

Female Graduate Students' Perception of the Relationships between the Residence Hall and the Home

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Abstract

University students' housing has received a good deal of emphasis in previous research. Much of this early research focused on the relationship between the environment, facilities, residence hall layout and students' satisfaction. The current study tried to view students' housing from a different perspective. It hypothesized that when students perceive the attributes of the home in the university (which we call sense of similarity to the home) residence hall their satisfaction with residence is improved. The current paper is based on the premise that the home is a multidimensional construct. It examined whether the residence hall is also multidimensional in the way it is described by the students. The study also aimed to understand the students' perception of the attributes which make the residence hall similar to the home. This paper which reported the results of a pilot study on graduate female students was a qualitative study which employed an inductive approach. Eighteen (18) individual unstructured interviews were conducted with female graduate students who were living in a university residence hall March to May 2010. Twenty (20) open ended questionnaires were distributed among students of this residence hall who were not willing to be interviewed. The selected residence were occupied by graduate (both national and international) students and had single rooms with a shared bath room for each pair of rooms. Participants were selected according to their university year, age, cultural background and nationality. The analysis carried out revealed that there were 4 major themes: *Physical facilities and Comfort; Security; Privacy; and Warmth and Friendly Environment*. These themes revealed the students' perceptions of the attributes which make the residence hall comparable to the home environment. It was found that when students were asked to talk about a residence hall in terms of a home, they usually compared the present residence hall with their own home. The results also revealed that their comparisons of *home* and the *residence hall* were highly dependent on their background and previous experiences and were indicative of satisfaction with their current accommodation.

Keywords: Residence hall, Sense of similarity to the home, Satisfaction, Residence hall physical environment, Residence hall social environment

1. Introduction

What the home means to people and what makes the house become a home is a complex notion that has been a subject of discourse for some decades till now (Tognoli, 1987, Gifford, 1997: 194-197). The essence of a home is a complex notion which is hard to describe. However, home has been described as the intersection of different domains: from the public to the private; and from the physical to the psychological and the social. It is more than just a dwelling; it is a composite commodity that contains the stories of our lives, the memory of our struggles, happiness and sadness which we share with our family members. The literature (Hayward, 1975, Dovey, 1985) has shown that there are six dimensions along which a home may be described. These are *haven, order, identity, connectedness, warmth and physical suitability*. Some of the key issues in all these dimensions are that the home is a place where we have privacy, security, feel connected to people and the setting and where the physical aspects meet our needs.

Leaving the home behind and residing in students' housing, for a long period of time, is a different experience for most young students. This new life style provides an opportunity to learn how to live independently, compromise with other students, roommates and share space and facilities. If the home is so central to our lives because it meets most of our physical, social and psychological needs, then, this raises the question as to whether the residence hall is similar to the home. Given the central focus of this study on the residence hall environment, it is assumed that a similarity of residence hall to the home which we call "sense of similarity to the home" is a multi dimensional construct that plays a moderating role between residence hall design and students' satisfaction. The more the residence hall provides a higher sense of similarity to the home, the more satisfaction the students will have with their residence. In this sense, this research aims to understand the students' perception of the factors which make the residence hall comparable (sense of similarity or dissimilarity) to the home.

2. Literature review

The benefits and disadvantages of living on-campus and off-campus is a common theme in many previous studies. Generally, the benefit of living on-campus has been a research topic that seems to have less rigour. Several studies have indicated that living on-campus has been tied to students' educational outcome, development and success (Araujo & Murray 2010, Velez 1985, Bozick, 2007). Studies support the notion that living on-campus is often anecdotally associated with gains in students' academic development. There are many authors who assert that residing on-campus leads to better classroom performance (Astin 1973) and even higher academic performance (Thompson et al 1993). Research shows that living learning centers which are under the umbrella of on-campus accommodation have a positive influence on a student's academic development (Inkelas et al 2007). In addition it is found that in comparison to students living off-campus, those who dwell on-campus tend to be more engaged on students' organizations (Winston and Anchors 1993) more socially adjusted and often participate more in campus activities (Lundgren & Schwab, 1979). Similarly Moos and Lee (1979) in their study established that "the students in residence halls participated more in religious activities, were more active in student organizations, and were less likely to consume alcohol or use medications. They had higher educational aspirations and were less likely to be on academic probation" (Moos and Lee, 1979:212). Though a lot of factors seem to contribute to student's level of satisfaction, majority of them would stay in residence halls if they were provided with decent housing and adequate facilities at a cheaper rate. Close distance to campus classes, access to food stalls and the opportunity to meet new people are other benefits of living on-campus.

