



Far From Home: Personalization in College Dorms

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Research Questions

Why do college students choose to decorate their dorms?

How do they go about decorating / personalizing a space?

What does this mean for their conceptualizations of home?



Literature

- Previous studies in college dorms:
 - The issue of privacy and personal space (Wode 2018 ; Kaya and Weber 2003)
 - Commodification of privacy (Poria and Oppewal 2019)
 - Students need to mediate under restrictions of universities (Thomsen 2007)
- Personalization of Space:
 - Important for mood, activeness, and sense of belonging (Dazkir 2008)
 - Material property as a way to convey identity (Hart 2007)
- Conceptualization of home:
 - Tethered to personal relationships rather than objects (Samura 2018)
 - Persons and places play large role (Vanzella-Yang 2019)



Methodology

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD - RECRUITMENT METHODS - DATA COLLECTION - SAMPLE
- INITIAL CONCERNS -



Ethnographic Field

- Current full-time students
 - Living on campus
 - Including Suite and Apartment style residence halls (as of fall 2019).
- The university consists of about 70% females and 30% males and has the following ethnic/cultural breakdown:
 - 62.77% White
 - 29.5% Black/African American
 - 4.88% Latino/Hispanic
 - 3.95% International
 - 1.41% Asian
 - 0.31% American Indian



Data Collection

- Students completed an online form showing interest in participation.
 - They were then contacted to schedule an interview.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the student's room consisting of:
 - A tour of the space
 - Answering questions about privacy, impact of the university, sense of home, and personalization.
 - Taking pictures of key items and important spaces in the room.



Our Sample

Conducted a total of 8 interviews with our participants.

Table 1: Demographic Data of Sample

Participants (N=8)	Sex/Gender	Race	Student Classification	Residence Hall Type
Ana	Female	White	Senior	Apartment
Chad Star	Female	White	Senior	Apartment
Claire	Female	White	Junior	Apartment
Clementine	Female	White	Senior	Apartment
Mallard	Female	White	Senior	Apartment
<u>TeeTee</u>	Female	African American	Sophomore	Suite
Jasper	Male	White	Sophomore (Transfer)	Suite
Jonathan	Nonbinary	White	Junior	Suite



Concerns:

1. There was a lack of gender and race variety among participants.
2. Roommate's of participants
 - How do we handle collecting consent in the case of a roommate being present?
3. Photographs of dorms:
 - Pressure to allow us to take photos

Solutions:

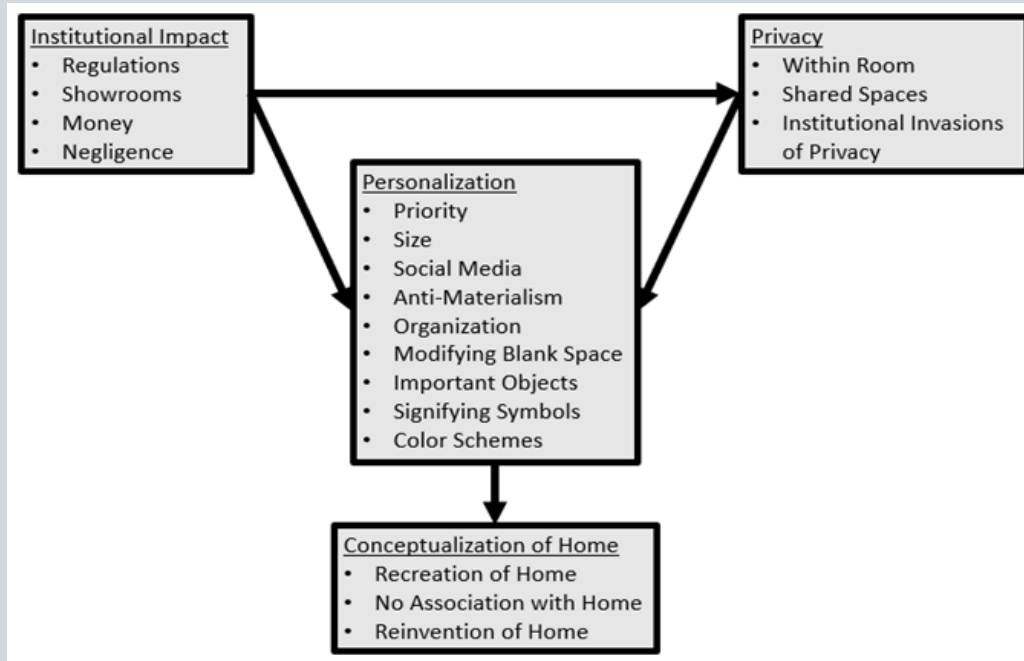
1. The university population itself is predominantly white and female, which is reflected in our sample.
2. We collected an additional consent form for the roommate of the participant, if present.
3. If a photo included any identifying materials, those identifying pieces were edited out to protect our participants' identities.



