

EXPLORING SAFE SPACES IN ON-CAMPUS RESIDENCES: PERSPECTIVES OF BLACK AND RACIALIZED STUDENTS THROUGH AUTO-PHOTOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Understanding the experiences of Black and racialized students in on-campus residences is crucial, yet remains underexplored within Canadian higher education. This study employs auto-photography and photo-elicitation interview methods to examine the experiences of Black and racialized first-year students at the University of Waterloo, and to explore how on-campus residences can foster safe and inclusive spaces. Twenty participants contributed 234 photographs and 446 pages of interview transcripts. Thematic analysis revealed five overarching themes: The Intersection of Nature and Social Connections, The Importance of Connection in Creating a Sense of Belonging, Sense of Space and its Role in Well-Being and Academic Engagement, Equitable Living Spaces, and Covert Isolation. Findings highlight the role of safe spaces in promoting inclusion, well-being, and academic engagement, offering actionable insights for the University of Waterloo. This research contributes to the advancement of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies and practices within Canadian higher education on-campus living environments.

Keywords: safe spaces, equity, diversity, inclusion, EDI, Canada, Ontario, on-campus residences, auto-photography, photo-elicitation interviews

Résumé

Il est essentiel de comprendre les expériences des étudiantes et étudiants noirs et racisés dans les résidences universitaires, un sujet encore peu exploré dans le contexte de l'enseignement supérieur canadien. Cette étude a recours à l'auto-photographie et aux entrevues par photo-élicitation pour examiner les expériences d'étudiantes et d'étudiants noirs et racisés en première année à l'Université de Waterloo, et pour explorer comment les résidences universitaires peuvent offrir des espaces sûrs et inclusifs. Vingt participantes et participants ont fourni 234 photographies et 446 pages de transcriptions d'entrevues. L'analyse thématique a fait ressortir cinq thèmes principaux : l'intersection entre la nature et les liens sociaux; l'importance des liens pour créer un sentiment d'appartenance; la perception de l'espace et son impact sur le bien-être et l'engagement dans les études; des milieux de vie équitables; et l'isolement dissimulé. Les résultats

mettent en lumière le rôle des espaces sûrs dans la promotion de l'inclusion, du bien-être et de l'engagement dans les études, et offrent des pistes concrètes pour l'Université de Waterloo. Cette recherche contribue à l'avancement des politiques et pratiques en matière d'équité, de diversité et d'inclusion (EDI) dans les résidences universitaires canadiennes.

Mots-clés : Espaces sécuritaires, équité, diversité, inclusion, EDI, Canada, Ontario, résidences universitaires, auto-photographie, entretiens par photo-élicitation.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the needs of first-year university students is crucial, particularly in universities where students live and learn on campus (Peck et al., 2022). On-campus residences have great impacts on first-year students' sense of belonging and well-being, serving as their first experience living independently (Graham et al., 2018). For many, this transition involves adapting to a new environment or culture (Buckner et al., 2022; Gupta & Gomez, 2023). Residence design, programming, and communication can either foster or hinder a sense of belonging. Despite institutional efforts, Black and racialized students often encounter challenges or barriers that impede their full engagement and belonging (Harwood et al., 2012; Haynes, 2019; Johnson et al., 2007; Malette & Ismailzai, 2020; Oram et al., 2023).

Following George Floyd's death and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, higher education institutions renewed focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) (Campbell & Bourbonnais, 2023; Simonson et al., 2024). This focus has underscored the importance of understanding and improving the experiences of Black and racialized students, particularly within on-campus residences. While promoting EDI in higher education enhances student experiences and outcomes (Deanna et al., 2022), Canadian literature on the experiences of racialized students in on-campus residences remains scarce. Most existing scholarship originates from the United States (Boettcher & Holmes, 2021; Cheng & Chu, 2022; Foste & Irwin, 2023), with limited attention to the unique sociocultural, historical, and institutional contexts of Canadian universities.

This study addresses that gap by conducting an auto-photography case study to explore how Black and racialized students experience safe spaces within campus housing¹ at the University of Waterloo. The findings contribute to EDI discourse and inform policy and practice aimed at creating more inclusive on-campus living environments in Canadian higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Safe Spaces

The concept of "safe space" encompasses multiple dimensions and interpretations, influenced by cultural, political, and institutional contexts. In the Canadian higher education landscape, the meaning of safe spaces overlaps with the American context but also exhibits distinct differences due to variations in societal and institutional priorities. Broadly, "safe space" can be conceptualized in three ways.

First, safe spaces are described as environments (physical or virtual) where marginalized groups can feel a sense of protection, belonging, and inclusion within the broader fabric of society or an institution (Harpalani, 2017). This perspective emphasizes the necessity of fostering physical, emotional, and psychological safety for underrepresented communities, particularly in historically exclusionary spaces like universities.