However there are students who prefer the off campus accommodation to on-campus. Lack of privacy, noise and shortage of space can be considered as stressful stimuli which drive students from on-campus to off-campus accommodation. Sometimes, when these stressful stimuli exceed the students' tolerance level, they move to off-campus if it be possible. The economic situation also can affect students' choice to live on-campus or off-campus. It might make students live in on-campus accommodation even when they don't want to, because, generally, residing in on-campus is cheaper than living off-campus. According to Rapoport (1985), the major theorist in environment-behavior studies, "The main effect of environment on people is through choice or habitat selection: given an opportunity, people avoid or leave some environments and seek out others" (p.257). When there is a profound difference between current and preferred housing, people are more likely to move. As Heaton (1979) asserted "People who prefer to live in communities which have different sizes or locational characteristics from their present residence are five times more likely to intend to move than those who have attained their preferred type of residence" P 565.

It has become widely accepted that students prefer to live off-campus, as it offers them more independence (Phillips & Carswell, 2007). In relation to this, Moos and Lee (1979, p. 217) who developed a 10 item scale to measure the social environment of off-campus accommodations found that "students who live off-campus

established social environments that were more oriented toward achievement, independence, and intellectuality, that is, toward personal and academic growth". Another reason why students may prefer off-campus accommodation may be that this accommodation offers them similar experiences to the home. Studies show that students might be interested in living within the campus if it can meet their various needs. A case in point is a study aimed at evaluating the housing situation at colleges and universities across United States. This report (*Housing : issues of concern to students, National Association of College and University Residence halls, Pennsylvania State University, 1971*) found that two-thirds of the students who had moved off-campus expressed a desire to return to the campus if the campus would satisfy their unmet needs. They believed that the on-campus accommodations must offer the following:

- 1) A variety of living options from which to choose
- 2) A chance for small groups to establish a feeling of closeness through shared interests
- 3) Privacy, meaning and control over one's environment and an absence of rules and regulations
- 4) The option of renting rooms without board.

(cited in student housing, a report from Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1972: 12)

The needs and requirements of current students differ from students of two or three decades ago. Today, students mostly consider access to high internet service and cable TV as important aspects in their decision-making process. Distance from university, retail centers, public transportation, crowdedness are also other factors which might affect their decision about their off-campus accommodation location. According to Phillips & Carswell (2007) the demands of students in off-campus accommodation are mainly related to better and more amenities. Currently the demand for "fully furnished units with washers and dryers, microwave ovens and entertainment centers are becoming more common" (Phillips & Carswell, 2007 p 170,171). Balogh et al. (2005) presented an interesting result addressing the recent trends in housing construction and renovation of educational institutes. The participants of their study were chief housing offices. Two hundred eighty four (284) participants completed the online survey. They found that "Construction and renovation focused mainly on building apartments and suites rather than traditional residence halls" (p55). More focus on these types of buildings (off-campus accommodation) reveals a greater students' demand for privacy and the institutions' strive of to meet this need.

The institutional kind of setting that exists in dormitories is one of the main causes which lead students to seek off-campus accommodation. Robinson (2004) in her PhD dissertation discussed about "institutionality" or "home-likeness" characteristics of buildings. By applying different methods she tried to show how different designs can affect the feeling of *institutionality*. For example she mentioned that a home-like living room seats five or less people while institutional living room seats more than five people. Living room chairs in home-like living rooms are in varying styles, while in institutional living rooms all are of one style. The Robinson's study is very close to the current study.

