also indicated to allow for purposeful selection across important indicators. A second contact list indicating students sharing a bedroom with one or more people was later generated as recruitment became focused on filling gaps in the emerging data. Of the 45 interviewees, 31 were university students, 10 were VET students, and four were enrolled in English language colleges. A total of 28 interviewees were from Sydney and 17 were from Melbourne.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A deductive coding frame of anticipated themes based on the themes covered in the survey oriented initial coding. Inductive codes were also generated from the detail of the interview data, allowing for the emergence of unanticipated themes. Deductive codes relevant to this article included: relationships with flatmates; making friends; use of home; and interaction with neighbours. Inductive codes related to the topic included loneliness and isolation, cultural affinity, missing home. Codes were collaboratively reviewed and refined with each cycle of analysis. Interview transcripts were coded by a single researcher and reviewed by the project lead. The project had university ethics clearance.

5. Main Findings

A simple survey measure of subjective loneliness provides baseline data on the incidence of loneliness among international students. That measure is then used to provide evidence of how different aspects of housing are associated with subjective loneliness. This data provides a context for the

Table 1. Loneliness and social exclusion measures, 2019, %.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Feel lonely	11	24	30	27	9
Hard to make friends in Aust	17	30	26	21	6
Not much community in area/neighbourhood	8	23	27	33	10

N > 7076
Questions: "I feel lonely in Australia"; It's been hard to make close friends in Australia'; "There is not much of a community in the area/neighbourhood I live in". Responses: 5-pt scale ("Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree").

main analysis of this article – the qualitative exploration of alienating and isolating housing experiences. Table 1 presents basic data on the experience of loneliness for which we rely on a subjective measure. A total of 35% of students reported feeling lonely in 2019 (i.e. strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "I feel lonely in Australia") and an even higher 47% reported that "it's been hard to make close friends in Australia". These two experiences were also highly correlated (Spearman's Rho = 0.54; $p < 0.01$). International students are much more likely to report loneliness than the rest of the Australian population. Even at the height of COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported around one in five Australians were lonely with that number falling to 10% in April 2021 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

5.1. Loneliness and Accommodation

To afford the rent, most international students in Sydney and Melbourne shared with one or more persons. The survey data indicates that 12% of respondents lived by themselves and 31% reported that they were sharing their accommodation with people or a family they "don't know". However, despite the high rate of sharing, over one third of respondents reported being lonely. The data suggest that sharing arrangements add to this problem, even if the type of sharing is not necessarily central to the loneliness problem. Analysis of the data reported in Figure 1 is illustrative: students who lived with people they did not know were significantly more likely to report that they felt lonely than students who knew their co-residents (Gamma = 0.146; $p < 0.01$).[3] It is not surprising that students who did not know their co-residents (prior to cohabitation) express greater loneliness: their housing choice already indicates a lack of social connection. However, this finding also points to the possibility that socially alien housing environments contribute to the problem – an empirical question we explore below.

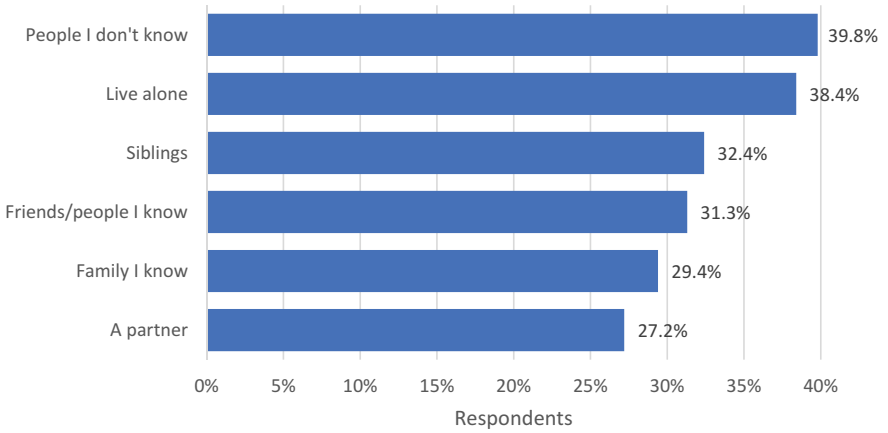

Figure 1. Respondents reporting they feel lonely in Australia (agree or strongly agree) by who they are sharing their accommodation with, 2019, % n = 7042.Question: Who are you sharing your accommodation with?