1 Where the term "Campus Housing" appears in its capitalized form, it is referring to the university's Campus Housing department. All other usages of the term in its lowercased form ("campus housing") refer to the general concept of residence spaces (i.e., the dorms, buildings, and living spaces that the students inhabit).

Second, safe spaces are often debated in relation to freedom of expression, particularly in the United States. Here, some scholars argue that creating safe spaces exclusively for marginalized groups limits open discourse and free speech. This critique includes claims that such spaces: (1) “coddle” students and stifle academic rigor (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), (2) may be justifiable in private education systems but are inappropriate in public institutions (Bagus et al., 2023), and (3) create a victimhood culture (Campbell & Manning, 2018). This debate has been less pronounced in Canada (Lai, 2023), where institutions tend to prioritize balancing inclusivity with expression, guided by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Government of Canada, 1982), Canadian Human Rights Act (Government of Canada, 1985) and the Ontario government’s 2018 free speech mandate (Office of the Premier, 2018).

Third, some scholars propose an integrative approach, suggesting that universities should balance free speech with inclusivity. They use alternative terms, such as “brave spaces,” defined as environments

where students are encouraged to engage in serious, respectful, and empathetic discourse as part of their education. Campuses at large need to remain places where students learn to confront the uncomfortable and the unfamiliar and respond in ways that enable them to grow. (Palfrey, 2017, p. 30)

Other terms include “resilient places,” which support safety and bravery alongside a civic commitment to positive outcomes in the face of trauma (Gill, 2017, p. 202), and “contested spaces,” which refer to both disputed and collaborative environments (Ludlow, 2004). These frameworks encourage individuals to engage in challenging discussions while ensuring mutual respect and safety for participants.

However, Anderson (2021), in his epistemological analysis of the “safe space” concept, concluded that “the tension between safe spaces and the pursuit of truth is an illusion. Creating safe spaces is part of the pursuit of truth” (p. 307). Additionally, in her study analyzing 79

essays on the concept of safe spaces, Grimes (2020) reported that safe spaces, like codes or dialects, are understood uniquely within each group, with slight variations in interpretation and usage, but their core meanings remain universally recognizable. Similarly, Sam (2021) emphasized that both defining safe spaces and identifying those who need them are crucial as institutions develop related policies; in the absence of a clear definition, individuals will create their own interpretations to fill the void.

In this study, “safe space” is defined as any environment (physical or virtual) where Black and racialized residents feel welcomed, protected, and a sense of belonging. Within on-campus residences, this definition expands to include spaces that foster community engagement.

Safe Spaces and Residence Life

Residence halls are critical environments for fostering students’ sense of belonging and safety. Interactions with peers, residence staff, and academic advisors significantly shape these experiences (Garvey et al., 2018). However, Black and racialized students often face unique challenges in these spaces.

Black students report cultural exclusion, underrepresentation among residence staff, and racial microaggressions, which undermine their inclusion (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017). Harwood et al. (2012) highlight that racial microaggressions, such as slurs or dismissive responses from staff, exacerbate exclusion. For Black women, residence halls can be marked by dual burdens of hypervisibility and invisibility, with stereotypes further alienating them (Haynes, 2019).

These challenges impact how racialized students perceive safety and belonging in university settings. Johnson et al. (2007) found that first-year students of colour reported lower senses of belonging than their White peers, with supportive residence environments offering fewer benefits for multiracial students. Similarly, Garvey et al. (2018) observed that White women reported higher belonging levels compared to White men and students of colour, demonstrating the intersection of race and gender.

Despite these challenges, some factors enhance belonging. Students in Living Learning Communities² (LLCs) report higher belonging levels than those in non-LLCs (Garvey et al., 2018; Spanierman et al., 2013). Additionally, inclusive and supportive staff play a vital role in fostering belonging (Harwood et al., 2012; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017).

Hurtado et al. (2019) caution against treating students of colour as a homogeneous group, emphasizing variations across racial identities. In particular, Black students report a lower sense of safety and community, regardless of their living environments. The authors advocate for a cultural centre model within on-campus housing to enhance belonging for students of colour.

Garvey et al. (2018) further conceptualize belonging as a dynamic process rather than a static outcome. They argue that belonging is not a question of whether students “achieve” it but an ongoing negotiation, requiring institutions to cultivate evolving spaces of inclusion.

Research Gap and Relevance to the Canadian Context

Research on Black and racialized students' experiences in residence halls is limited, particularly in Canadian universities. While studies in the United States highlight racial microaggressions, cultural exclusion, and intersectional challenges, Canadian universities face distinct socio-political contexts that require further exploration.

This gap underscores the importance of this study, which addresses the need for empirical research on Canadian students' experiences of safety and belonging in campus residences. By employing an auto-photography approach, this research provides a student-led lens to capture nuanced experiences and visual narratives. The findings aim to advance understanding of

how marginalized students interpret and navigate the concept of “safe spaces” and to inform institutional policies and practices for creating more inclusive on-campus living environments.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) as a conceptual framework (American Psychological Association, 2021; Ferdman, 2013; Government of Canada, 1982), this study explores how EDI principles shape the lived experiences of Black and racialized students in on-campus residences. Principles of EDI in higher education (Government of Canada, 2019) guide our analysis of student-generated photos and reflections, emphasizing their sense of belonging, well-being, and inclusion. This inductive approach prioritizes students' perspectives and contributes to understanding safe spaces while informing strategies for inclusive campus environments.