In this study, we attempt to explore the students' perceptions of residence hall attributes which make it similar or dissimilar to the home and which may also play a major part in students' choice of accommodation during their varsity years. The rationale is that this would provide the necessary basis for improving the design, policies and management of residence halls. Another research which have come quite close to the concept of this paper is Thomsen's study (2007). In her study she discusses about the influence of student housing architecture on their "residential satisfaction" and "feeling of a home" (p. 577). She conducted some semi-structured interviews with 12 students residing in selected housing projects. She found that perceived institutional character of accommodation is associated with feeling of home. In fact this institutional character reduces students' feeling of on-campus accommodation as home-like. Similarly the current study sought to understand the factors which improve the students' "sense of similarity to the house".

3. Method

There are many studies which have used the quantitative method in understanding students' housing (Khozaei et al 2010 (a), Amole 2009, Cross et al 2009). In this study the qualitative research method is adopted because it permitted a more focused research effort in comparison with the quantitative method. This research sought to describe a range of views about the similarities between the residence hall and the home rather than test specific hypotheses. In this study, generalization to wider populations was not as important as identifying the various perceptions of the students; hence, the purposive sample method was most appropriate.

Graduate female students were selected as there is a dearth of research that focuses on this group; the majority of previous studies on students' housing have concentrated on undergraduate students.

Eighteen (18) individual unstructured interviews were conducted with graduate students and they were purposively selected for this study. Other criteria used in the sampling process were their willingness to participate in the study, university year, age, education and occupational background and nationality. For those who were not willing to be interviewed, numbering 20 respondents, questionnaires with open-ended questions were distributed to them. Participants were contacted directly to schedule an interview time and location. The students were interviewed at a date, time, and location of their choice. The actual appointment was scheduled for an hour to allow for ample time for the interview. The interviews were held most of the time either in the students' room, the residence hall's meeting room or at a university food outlet. The researcher provided each participant with the informed consent form and reviewed the form with the participant before each interview. The researcher explained that she would be taking field notes throughout the study, in addition to using an audio recorder. The interviews started with the question "do you agree that you are more satisfied with a residence hall which is more similar to the home? Students who agreed to the proposition were then asked, "In your opinion, in what ways the residence hall is similar or dissimilar to the home and how can the residence hall be made similar to the home? On average, the length of each interview varied from 16 to 47 minutes. Participants who were interested in the result of the study were promised that they will be provided with a final report.

4. Data analysis

The content analysis was used for data analysis (Mayring, 2000). The transcripts of the interviews and answers to the open ended questionnaires were read several times to obtain a general sense of their opinions. Subsequently, the texts were analyzed using codes. The codes were grouped into categories depending on their similarities.

5. Findings

The results presented subsequently discuss the various dimensions or factors along which the residence hall and the home may be compared (similarities and differences). These discussions were based on the variety of responses given by the respondents. When the responses were coded and categorized, four themes emerged. These were *Physical facilities and Comfort; Security; Privacy; and Warmth and Friendly Environment*. The following sections deal with these themes. Fictitious names are used whenever direct quotes are used to maintain respondent confidentiality.

5.1 Physical facilities, and Comfort

The majority of students mentioned that a residence hall is like home when it is comfortable. According to them, being equipped with facilities like air conditioning system, good internet connection, adequate room size, adequate storage space, water tub in the room, private bath and toilet, were the indicators of a comfortable residence hall. They mentioned that they felt they are living at home, when a proper range of facilities are offered by the residence hall management. Somehow one of the students said that she would opt to use off-campus facilities instead of the residence hall ones.