Findings and Analysis

PRIVACY - INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT - SENSE OF HOME - PERSONALIZATION

Coding Scheme





Privacy

PRIVACY WITHIN THE ROOM - NAVIGATION OF SHARED SPACE
- INSTITUTIONAL INVASIONS OF PRIVACY -



Privacy Within the Room

- Those living in suite style residence halls received less privacy within their room than those living in an apartment style residence hall.

"It's not the worst! I don't often think about it because we don't interact too often for it to be annoying."

- Jonathan, Suite Resident

"...the study rooms right there. There's couches right there if he's on like a discord call or whatever I can go outside and just uh so that he has so he's talking and I can go do other stuff." - Jasper, Suite Resident

"There's definitely a lot more privacy. I lived in (Hall Style Residence Hall), where I literally slept next to someone... Which is pretty awkward you know? You kind of have to have a relationship with them but here, you know (here) I get to close my door. I can lock my own door. I have the privacy of you know being in here by myself, which I definitely did not have when I lived in (Hall Style Residence Hall)." - Claire, Apartment Resident



Navigation of Shared Space

- Participants across both residence hall types expressed the importance of communication over the use of shared spaces.

“You really just have to communicate with your roommate and um make sure that everything you’re doing in the shared space is okay.”

- Clem, Apartment Resident

“I have to think about, uh, being silent or being loud or light fixtures, and um, remember to, uh ... Like, like I was alone in a room last semester, so I could, like, spread out and use all the space. You’re not supposed to but I did it anyway. Um, and I didn’t have to worry about [it].”

- Jonathan, Suite Resident

- Apartment style halls can be isolating if there is a lack of communication between roommates.

Chad Star shared her experience with this situation describing it as:

“Sort of lonely and sad, ‘cause when you’re sharing a common room with roommates that you aren’t already friends with, you don’t ever wanna go out there, and so the common room is like totally unused.”



Institutional Invasions of Privacy

Though the apartment style residence halls seem to provide the most privacy when it comes to roommates, they face institutional invasions on their privacy. They felt their privacy is invaded by monthly health and safety inspections. One participant, Mallard, described an experience where she felt like her privacy is being invaded:

“Overall ... I feel like I have a lot of privacy in here if I want it. And I just have to shut my door to do whatever. Room inspections are a different story.”

“It’s 3 o’ clock in the afternoon and I’m taking a nap. And a room inspection comes in, well now I have to like go and do whatever, because you decided you have to come do a room inspection.”



Institutional Impact

SHOWROOMS AND CATALOGS - RULES AND REGULATIONS
- INSTITUTIONAL NEGLECT -



Showrooms and Catalogs

Students did not make much use of the university provided showrooms and catalogs for buying sheets and other room necessities. Only one participant, Jonathan, used them to buy his sheets.

Clem described her experiences trying to get a look at the showroom in a hall style residence hall:

“No you can’t go in there. No, I can’t show you the showroom, no I can’t give you the key for you to go look.”

Chad Star also described her experience with the showrooms, but ultimately decided to not take any decoration inspiration from them. She also would find out later on that the university has different styles of residence halls, not just hall style buildings:

“The only time I saw Winthrop before actually moving in was for orientation. Um, because I didn’t do like a campus...Tour, yeah. Um. And so the only place I saw was [Hall Style Hall], which is the exact same as [Other Hall Style], and so my expectations were the same as what I got, so. Honestly, I was like, ‘Whoa, there are nicer ones? Wait what?!’ Which was every other dorm basically.”