EDI principles, whether explicitly implemented in policies or implicitly presented in campus culture, affect how students engage with their environment, peers, and academic life. For instance, inclusive practices in residence life, such as diverse programming, equitable representation in leadership, and proactive measures against discrimination, can foster a sense of belonging and well-being (Campbell, 2021; Campbell & Bourbonnais, 2023; Peck et al., 2022). Conversely, a lack of EDI initiatives can contribute to exclusion, microaggressions, or systemic inequities (Johnson et al., 2021; Sue et al., 2007). This framework critiques how institutional EDI commitments are enacted (or not) within residence life, highlighting both strengths and gaps.

The framework also shapes the research design by guiding the development of research questions centred on safe spaces from the perspectives of Black and racialized students and informing our use of auto-photography and photo-elicitation interviews to elicit authentic narratives. EDI principles further inform our analysis of how inclusion efforts—or their absence—are experienced.

To deepen the analysis, we integrate critical race theory (CRT), which underscores how race

2 Living Learning Communities (LLCs) can take different forms, but they all share an overarching goal: connecting students academically and socially while living in residence. In the context of this article, LLCs bring together students from the same program or faculty and offer structured academic and social programming.

and racism are embedded in societal structures, shaping individual experiences in pervasive ways (Rao, 2021). CRT centres the lived experiences of racialized communities and situates them within broader systems that maintain inequity (Gintova, 2023). By examining how dominant cultural norms within residence life may inadvertently reinforce exclusion, CRT complements EDI in identifying barriers to belonging. These frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for addressing the complexities of Black and racialized students' experiences and informing strategies for more inclusive campus environments.

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

Methods

This qualitative single-case study explored two research questions: (1) What are the experiences of Black and racialized students living in campus housing as reflected via their photos and narratives? and (2) How can the university's Campus Housing department create safe spaces in on-campus residences for Black and racialized students? Auto-photography and photo-elicitation interview methods were used to enrich data by providing participants opportunities to reflect on and communicate their experiences in ways that are meaningful to them.

Unlike other qualitative research methods, which may limit participants' ability to deeply process and articulate their experiences, auto-photography helps participants to engage in a reflective process. First, they consider their experience, capture it in a photograph, and then evaluate whether the image accurately represents their perspectives. As Glaw et al. (2017) noted, "visual images evoke deeper parts of human consciousness than words do" (p. 3). Auto-photography also facilitates the relationship between researchers and participants; it reduces power differentials by enabling participants to actively engage in the research and to produce and interpret data. This method provides researchers with a unique view into participants' worlds through participants' eyes (Noland, 2006).

Furthermore, the photo-elicitation interview generates deep information about the participant's feelings and perspectives and uncovers different layers of meaning, as this method evokes deep emotions, memories, and ideas (Balomenou & Garrod, 2016; Glaw et al., 2017; Noland, 2006).

We conducted thematic analysis using the seven-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). This approach allowed us to identify and analyze patterns within the data systematically. This study and all its materials have been reviewed and given ethics clearance ORE 44240.

Participants and Procedures

The University of Waterloo was selected for its institutional commitment to EDI, and its Campus Housing department initiated the research as part of a broader institutional direction. Using purposeful sampling, the study focused on Black and racialized first-year students residing in campus housing in the fall of 2022. Eligible participants were first-year residents who self-identified as Black, Indigenous, or people of colour.

An invitation email was sent to approximately 4,000 undergraduate first-year residents. Interested students completed a screening form, and from the pool of eligible respondents, a random sample of 20 participants was selected to ensure diversity in racial and ethnic background, residence building types (i.e., traditional style, suite style, apartment style), and academic programs.

All 20 participants received training on ethical considerations, photo protocol, and project logistics. They were instructed to take a minimum of 10 photos (most submitted up to 21). Participants received key documents including consent forms, an annotation worksheet to record photo details (i.e., date, time, place, title/description, and comments), and a photo-taking checklist that outlined 10 prompts related to residence experiences and belonging.