I do not use the inside residence hall laundry, the reason is that it takes about two hours for me to wash my cloths inside the residence hall and sometimes I need to queue. To save my time, I prefer to wash my cloths in outside residence hall laundries. (Grace)

In addition the majority of the students believed that kitchen and cooking facilities are important attributes which make the living in residence hall more comfortable. The difficulties in adapting with local foods, ability to cook the traditional foods and saving money with cooking instead of buying foods, were mentioned as some of the reasons for expecting cooking facilities to be provided in the residence hall.

In terms of room size, students had different ideas: while some students said that the current room size is good enough for one person the others perceived their room as very small. Students mentioned they would be more satisfied if the size of the room was double the current size.

In the residence hall, every two students shared a toilet and bath. This type of sharing was perceived as both satisfactory and unsatisfactory by the students. Some students were totally satisfied with the idea of sharing bath room and toilet facilities. Others lamented that sharing brought about some problems. For example, they found it inconvenient when there were guests, or when the other student had a habit of using the bath for a long time. However, everyone agreed that twin-sharing basis was much better than having to share a common public toilet with a group of students.

"I am satisfied with sharing of my toilet with only one person. It is harder to live in a residence hall which group of people have to use public toilets" (Bintra)

When you are sharing a toilet and bath with only one person, it is very important that both of you have a similar background. For example I hate to keep the dirty cloths inside the bath, or I really can not stand to see dirty bath. (Iqbal)

Some students mentioned that having less responsibility makes the residence hall more similar to the home. Obviously this is highly related to students' background, life style and their home condition. Somehow living in a residence hall with lower responsibilities made them to perceive the residence hall as similarity to home.

"when I was a bachelor student, I didn't have much responsibilities in the house. I didn't know how much is the bill for water, electricity so on. Here in the residence hall the monthly fee covers other amounts like water, electricity etc. It is absolutely good, and when my room needs some repairmen I just call the in charge staffs and they quickly solve the problem. Honestly I am not interested to rent an apartment outside campus, because I will have lots of extra responsibilities" (Rosa)

In line with this idea, one of students mentioned that living in single room of a residence hall was better than sharing an apartment with a group of people.

When you are sharing a house with some other students, you must highly compromise with others. Cleanness of common spaces like kitchen, sitting room and toilets are very important. In comparison to residence halls which some maids have the responsibility of cleaning these spaces, in the house students must take the responsibility of house chores. (Josephine)

Modern and flexible furniture were also mentioned as contributing to a comfortable residence hall setting.

According to some of Muslim students, recreational facilities for female students have to be designed properly so that there is a greater level of visual privacy. For instance, they requested for an indoor swimming pool, located nearby the residence hall.

5.2 Security

Security was mentioned as one of the factors that could create the feeling like that of a home. One of the students explained about her experience of living with an undergraduate student when she was a Masters student.

"When I was a master student, I was living in a foreign country far away from home. The majority of students who were living in my residence hall were local undergraduate students. Almost all of the students were leaving the residence hall to visit their family at the weekends. Living almost alone for two days was a frightening experience". (Iqbal)

This lack of security can be explained by the locus of control. When this student felt less control over space she were more worried and dissatisfied with the security of residence hall. Surprisingly one of other students also had a similar experience. She was residing in a residence hall outside of the university campus when she was a master student.

"My residence hall was about 4 kilometer from my university which I was studying. It was located at the middle of a large garden and was enclosed with fence. From the beginning I was worried that why the fences are too short, because it was easy for strangers to come inside the residence hall yard. But other students said there never have been a rubbery or any other types of crime. I remember I was sharing my room with a local undergraduate student. At night I preferred not to go out of room, I was scared of using toilet at night but my roommate didn't have the same feeling. Finally I changed my residence hall and moved to a residence hall inside campus" (Melika)

This experience might suggest that perception of security differs among people with different backgrounds. This finding also supports the notion that living outside campus decreases the level of perceived security.