Rules and Regulations

The university puts rules and regulations into place to ensure the safety of not only the students but the rooms themselves as well. One way they do this is by enforcing the use of Command Hooks, which do not damage the walls.

“It makes it easier if I ever do want to rearrange the room, or I need to get out in a snap, I don’t have to worry about ripping nails out of the wall or whatever. I can just grab things and run out if something happens.” - Ana, Apartment Resident

“It just- it gets expensive trying to find other alternatives when you know I could just get a tack or a screw or something like that or even just a small little nail and put it in the wall and I know its going to stay. Instead I gotta like play the game of Are my command hooks going to fall off the wall today.” - Clem, Apartment Resident

Some students opt to break those rules and regulations, however:

“I like that window, um, first of all, I... took the... blocker thing off the window so I can open it all the way. Uh... And that’s good! Because then you can just, like, basically stick your whole body out the window from the bed and still be laying on the bed.” - Chad Star, Apartment Resident

Institutional Negligence

An example of this comes from the buildings themselves and the university's lack of maintenance.

Jonathan described how the air conditioning system is problematic and is not *“able to decide whether or not it's heat or cold.”*

The window in Chad Star's room is actually coming out of the sill, allowing for air to constantly come in from outside, which becomes more of a problem as it gets colder.



There are a great deal of inconsistencies in the enforcing of rules between university officials. Ana described her experience with these inconsistencies, relating to health and safety inspections:

“We called facilities management last year for our bathtub because it wasn't draining, and facilities management took a picture of our tub and showed it to the RLC because he thought it was nasty! And so, we got a nasty email from the RLC saying, ‘You need to clean this up in the next 24 hours our we're gonna have fines for you!’ It was the middle of finals week, and our RA had never brought that concern up to us! Ever! What in the world?!”



Sense of Home

RECREATING HOME - NO ASSOCIATION WITH HOME - REINVENTION OF HOME

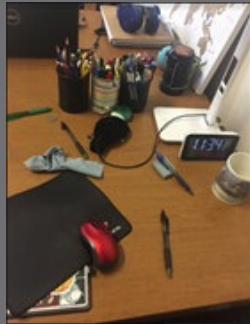


Recreating Home

The students who recreated home were attempting to find a sense of normalcy in college or attempting to connect to the close bond they have to home.

Jonathan set up his desk in the same way he sets up his desk at home:

“The lamp and clock on the right side and... books on the left side.”



Claire tried to make her room homey to keep her close connection to home, even if she is not close by proximity:

“I like being reminded of you know the people at home and the memories and that kind of thing because you can't- I'm 2 hours away from home so I can't always be you know calling or texting everyone so the pictures are nice reminder.”



No Association with Home

The students who did not try to associate their room with home mostly did so out of convenience.

“Living in a dorm I don't try to decorate it too much because then at the end of the year I'm gonna have to take this stuff down anyway.” - TeeTee, Suite Resident

“I don't want to spend the time making it so much like an actual home. I need to be able to pack it up and leave within two hours.” - Jonathan, Suite Resident

The exception of this is Clem, who told us about her decision to make her room nothing like her room at home:

“I wasn't really going for like a home away from home feel Like I was just trying to keep it- keep it more separate. Because if I made this like home then I would not miss home and want to go home. You know other than my parents and I miss my mom. Um but this just gives me like two different places I can be comfortable in you know? If I'm at home and I miss school, then I'll come back to school.”



Reinvention of Home

Our participants who tried to reinvent home did not have close connections to home or were trying to use college as a chance to reinvent themselves as well.

Claire had shared a room with her sister making it difficult to *“distinguish between you know what is my style and what is my sister’s style.”*

Ana did not have strong ties to her home and is trying to separate herself from them:

“My family also just always asked too much, and they would just. Set these expectations for me, and when I would achieve them, they would show it off to others like I was more a trophy than I was their child. And that really doesn’t resonate with me at all. And so, as I’ve grown up, it’s been a lot of me trying to figure out how to fit them into my life without giving them too much power over my mind and who I’ve become. So I’ve become and grown into who I am, I feel like, despite what I’ve grown up with them.”