Finally, participants captured their photos during October and November of 2022. Photo-elicitation semi-structured interviews with all 20 participants were conducted from November to December of 2022. Each interview last-

ed between 60–90 minutes, depending on the number of photos and the depth of participants' responses. All interviews were held in one of the campus housing residences at a time convenient for both the participants and the researchers. The interviews were transcribed using NVivo software and reviewed verbatim by the principal investigator (first author) for accuracy. All participant names are pseudonyms reflecting self-identified gender.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility of our findings, we implemented several strategies. Data privacy and bias minimization were addressed by limiting access. The principal investigator had full access, while each co-author worked with no more than five participants, conducting their interviews and analyzing the corresponding photos and transcripts. This approach protected confidentiality and reduced interpretive bias. Member checking involved sharing verbatim transcripts with participants for accuracy, with clarifications sought as needed. We further validated our interpretations through a research exhibition, where participants' selected photos were grouped by theme, without revealing theme titles, and attendees were invited to infer the themes. The close alignment between their responses and our thematic analysis supported the credibility of the findings. Finally, triangulation was achieved through independent coding. Researchers coded their assigned transcripts separately, while the first author analyzed all 20 transcripts. Regular team meetings were held to refine codes and themes, with consistent patterns emerging across the dataset.

FINDINGS

Collectively, participants submitted a total of 234 photos and participated in 20 photo-elicitation interviews, resulting in 446 pages of transcripts. Using Braun and Clarke's (2013) seven-step thematic analysis, we identified over 1,500 codes, about 350 sub-themes, 15 themes, and five higher-level themes. Below, we present the five higher-level themes.

The Intersection of Nature and Social Connections

This theme illustrates how the natural environment within campus housing residences, such as the greenery and outdoor spaces, interacts with and influences social dynamics and connections. Participants consistently expressed how nature played a pivotal role in shaping their experiences, interactions, and coping mechanisms.

For example, in Figure 1, Sophia metaphorically draws a connection between nature's transformations and her own experiences, stating, "Even the change coming to university has been like a transition, and this tree is in transition as well. So, it's nice to be able to relate to a natural object as a reflection of human experiences." This connection fosters a sense of comfort as she recognizes that the challenges she faces are part of a transitional phase.

Figure 1

Sophia's Photo of Tree, Symbolizing Growth and Change



The natural environment serves as a backdrop for fostering community engagement. In Figure 2, Mia used her telescope to photograph the moon and reflected, “I took this photo of something just so far away from us, but it helped me connect with people around me, despite it being that far away.”

Figure 2

Mia’s Photo of the Moon, Illustrating Connection Through Nature



Beyond facilitating social dynamics, the natural environment became a source of support for students in navigating stress, study loads, and nostalgia. In Figure 3, Emma shared how the scenic walk from her residence to school served as a relief during stressful times, stating, “sometimes school does become stressful.... But, like, there are always things around to make it a little more manageable. So, like nature kind of makes it more manageable for me, like calms me down a little bit.”

Figure 3

Emma’s Photo of Nature, Reflecting Stress-Coping Strategies



The Importance of Connection in Creating a Sense of Belonging

This theme highlights the role of social environment, interpersonal relationships, and community engagement in shaping students’ sense of belonging in on-campus residences. Participants emphasized that support from Dons³ and peer leaders and interactions with faculty, staff, or fellow residents influenced their sense of belonging.

For example, in Figure 4, Charlotte emphasized how studying with friends positively impacted her sense of belonging: “I’ve met my

3 “Don” refers to a student staff member who lives in residence and supports students through community-building and on-call duties. The term is specific to a few Ontario universities and is elsewhere known as “residence assistant” or “residence life staff.”

friends from living in the same building as them, and I've gotten close with them! We do a lot of things together, studying being one of them. I felt like I really belonged." Similarly, James submitted a photo of the Science Living Learning Community symbol (Figure 5) and described attending events during his first weeks on campus, noting, "Extremely fun events, something I would never have had the opportunity to have

Figure 4

Charlotte's Photo of Herself and Her Friends Studying in Residence

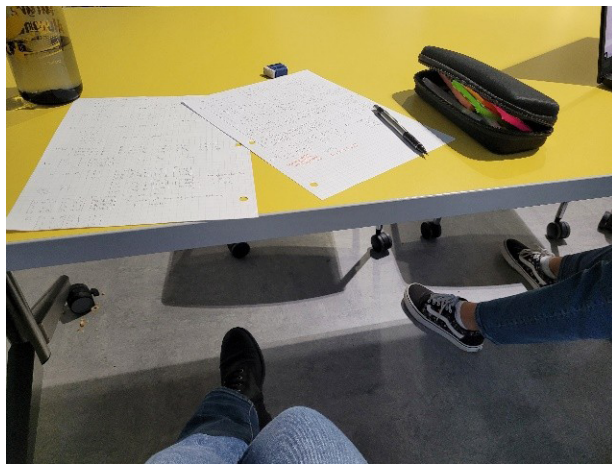
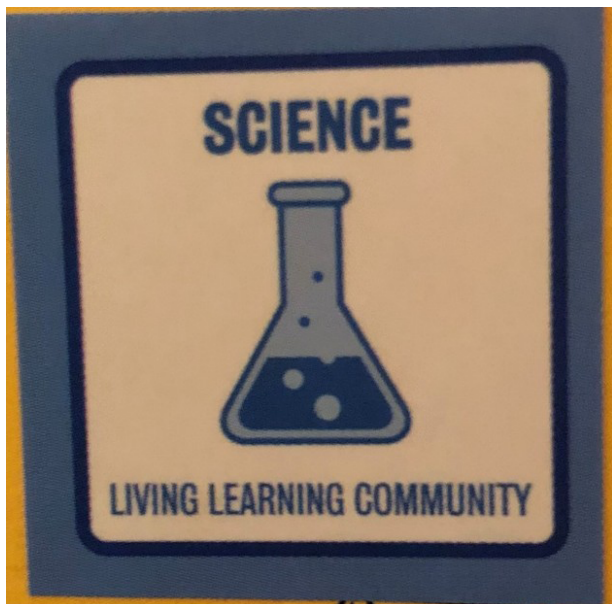