Table 2. Students experiencing loneliness ("Lonely") consistently report greater social and housing problems, 2019, %.

Statement	"Lonely" (Total agree)	"Other" (Total agree)	Difference (Column 1 – Column2)
Hard to make close friends	88	45	43
No neighbourhood community	51	29	22
Hard to study in home	39	17	21
Accomm condition impacts studies	27	13	15
Space to relax/socialise	55	69	−15
Home over-crowded	26	12	14
Good share relationship	64	76	−12
Feel safe at home	74	86	−12
Must follow list of house rules	67	57	10

N for individual items ranges from 6048 to 6464.
Statement: "I feel lonely in Australia". Responses on a 5-pt scale Agree scale recoded (total agree = "Lonely" and neither or total disagree = "Other").
Questions: "It's been hard to make close friends in Australia"; "It's hard to study in the home I live in"; "There is not much of a community in the area/neighbourhood I live in"; "The condition of my accommodation has a negative impact on my studies"; "There is plenty of space in my home to relax and socialise"; "The home I live in is over-crowded (i.e. too many people)"; "I have a good relationship with the people with whom I am sharing my accommodation"; "I feel safe in the home I live in"; "'I have to follow a list of 'house rules' given to me by the person I pay rent to"; Responses are all 5-pt scales ("Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree") and recoded for total agreement.

Table 2 presents a closer examination of those housing factors associated with higher levels of loneliness. The results report total agreement (i.e. "Strongly agree" and "Agree") for a range of propositions for two groups: those reporting loneliness ("Lonely") versus neither and disagree responses to the loneliness question grouped as "Other". The results are reported in order of the absolute value of the difference in agreement between "Lonely" and "Other" categories. For example, large gaps between the two groups indicate that students reporting loneliness have different housing and social experiences than those not reporting loneliness. All the reported relationships (for the Lonely/Other categories) are significant at $p < 0.01$ using a test of ordinal association (Gamma).

Not surprisingly, lonely students find it harder to make friends than non-lonely students by a considerable margin – 43% higher agreement. Lonely students are also more likely to agree that "there is not much of a community in the area/neighbourhood I live in" (22% difference in agreement) confirming findings about neighbourhoods (Scharf and de Jong Gierveld 2008). The Table also provides detailed data on a range of home or property-related conditions associated with loneliness. Lonely students find their home harder to study in (21% difference in agreement) and are more likely to find the home hard to relax and socialise in (lonely students report 15% lower agreement) and are more likely to report overcrowding (14% higher agreement).

Similar patterns, with diminishing margins, are established for feeling safe at home and having good relationships at home – 12% lower agreement among lonely respondents in both cases. There are also some hints, explored further below, that lonely students are more likely to confront households with rules (12% higher agreement that respondent "must follow list of house rules"). None of the differences highlighted in Table 2 establish causality (i.e. that home conditions *cause* loneliness). Nor are they exhaustive of all the sociological correlates of loneliness present in the data. However, they consistently point to associations between loneliness and housing conditions which are explored in more detail below.

5.2. Loneliness and Spatial Organisation of Accommodation

Our survey data suggests that the physical structure and spatial organisation of accommodation shapes the possibilities for social interaction and connection in the home – a topic we explored qualitatively. Small and Adler (2019, p. 116) use the term "spatial composition" to refer to "the presence or absence of fixed places that make social interaction possible or likely". "Spatial configuration" is "the arrangement of physical barriers and pathways that result in the segmentation

of space" (120). Some landlords or sub-letters motivated by excessive rental returns convert communal spaces into bedrooms (Nasreen and Ruming 2020). International students with limited financial resources are drawn to these conversions as the rents are invariably cheaper than conventional accommodation (Zhang and Gurran 2020). For example, Shakib (mid-twenties) chose his accommodation because it was relatively inexpensive and close to his university. He moved to Sydney from Dakar where he had a wide circle of friends. In Sydney, Shakib moved into a house with seven or eight people; he was not sure of the exact number. Each tenant had their own room and the landlady also lived in the house. He had minimal contact with his housemates and his loneliness within the house was acute:

> Mostly it was dead silent. You couldn't even tell that seven or eight other people are living in the property, living next to your cardboard wall . . . Well like we had our times separate. Some of them will cook at 5am in the morning and then start off for the work . . . But yeah, we didn't pretty much interact, and we didn't even see who else was living in that house . . . I think no one would even know if I had died in my room if it wasn't for a month when my landlady would come and ask for rent.

Here Shakib suggests that the different schedules tenants kept limited the possibility of them crossing paths, however the lack of opportunity to interact was exacerbated by the inadequate communal facilities. There were no communal spaces for socialising. The shared kitchen was "most of the time in pretty terrible condition", so he avoided using it. Living in physical proximity to strangers, separated by the "cardboard" thin walls, heightened his sense of isolation in the house.

Sophia, a PhD student in Sydney in her mid-thirties, originally from Italy, also commented that the layout of her rented accommodation and the poor lighting made it difficult to meet her fellow tenants. Like Shakib, she had not met most of the residents in her household and was unsure how many there were: "I don't know if there are really seven or if we are six or five. I have no idea". She described the communal areas:

> There are two sofas and then the access to the kitchen, which is like a corridor [. . .] But it's quite dark. There is no [natural light], the natural light coming inside comes from the kitchen but as the kitchen is a corridor you cannot have light in the living room.

Besides its narrow layout, the kitchen was "disgusting" and she avoided cooking there. Again, the lack of a congenial common space for mingling discouraged contact and meaningful interaction between tenants, echoing the finding of previous research on share housing (Heath 2004, Heath *et al.* 2018).

Intense physical proximity did not necessarily facilitate connecting with fellow tenants. Soon after arriving in Sydney, Bian (mid-thirties), a PhD student originally from Vietnam, moved into what was supposed to be a two-bedroom apartment. However, the lounge had been converted into a third bedroom with three bunks. Bian estimated that 13 or 14 people were living in the apartment. She shared her bedroom with three other people and viewed the apartment merely as a space to sleep and occasionally cook. Bian avoided contact with her fellow tenants by rising early and returning late. The shared kitchen discouraged lingering or relaxed socialising:

> We did not have enough space to sit down and have a comfortable meal . . . Within the peak hours, there was always someone cooking in the kitchen, someone eating their meals on the couch.

Overcrowding of shared facilities and lack of personal space to withdraw discouraged Bian from seeking connection with her fellow tenants, encouraging instead a purely instrumental orientation to her accommodation. Lack of a space to retreat and make one's own can also forestall the creation of social connections with fellow tenants (Heath *et al.* 2018).

5.3. Loneliness and the Social Composition of Shared Households

How people respond to the spatial arrangements of accommodation, and whether it impacts on social interaction also depends on the social composition of those spaces (Small and Adler 2019). Table 2 data suggests students reporting loneliness are less likely to have good relationships with their co-residents (64% versus 76% agreement). Although the friendships of international students are in many instances certainly not confined to students from their home country (see Gomes *et al.* 2014), the familiarity that is associated with shared backgrounds can facilitate connection. Reviewing the literature on share housing among young adults, Clark *et al.* (2018, p. 5) conclude that similarity in terms of age, ethnicity, and cultural background, as well as shared interests, are most likely to foster and sustain meaningful relationships between housemates.

However, many international students end up sharing dwellings and even bedrooms with people they do not know – 39.8% in our 2019 sample of 7084 respondents (see also Nasreen and Ruming 2020). Several interviewees described cultural and linguistic differences as a barrier to developing meaningful contact with fellow tenants. Shabid described a substantial cultural and linguistic divide between him and his co-residents:

> I was the only one who wasn't Chinese. Even the instructions were written in Chinese. . . . I couldn't follow kitchen instructions. It was all in Chinese. I didn't get what it meant.