Personalization

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALIZATION - ORGANIZATION - DECORATION

Importance of Personalization

Everyone who participated in this study put some sort of priority on decorating. Nobody had a completely blank room:

Jonathan described his room as *“utilitarian.”*

Ana did not like her room to feel cluttered because it:

“Gives me peace, and it lets me know that I can always add more if I want to, but that I don’t have to, and so that it’s not so overwhelming for me.”

Claire decorated her room with sentimentality in mind. She made sure to hang up photos that remind her of home and art that she has made that makes her happy.





Organization

The size and structure of the rooms plays a role in how the room is organized.

Claire described how the closet location and bulky furniture made the space “awkward” and felt very small.

Jasper felt the opposite:

“I lived on a second story it's basically like a loft so the only place that I could stand up straight is the very middle of my room cause the roof is on both sides... um [pause] but [pause] so I can't really put anything on my walls usually.”

Clem explained her organization of space:

“To make the room feel even bigger, um I don't want like all the white blank wall space, so I have all my tapestries up which is really nice.”

She also mentioned her efforts to keep everything organized, citing her calendar and dresser as examples of this:

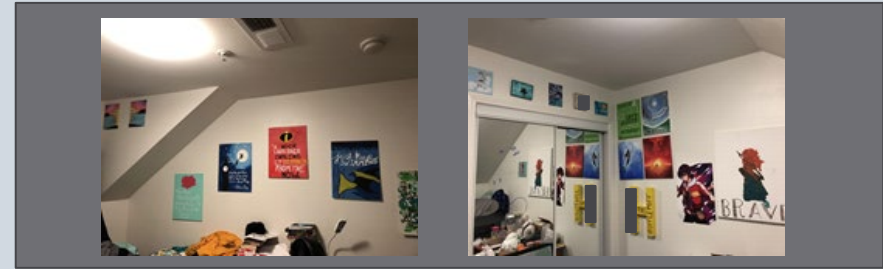
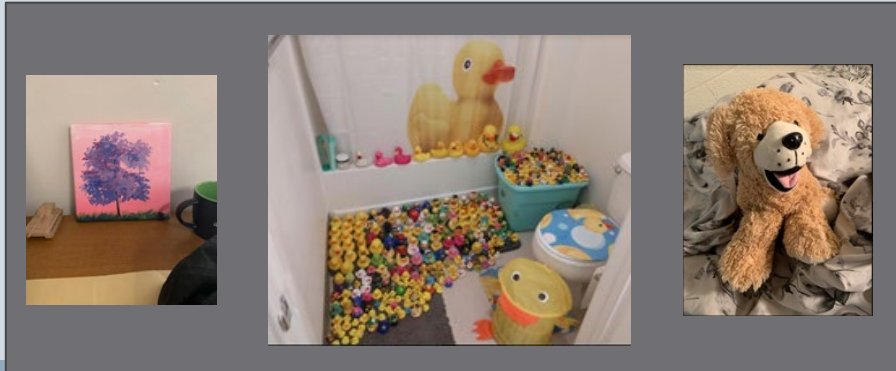




Decoration

Important Objects and Symbols were prevalent throughout the rooms that reflected their identity in some way. Clem and Claire had elephants in their room, Jonathan and Ana had fandom memorabilia, Chad Star had stars, Mallard had her rubber ducks, Jasper had a tree painting, and TeeTee had her stuffed dog.

Mallard and Ana both put emphasis on decorating their walls with items that had sentimental value to represent their relationships with loved ones:





Conclusions

- The room type that a student lives in plays the biggest role in how much privacy they receive.
- Institutional impacts are mostly felt when it comes to regulations and where the university's involvement was insufficient.
- Decoration was more prominent in female rooms than males. Though everyone decorated their space in some way.
- Students' conceptualization of home comes from how they personalize their space, which heavily reflects the representation of their identity rather than simply creating an aesthetically pleasing room.



Limitations and Recommendations

Limitations:

- Sample
- Data comes from one small liberal arts university in the southeast.

Future Research:

- Larger and more well-rounded sample in regards to hall style, gender, and race.
- Possibly use different universities to test the generalizability of our results.