Figure 5

James's Photo of the Science Living Learning Community, Highlighting Academic Engage-

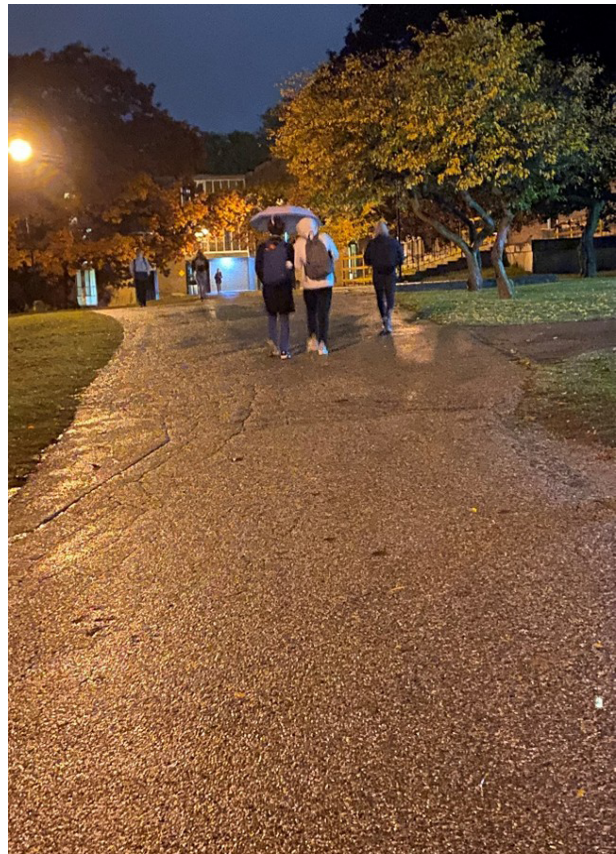


otherwise." These shared experiences, with peers and professors, highlight the importance of early social and academic connections in fostering a sense of belonging.

Conversely, students unable to establish relationships with others in their living space experienced loneliness and sadness, impacting their sense of belonging. Sophia, through a photo of friends sharing an umbrella (Figure 6) conveyed her sense of isolation. She reflected, "I felt pretty isolated, especially seeing two random people sharing an umbrella, which is kind of cute, but I wasn't really that distraught about it."

Figure 6

Sophia's Photo of Feeling Isolated



Community engagement also played a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging. Students found that social community events facilitated by Dons were vital in fostering connections and enhancing their sense of belonging. In Figure 7, James—reflecting on a pumpkin carving contest event—expressed, "these

events hosted by my Don are an extremely fun experience...not only did I help carve the pumpkin, but also got to socialize and become more familiar with the people on my floor.”

Figure 7

James's Photo of the Pumpkin Carving Contest, Illustrating a Sense of Belonging



Sense of Space and its Role in Well-Being and Academic Engagement

This theme captures a spectrum of experiences, encompassing both positive and negative dimensions of participants' sense of space. Participants consistently underlined the impact of the design, layout, and functionality of living spaces and common areas within campus housing on their well-being and academic success.

Participants noted the positive impact of personalizing their living spaces. The ability to decorate rooms, whether by hanging pictures of loved ones, rearranging furniture, or incorporating items with sentimental value, emerged as a significant contributor to overall well-being. For instance, Isabella shared a photo (Figure 8) of her decorated wall, titled “Freedom of Expression,” and explained, “I am able to decorate and

design my room to my liking, so that it reflects my personality and interests.”

Figure 8

Isabella's Photo of Her Decorated Wall: “Freedom of Expression”



However, when the layout of their room or their building was not pleasing, it caused them to feel that they had lost the ability to consider it their own. Harper captured a photo (Figure 9) of her room ceiling, expressing her dissatisfaction: “It’s a photo of my ceiling. There’s a pipe that comes out. There are wires. There’s like a sprinkler, I think...this isn’t completely able to be my home or somewhere that I can completely feel at home.”