Let me see why the house is good because: you feel comfortable and feel secure in house. When you enter the house you know that somebody is inside the house and you are not alone. It is very important. You feel some body is there, like your father, your mother. Your mother is cooking in the kitchen, and you are in your own room, but you know she is there, and you know you are not alone (Sarah)

5.3 Privacy and Social Interaction

The most frequently mentioned attribute of residence hall that indicated a sense of similarity to home among students was privacy. The majority of students mentioned that they preferred to stay in single shared room even if the room was small. In response to the question why they preferred private rooms, they felt that lots of compromise was needed if they had to share rooms. This was particularly so because they believed that graduate research students did not have a specific study time. They needed the privacy to concentrate on their thesis writing.

I never want to live in a bigger room with double sharing because the privacy is very important among graduate research students. Imagine somebody else is in the room and she is going to listen to the music. Or her friends are going to come to our room and they are going to talk to each other. I can live in a smaller room than this but I don't prefer to share my room with somebody else. Sometimes I am studying until 4 AM, if I have a roommate in a specific time I have to switch off the lights. Graduate students by research don't have any specific study time. Imagine that about 10 pm I find a good article that is much related to my study, and I am going to finish it by 3 AM, but my roommate is going to sleep. Or sometimes I am tired and I am going to sleep but my roommate is going to study. It is hard to compromise and adopt with this situation. (Atika)

One of students explained the disadvantages of sharing an off-campus apartment and emphasized the lack of privacy in those places.

When I share my apartment with some others first of all I have less privacy than if I am staying in a single sharing room. There also I cannot easily invite my friends or my family members, because it might trouble the others. I might have some problems with the others in cleaning the common spaces like living room and kitchen. I need to highly compromise with others. But here in the residence hall I have my own privacy and beside I have good relationship with others. (Salma)

There are many studies which support the importance of privacy in student's residence hall (Baron et al 1976, Amole 2005, Walden et al 1981) and this finding is in line with these previous studies. To buttress this finding, some students mentioned that sometimes they needed to be alone and could not accept the presence of others in their room.

Some times that I am very busy with my works I really feel I need to be alone especially when I am under pressure for my dissertation. I cannot bear anybody else there. I wasn't like this, but over time I have changed. May be it is because I am a research student. I need to organize myself. (Adeline)

Some Muslim students also emphasized the importance of visual privacy in their room as well as public areas like corridors. One of students who was living on the ground floor said that there was less privacy achieved on the ground floor in comparison to the upper floors. Some others felt that a central community space with a high level of privacy was necessary to bring about a home-like similarity to the residence hall environment.

I wish there was a big central space at the residence hall, where we could have interaction with other international and local students..... we could see each other. We could take our cookies and sit there. At the moment, if I and my friends want to go and drink a cup of tea we must go to a near food court which belongs to another residence hall or any restaurant. But if we had such an introverted space here I could poor tea and take the tray of tea there. And we could drink it together without changing our informal clothes. Just like home" (Leila)

This remark reveals a very important notion that should be incorporated in the design of residence halls. The residence hall under study, like many others, had facilities such as a TV room, a meeting room and a study room where students gathered. But Leila's point of view leads us to think about a different type of space. She was demanding a space which had the attributes of "informality", "visual privacy", "introversion" and "large". All of these expressions imply that the designer should think again about the needs and requirements of female Muslim students. It is, thus, recommended that the same study be conducted for male students to find out their views for privacy in community spaces.

Not surprisingly another student from the Middle East mentioned the same need:

"If you want to make the residence hall like the home it must has a big courtyard that students can socialize in this area. We must feel it belongs to this residence hall and it is not a public yard". (Amani)

Some students believed that the residence hall must provide proper community spaces to make it similar to the home. They described home as a place with different types of spaces.

"I need my privacy, and I prefer to stay in single sharing room, but sometimes I need to talk to my friends. I wish there was a common space between some of rooms, may be three or four like a common balcony or a sitting room. (Jane)

The students did not think communal spaces were important for its own sake but because they felt that to be like a home, a residence hall had to provide the opportunity to be part of a community, family or group of friends. The students expressed the need for social interaction as evident in the last two responses.