Cherie, 22 years-old, moved to a Melbourne university from Hong Kong. She was sharing her bedroom (it was a one-bedroom apartment) with three students from the Philippines, Singapore, and India. Despite the intense propinquity, she had minimal social contact with her flatmates. It would appear that cultural unfamiliarity played a significant role:

> We eat and cook separately . . . Yes, and I would say I really experienced the culture shock . . . When the Indian girl cooked . . . the smell is so strong so when she was in the kitchen I would close the door in my bedroom . . . I didn't expect that, because in my imagination I should have a good relationship with my room-mates. Let's say cooking together, having fun. But I find that it's really hard to make a friendship with them.

Asked why she thought this was so, she responded:

> They have their life and I don't know much about them, their cultural background, so it is so strange. I keep chatting with my friend [in Hong Kong] through WhatsApp and I find it so strange that even [though there's] four of us at home, it is totally silent.

Living in such close quarters with little communication intensified her sense of loneliness and Cherie moved after six months. However, she also experienced loneliness in her new accommodation. Her three flat-mates were all from mainland China, which she felt created a language and cultural barrier:

> Yeah, maybe because they were speaking Mandarin but I'm not good at that . . . and they can't understand Cantonese or English . . . They [her house-mates] are friends with each other because they all study in Monash [University] so I can hear the conversation in the common area, but I'm excluded . . .

The lack of communication left her feeling alone and homesick. When asked if she put up pictures in her room, she responded, "Yeah, I put a big calendar counting [the days] when I can go back to Hong Kong . . . A bit homesick because no one communicates with me".

Many international students cope with the possibility of "acculturative stress" (Berry 1997) by living with students from their home country (Brown 2009, Patron 2015). In her first year in Sydney, Gawa, a university student in her mid-twenties originally from Myanmar, stayed in university-provided accommodation and struggled with loneliness. In her second year she rented an apartment with two friends who were also from Myanmar. She was adamant that the move and the associated familiarity made a substantial difference. She no longer experienced loneliness.

> I definitely find that cultural familiarity made it much easier to get along, especially after feeling quite lonely in the uni accommodation during my first year . . . I was already quite overwhelmed about moving to a country I've never been before. But the new environment, coupled with having to learn different cultural cues and other added pressures with studies made it much harder to transition to uni. [In my second year] living with other friends from Myanmar made things easier in a way that the sense of home/ familiarity took away the homesickness and also culture shock. We got along well because we were already on the same page with cultural cues, superstitions and taboos.

A PhD student from Mongolia, Altansarnai, (early thirties), was sharing with two fellow Mongolian nationals. She emphasised how their common backgrounds facilitated their strong connection:

> I think we have similar worldviews, so we have same idea about respect or like understanding each other, our diversity, inclusiveness, so I think it's very easy to live together. Yeah, we are very good friends I will say and respecting each other's privacy and like private life . . .

A few interviewees deliberately sought out difference and enjoyed staying with students from different countries. For these students, being of a similar age and shared status as international students were more important than country of origin or ethnicity (see Gomes *et al.* 2014). Annisa, (mid-twenties), a university student from Indonesia, was determined to share with non-Indonesians so that she could experience other cultures and learn English. Soon after arriving in Sydney, she found a three-bedroom apartment which she shared with eight others. She was the only Indonesian.

> The place where I live in right now is like a mix of other people. There's Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese and there was a Korean, but she moved away a few weeks ago.
>
> I really like living with other people. I get to learn their language, their culture, their food.

Students who found themselves living with people who were much older, had difficulty "connecting". Kiara, 25 years-old, a university student in Sydney, originally from India, felt that the age gap was a significant factor preventing her connecting with her fellow tenants.

> Everyone just wants to stay in their room which I do appreciate because I want that as well, but you know sometimes you want a bit of outlet. But that is another reason why I wanted to shift with my friend who is my age instead of people who are in their early 40s or late 30s . . . But you know you have that age gap and that sometimes affects . . . Yeah, I don't think even once we've had dinner together in one and a half years.