Figure 9

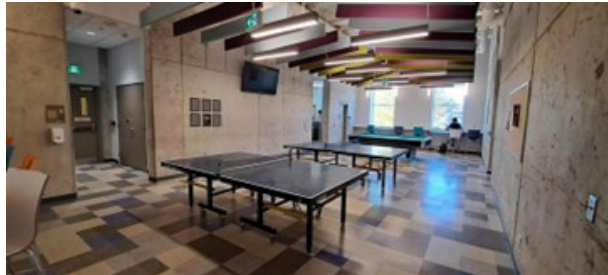
Harper's Photo of Her Ceiling, Illustrating Her Sense of Space



Furthermore, communal spaces (i.e., study rooms, lounges, common areas) played a pivotal role in participants' experiences. Daniel, in his picture of a grand common space (Figure 10) described it as "an example of a good academic community interaction."

Figure 10

Daniel's Photo of Common Space, Highlighting Community Interaction



Additionally, the creation of purpose-specific spaces, such as a piano room and a multifunction room, showcased the positive impact of shared facilities on residents' well-being. For example, Emma expressed her excitement about the piano room, saying: "I'm going to play the piano and also just because the piano is something that I enjoy. I think it's just nice that they have that inside the residence for people who do enjoy it."

One final aspect of how students make sense of their living spaces is their perception of safety. Participants reported feeling safe in their residences due to the presence of security cameras, campus security vehicles, secure door locks, and floor-specific access systems that restrict entry to residents only.

Equitable Living Spaces

This theme reflects participants' perceptions of inequity in residence amenities and how these perceptions shaped their experiences. Our findings illustrate that variations in room facilities and common areas can contribute to a sense of inequity among residents.

Emma, for example, compared lounges across residence quads and felt disheartened by the discrepancies. She photographed the

South Quad's lounge (Figure 11) and remarked: "It does feel like almost neglect, like you ended up in the West...or the West Quad or the North Quad, so you don't get the nice lounges." Similarly, Emily's experience on a co-ed floor raised concerns about the accessibility of amenities, especially the location of the lounge on the male side, which posed inconveniences, discomfort, and feelings of unsafety for female residents. These differences in lounge quality and accessibility exemplify how the layout and condition of shared spaces influence residents' sense of comfort and safety.

Figure 11

Emma's Photo of South Lounge, Highlighting Space Differences



Additionally, participants expressed reservations about the shower rooms in their building, where the lack of doors and privacy heightened feelings of vulnerability. For example, through her photo (Figure 12), Isabella stated, "you have a stall to use a toilet, why would you not have like a stall with the lock on it to shower?"

Because personally, I would think you're more exposed even if you are showering."

Figure 12

Isabella's Photo Highlighting Privacy Concerns in Shared Shower Rooms



Covert Isolation

The covert isolation theme refers to the unintended consequences that can arise within environments perceived as inclusive. Despite diversity, Black and racialized participants living in separate dorms experienced a form of unwanted, self-imposed isolation. Despite the absence of explicit problems, they are hesitant to initiate conversations due to apprehension.

For example, Ava's sense of loneliness (Figure 13) stemmed from the absence of a roommate and the presence of already-established, close-knit groups among her floormates. Describing her feelings, she said: "It felt a lot like everyone was just confined to their room and no one wanted to, like, just say hi in the hallway. Everyone was kind of just trying to get somewhere without acknowledging somebody else's presence."

Figure 13

Ava's Photo of Feeling Lonely



Similarly, Olivia captured a photo (Figure 14) expressing gratitude for a staff member who consistently greeted her, highlighting how small gestures can foster a sense of belonging. She explained:

Unfortunately, I was not able to take a picture with this person, but she is a member of the campus's ancillary staff who, no matter where or when I pass her, she always greets me with a smile or simple "good morning." Simple habits like these are an incremental part of Caribbean culture. Small things like this provide a sense of belonging and, although she may not have known it, her amiability makes my day.

Participants faced challenges in configuring themselves within a diverse community. For example, Harper creatively and metaphorically conveyed her feeling of not fitting in by photographing a shoe rack (Figure 15). She noted,

When I was looking at it, I noticed that the shoes don't all fit on there. There's like one that kind of goes off. Even changing the orientation doesn't make it fit...I kind of wanted to show what I feel like even when I'm trying to configure myself; there's ways that I won't exactly fit in with my community just because we have a lot of differences.

Figure 14

Olivia's Photo of Ancillary Staff Tools, Reflecting Isolation and Appreciation

**Figure 15**

Harper's Photo of Shoe Rack Reflecting the Feeling of Not Fitting In

**Figure 16**

Charlotte's Photo of Roommate's Decorations Reflecting Feelings of Exclusion



Similarly, the difficulty in connecting with roommates due to differences emerged as another challenge faced by students. Charlotte's photo (Figure 16) reflects her feeling of being left out, sharing,

It was my roommate's birthday a little before the photo was taken and they left the decorations up, which is totally fine, but I wasn't there to celebrate it...I just felt a tiny bit sad, but I'm glad they had a good time.

She further explained, "I'm different from them, and it's hard to connect with them sometimes."