5.4 Warm and Friendly environment

Another theme that emerged from the data was "friendly environment". The students believed a friendly environment would increase their sense of similarity to home.

The residence hall is like home when it has a friendly environment. I love colors, and these days I love orange! The residence hall must be full of colors..... I wish I could paint my own room. I wanted to paint it with orange color. Where the rooms wall have only one color, white, this homogeneity makes me to feel I am living in a residence hall. It is very formal, you know! When I compare it with my own house, my room was full of colors. There is something in the white color of residence hall which tells me you are stranger here! Or don't touch the walls! I don't know why! May be it is my first experience of living in residence hall. (Yani)

6. Discussion

Without doubt, the students compared the residence hall with the home very aptly and along many dimensions. They considered the residence hall as a dwelling and evaluated it along the dimensions of home. This implies that the home was a worthwhile basis of comparison. The students' expectations of the residence hall were based on their experiences of home. The emerging themes discussed in the last section are the evidence of this assertion. The themes which emerged were very similar to the themes by which the home has been described in the literature. The concepts of privacy, social interaction, security, warmth and physical facilities are some of the concepts used to describe home environments. They have also been the components of the home that have been well studied by researchers. For example the idea of privacy has been very central to the home (Tomohiro *et al*, 2005) and the results of this study showed that privacy is a very important phenomenon for the students. Just as in the literature, the students did not construe privacy as solitude only but as the control of social interaction. They expressed the need for the control of individual and group privacy as well as social interaction with others. Many other researchers have also shown the significance of safety and security in the home (Welsh *et al*, 2009) and this has also emerged as an important reason why students chose the hall of residence on the campus. All these suggest that when students evaluate their residences, they use the "lens" of the home. In addition, the results indicate that the residence hall is a dwelling which should be as closely related as possible to the home.

Other components usually associated with the home in the literature did not appear to have emerged as strongly as the identified four themes. These are the components of attachment (connectedness), order and identity. The reason for this may be the institutional nature of the residence hall. In addition, the temporary and transient nature of the students' as users of the halls may account for why the students do not expect to be connected or attached to the halls of residence.

The results of the study also show the multifaceted and interrelated nature of the concepts which describe the hall of residence. It was difficult to place some of the students' responses into themes. Many of the responses fitted into more than one theme. Indeed, the evaluation of the residence hall is just as multifaceted as the evaluation of the home. In this way, the home and the residence hall are quite similar.

Specific ways in which the students found their halls of residence similar to the home were identified. For example, their experiences in sharing facilities and the security of living in campus residence halls were mentioned as some of the aspects of their current living conditions which were similar to their home experiences. It was apparent that these aspects gave them satisfaction. However, with many more of the other aspects of the residence hall such as facilities for cooking, laundry, privacy, opportunities for social interaction and personalization the students experiences were not similar to their experiences in their homes. The indication therefore is that aspects of the residence hall in which the experiences of the students fell short of their experiences at home were sources of dissatisfaction and that those which were similar to the home were sources of satisfaction. What this implies is that designing and formulation policies for student residences need to attempt to recreate the home experience as much as possible to increase the satisfaction of the users.

Another significant finding from these results was that differences arising from the students' background characteristics were evident in their responses. This supports a lot of previous research (Gifford, 1997) which show that the characteristics of users are very important; however, it was not the goal of the study to identify which characteristics influenced the responses of the users. Since this was a qualitative study, the diversity of responses was more important. Nevertheless it is important to note that the students' background and previous experiences in the home is a significant issue.

In conclusion, the study has shown that, the residence hall and the home are quite comparable along some dimensions namely privacy and social interaction, security, physical facilities, comfortable environment, warmth and friendly environment. The presence or absence of these dimensions also suggests whether the users will be satisfied or dissatisfied with their residence halls.

Note

This paper is based on the first authors' data collected for her PhD thesis.

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