5.4. Loneliness and Power Differentials within the Accommodation

Survey results in Table 2 indicate that students reporting loneliness are significantly more likely to report having to follow "house rules" (67% versus 57%). Moreover, a separate finding from the survey data suggests that rules are significantly more common where cohabitants did not previously know each other. Some 66% of respondents in such cohabitations arrangements report "rules" compared to 52% for households where cohabitants knew each other previously (Gamma = 0.220; $p < 0.01$). These results imply some housing situations lack conviviality and hint at unequal power relationships. Indeed, power differentials within accommodation can promote unpredictability and lack of control that undermines ontological security and the capacity to create a sense of home and connection with fellow residents (Hiscock *et al.* 2001, Easthope *et al.* 2015, Nasreen and Ruming 2020, Nethercote 2019). For example, sub-letting from somebody who holds the lease or living with a live-in landlord, can potentially shape how tenants relate to fellow occupants and use the communal spaces (Heath *et al.* 2018). Our data confirms one obvious source of unequal power: respondents sharing with cohabitants they did not know previously are much less likely to know the total rent for the accommodation (32% versus 75%).[4]

Misha was only 18 when she came to Sydney from India. At the time of the interview, she was happily settled in a share house, but her first year in Sydney was extremely lonely. Initially she shared with a couple (they were the lease-holders) whose controlling behaviour made it difficult for her to feel at home or develop any relationship with them:

> They had so many restrictions. They . . . had a baby [so] they didn't want any noise. They didn't want cooking in the kitchen after 9 pm, "You can't cook there", and something like that.

She decided to move and found herself again sharing with an older couple. Remarkably, the couple refused to give her a front-door key:

> I finished my shift at nights then I'll have to actually ask them to open the door and they would be saying . . . "Why can't you come early?" [I responded], "But it's just like my job [and it finishes at] that time and . . . why don't you guys give me the keys?"

Siya, a 22-year-old VET student in Melbourne, found herself in an intolerable situation. She lived for month with a landlady who insisted she cook her food in the garage because she was sensitive to the smell of Indian cuisine:

> I used to cook in the kitchen and when she came home she make faces and . . . and she said, "Okay, can you please cook in the garage" . . . Cooking in the garage was such a panic for me.

The only reason Siya endured the situation as long as she did was because she had paid one month's rent in advance, which she couldn't recover if she left. After this and a couple of other bad experiences, she decided to only share with fellow Indian nationals:

> Yeah, so then I really preferred living within my community you know not with someone from different ethnicity, so yeah . . . I stopped looking for anyone from different countries because I don't want to you know listen to something like that.

While some students spoke about explicit restrictions imposed, others described the more subtle exclusion imposed by landlords or head tenants. Aiya (35 years-old), who had come from Japan and was enrolled in an English language college in Melbourne, hardly interacted with the couple she was renting from and felt uncomfortable using the living room:

> I was getting uncomfortable because the owner couple was . . . always in the living room and watching TV and then it's like . . . I wanted to use our living room as well when I was eating dinner and after dinner, but always the owner couple was there, so it became uncomfortable for me.

The owner couples' sense of entitlement in dominating the communal living area unsettled Aiya's own feeling of comfort. The result was a feeling of social and spatial exclusion, thwarting the possibility of connection.

6. Conclusion

There is a long-standing recognition that the physical and social features of the neighbourhood can encourage social ties and lessen the possibility of loneliness (see Jacobs 1992, Talen 1999, Grant 2006, Scharf and de Jong Gierveld 2008, Congress for the New Urbanism 2013). This article adds to this literature by highlighting the distinct contribution of *accommodation*, which has largely been overlooked. For international students, a stable and socially enriching experience of "home" is far from guaranteed. The experience of social dislocation, temporary arrangements, and limited finances mean that housing can add to social isolation. We show how physical layout, social composition, and power differentials in PRS accommodation is associated with the experience of international student loneliness. These three factors help frame and analyse key dimensions in the experience of loneliness in shared accommodation. Moreover, we infer that students who experience loneliness in their accommodation settings are more likely to experience loneliness outside of their accommodation.