Finally, concerns about underutilized common spaces affecting participants' feelings of isolation were also voiced. They highlighted that when communal areas are neglected or infrequently used, they lose their social function and instead reinforce disconnection among residents.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences of Black and racialized students regarding their perspectives on safe spaces in on-campus residences. Five key themes below emerged, reflecting these perspectives.

The Intersection of Nature and Social Connections

This theme highlights how natural environments within on-campus residences contribute to students' interpersonal relationships, coping, and overall well-being. Nature served as a source of comfort for managing stress, study loads, and nostalgia. These findings align with prior studies. Foellmer et al. (2021) reported that green spaces promote detachment from stress, enhance well-being by evoking positive emotions, and serve as sites of social inclusion. Similarly, Thompson et al. (2023) found that students in green spaces reported a significantly more positive sense of belonging compared to those in non-green campus spaces. Harwood et al. (2012) also emphasized the role of campus design in fostering belonging among marginalized groups. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of integrating green spaces and intentional layouts in residence planning. Student affairs professionals can also leverage outdoor spaces for programming to foster student engagement beyond residence halls. Natural elements in design can simultaneously support well-being and interpersonal interaction.

The Importance of Connection in Creating a Sense of Belonging

Participants emphasized that supportive environments, interpersonal connections, and community engagement foster a sense of belonging. Friendships, especially those formed early, were key to positive well-being and connectedness. Early interventions, such as structured events and icebreakers, can play a pivotal role in fostering bonds. Community meetings, though potentially impactful, were underused. Reimagining these meetings with a focus on inclusivity and engagement could address this gap.

Connections with friends, residence Dons, peer leaders, staff, and fellow residents contributed to students' sense of inclusion. Those who felt isolated often turned to nature or sought connections outside their residences, emphasizing the value of residence hall programming that encourages informal peer interactions. This is consistent with Spanierman et al. (2013), who found that making friends was a key motivator for choosing on-campus housing. Additionally, participants highlighted the critical role of residence Dons in creating welcoming and inclusive spaces. This emphasizes the need to invest in Dons through professional development opportunities to strengthen their ability to support student well-being. Living Learning Communities (LLCs) also emerged as beneficial, supporting both academic success and well-being. As Spanierman et al. (2013) noted, LLC students experienced greater sense of belonging and benefits such as social and academic support, leadership development, and multicultural experiences. This reinforces the importance of LLCs in enhancing students' residence experiences. Moreover, Johnson et al. (2007) highlighted disparities in belonging between racialized and White students, reinforcing the need for targeted supports. Socially anxious or shy students faced challenges in initiating interactions; participants suggested targeted programming or peer mentorship to support them. This aligns with broader findings that social support and inclusive practices are critical for creating a supportive environment.

Sense of Space and its Role in Well-Being and Academic Engagement

Participants highlighted that their living environment shaped both their well-being and academic success. The ability to personalize and decorate their rooms contributed to feeling at home and a sense of belonging. This aligns with Samura et al. (2021), where 72% of participants reported feeling comfortable in their bedrooms due to the ability to personalize their spaces and create privacy.

Communal spaces, such as study rooms, lounges, and common areas, also played a pivotal role. However, participants indicated these spaces were underutilized by residents, highlighting the need for housing professionals to develop strategies for enhancing their use. These strategies could include designing programs that facilitate interaction and building relationships within these spaces. Haynes (2019) further supports this by demonstrating how spatial design can influence interactions and reduce cultural barriers.

Equitable Living Spaces

Participants emphasized the need to address disparities in residence environments. Perceived inequity in room quality and shared spaces often led to discomfort and reduced students' ability to engage academically. These findings highlight the need for university housing professionals to prioritize equitable living conditions, ensuring all students have access to comparable facilities and resources. Additionally, concerns about the placement and accessibility of shared coed amenities, such as lounges or washrooms, revealed that these designs sometimes created discomfort or a lack of safety for certain students. Higher education and student affairs professionals need to incorporate student feedback in residence planning and improvements and consider student-specific needs related to privacy, safety, and cultural or gender-based preferences. Hurtado et al. (2019) highlight structural inequities in residence environments, reinforcing the necessity for intentional efforts to create equity-driven practices.

Covert Isolation

This theme highlights the unintended, self-imposed loneliness experienced by some participants, often stemming from the dynamics of close-knit student groups. While participants did not deliberately isolate themselves, they often felt excluded or unable to break into already-established social circles within their residences. This exclusion led to feelings of loneliness and invisibility, which were not necessarily recognized by others.

Participants described how the tight-knit groups within their residence halls often formed around shared cultural or linguistic backgrounds, making it challenging for those outside these groups to feel included.

Participants expressed a hesitation to engage with peers from other groups due to fear or apprehension. This form of isolation highlights a critical challenge within residences: the gap between creating physically inclusive spaces and fostering genuine social inclusivity. Participants highlighted the importance of small, meaningful gestures, such as being greeted by peers or residence staff, in fostering a sense of belonging. This aligns with Garvey et al. (2018), who noted that inclusive connections often stem from simple acknowledgements that foster visibility. However, some students described the culture within their residences as lacking inclusivity and authenticity, with Black students, international students, and Canadian citizens raised abroad particularly reporting feelings of isolation.

This finding aligns with Hotchkins and Dancy (2017), who emphasized the role of cultural competency in residence staff to mitigate feelings of isolation. Additionally, Gupta and Gomez (2023) and Buckner et al. (2022) highlight the lack of focus on international students within Canadian EDI initiatives. The findings suggest that addressing covert isolation requires more than physical integration; it demands intentional efforts to build bridges across diverse groups through structured programs and dialogues that encourage meaningful interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the multifaceted nature of creating safe and inclusive spaces in university residences for Black and racialized students. While friendship and social connection are central to fostering belonging, barriers such as apprehension in initiating interactions and inequitable living conditions remain. These challenges emphasize the need for early and intentional interventions, such as rethinking community meetings and supporting shy or socially anxious students to cultivate connections.

Participants shared diverse perspectives on what makes a space feel safe and inclusive. For some, safety meant access to multifaith rooms, piano rooms, or varied programming to cater to individual needs. Others emphasized the importance of cultural education to foster understanding within shared living environments. The presence of residence Dons and front desk staff offered reassurance to some, while others called for rules that safeguard freedom of speech and promote mutual respect.

Equitable living spaces and inclusive design are foundational to creating environments where all students feel valued. However, such strategies must be critically evaluated to avoid overlooking privacy, safety, and cultural or gender-based needs. Natural elements and first impressions shape perceptions of inclusion and stress the need for holistic approaches to residence design. Still, the persistence of covert isolation demonstrates that even in seemingly inclusive spaces, unspoken divisions can hinder genuine connection. To address these gaps, universities must move beyond physical infrastructure and invest in programming that promotes dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect among diverse groups. By addressing these subtle barriers, institutions can create on-campus residences that truly reflect equity, diversity, and inclusion.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This qualitative case study, conducted at a single university with 20 participants, offers valuable insights but lacks generalizability. Although efforts were made to include a diverse sample, no major differences emerged across participants. However, 80% of Black participants reported feelings of loneliness, suggesting an area for further exploration with a larger sample.

A significant limitation was the absence of Indigenous student participants. Despite initial plans, no Indigenous students joined the study, raising questions about whether this was due to a small population in residences or other barriers to participation. Based on prior research ex-

periences, Indigenous student engagement is often limited for reasons that are not fully understood. Future research should focus on strategies to involve Indigenous students, such as meeting them in familiar spaces and addressing potential barriers to participation.

The study did not examine how intersecting identities, such as gender, religion, or socio-economic status, shape safe space experiences. Including White students and examining cost-related barriers to equitable living conditions could broaden understanding and inform residence policy and dynamics. The persistence of covert isolation suggests the need to examine its impact on shy or socially anxious racialized students, an understudied intersection in current literature. Research in this area could inform interventions to better support connection and inclusion.

Expanding research across institutions would reveal how policy and design shape perceptions of safety and inclusion. Longitudinal studies could examine links between residence experiences, academic outcomes, and well-being. Evaluating initiatives, such as Living Learning Communities (LLCs) and cultural competency training, would offer valuable insights into their role in fostering belonging.

Finally, participants shared that the auto-photography method gave them a chance to be creative, often leading to metaphorical images that captured their experiences in unique ways. It was evident to us that two almost identical pictures could convey completely different meanings. The process also made them more aware of their surroundings and provided space for reflection. Many enjoyed and appreciated being part of the research, as it allowed them to gain new insights into their own experiences. While valuable, this method depends on thorough participant preparation and guidance. Future use of this method should include training, checklists, and ongoing support to ensure photo relevance and participant engagement.

ACTION TAKEN

This study deepened the understanding of Black and racialized students' experiences in Cana-

dian on-campus residences and emphasized applying findings to practice. We shared results broadly, particularly within the University of Waterloo's Campus Housing community, where the research was conducted.

In response, the lead author developed tailored recommendations for different Campus Housing business units and met with managers to discuss them. These meetings invited feedback on whether the recommendations were new, feasible, and actionable, giving each team space to reflect on how they might address these issues, even if they had been raised before but not yet acted upon.

As a result, several key initiatives were implemented. One of the most notable outcomes was the creation of specific programming designed to foster an inclusive and safe space for international students. Additionally, renovations were made to improve the living spaces, such as replacing shower curtains with doors in shared bathrooms to enhance privacy and renovating lounges in the West and North Quads to promote equitable living spaces. Trees were also planted along the pathway from the residences to the main campus, providing a welcoming and calming environment for students. Figures 17 and 18 show "before" and "after" comparisons.

Figure 17

Responding to Participants' Feedback: Renovating Lounges



Figure 18

Responding to Participants' Feedback: Shower Door Added



Overall, this research directly contributed to building more inclusive, equitable, and safe living environments, demonstrating the power of research-informed action in improving student life.

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