Four conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, our survey measure of subjective loneliness in Sydney and Melbourne suggests that loneliness is a common experience of international students living in the PRS. As discussed, the experience of loneliness is certainly not confined to international students – it is a pervasive social problem (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018). However, international students confront particular housing circumstances that add to the risk of isolating and alienating cohabitation experiences, adding to the risk of loneliness.

Second, we demonstrate empirically that the physical and spatial composition of the housing plays a significant role in assuaging or increasing loneliness. Expensive rents in Sydney and Melbourne force many students to reside in sub-standard arrangements i.e. where there is overcrowding, common areas are converted into bedroom space, or are in such poor condition that they are barely usable. Students commented on how in these situations there is minimal opportunity to interact with fellow tenants and to possibly develop friendships.

Third, both the survey and interview findings indicate that students residing with people they do not know are more likely to feel lonely in these housing arrangements. In our study, the cultural/national divide was often overlaid and compounded by language barriers. Cultural and language affinity for several of the students interviewed created fertile ground for strong social connections. Of course, there were exceptions: we interviewed students who thrived in situations where they had the opportunity to share their accommodation with students from countries other than their own. Still, international students are at greater risk of these alienating experiences than, for example, locals with social connections. In their study of share housing in inner Sydney, McNamara and Connell (2007) found that, for local students and employed people moving out of the parental home and sharing accommodation was usually a conscious decision in pursuit of the companionship of others. Almost all moved in with friends. By contrast, our survey data indicates that at least three in ten international students shared with people they did not know previously.

Fourth, this research also highlights how power differentials within the household contribute to the experience of loneliness. We highlight cases where younger international students who resided with landlords or older couples, especially if the latter were the lease-holders, had limited control within their accommodation and felt uncomfortable using the common living areas. These circumstances reduced possibilities for meaningful social connection within the home.

This study highlights that in Australia the experience of loneliness within the PRS and generally is a major issue for international students that requires policy intervention. The Covid-19 pandemic certainly heightened loneliness among international students. In a survey of international students we conducted in mid-2020, our sample was a sub-set of the respondents to the 2019 survey, 63% of respondents reported that they were "more lonely in Australia since the pandemic" (Morris *et al.* 2020).

Education providers need to play a much greater role in the accommodation of their international students (Ramia 2017). Policy efforts that enhance opportunities for international students to extend and deepen their social ties are important. And more specifically, education providers should expand subsidised accommodation designed to facilitate contact between students. Subsidised accommodation would mean more students avoid the most alienating housing experiences – for example, bedroom-sharing with strangers or living in properties in the PRS that lack the amenity and/or social arrangements conducive to interacting with others. Unfortunately, in Australia, present financial pressures on education providers makes the provision of more subsidised accommodation unlikely. As an alternative, education providers could better inform students of their rights in the PRS and/or improve services that match students to suitable accommodation.

Notes

1. Netnographic research refers to the collection of data by entering into a data rich relevant internet site. In the study referred to "a data-rich and active site for doctoral students around the world was selected" (Janta *et al.* 2014, p. 558).
2. In May 2020 the average full-time average weekly earnings was $1714 (Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2021). The average rent in Sydney and Melbourne thus represents around a quarter of the average full-time weekly earnings.
3. Gamma is a measure of ordinal association. Two groups (Know/Don't know cohabitants) were compared for responses on the subjective loneliness item (5 pt. scale). Gamma = 0.146 is a moderate association that was significant at p = 0.01 (n = 6191). Two groups from a recoded item (1 = "A family I know"; "People I don't know"; 0 = "A family I don't know"; "A partner"; "Friends / people I know"; "Siblings"; Excluded = 'I'm not sharing / living by myself')
4. Question is: "Do you know what the total rent is for your accommodation (the whole apartment / house)?" coded Yes = 1/No = 0 for responses. Not knowing total rent is strongly associated with Know/Don't know cohabitants (Gamma = −0.730; p < 0.01; n = 6107).

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