

Making home in floating: living experiences and homemaking practices of international students in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Housing crisis in the Netherlands affects not only the house-seeking process, but also the living experience during inhabiting. Using Groningen's international students as a case study, this research aims to uncover often-overlooked practices and experiences related to homemaking within student rental housing. Within the expanded framework inspired by Eghbali, the study delves into three homemaking aspects -- institutional, material, and societal. The emotional facet of living experience is encapsulated by the concept of "ontological security". Empirical findings from qualitative interviews demonstrate that prevailing housing policies and selection processes have a cumulative negative impact on international students in the Netherlands. The temporariness enhanced by spatial constraints and uncertainties hampers homemaking endeavors. Moreover, daily interactions with roommates and potential guests significantly influence ontological security, aligning with previous research. Importantly, this study reveals that local communities also play a pivotal role in aiding international students in creating a sense of home.

Keywords: international students; students' housing; homemaking; ontological security

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

With the huge flow of students' (im)migration, Dutch cities are currently facing an exacerbated housing distribution issue, encountered with both quantitative shortage and qualitative deficiency (Nijënstein et al., 2015). Conflicts of student housing are especially urgent in a city like Groningen where over 17% of residents are students (Basis Monitor Groningen, 2022). These students often face challenges in navigating the housing market and finding suitable rental accommodations. (Fang et al., 2021).

Despite all the obstacles that students are facing in rental housing markets, international students as a vulnerable group are especially suffering from the unequal competing position compared to local students (Fang et al., 2021; Boccagni et al., 2022). Whether or not international students have sufficient financial resources, they are considered to be a socially and culturally disadvantaged group when looking for housing (O'Connor, 2017; Calvo, 2018). On one hand, they are lacking the social networks which are crucial in searching for housing at the beginning stage; on the other hand, language barriers and limited local experience may result in the "culturally incompatible" situation with the local housing contexts (Fang et al., 2021). Ethnic discrimination in housing markets poses a significant barrier for international students seeking to establish their lives in foreign countries, whether it is overt or covert in nature (Auspurg et al., 2019).

While most of the literature discuss the external factors and the difficulties to settle down for international students (Fang, 2021; Wilson et al., 2022), few of them considered what students encounter after living in the private rental housing. According to literature, student tenants are considered to be "temporary tenants", but have a distinction from refugees and starter-home seekers with a "transitional" meaning for their adulthood (Kenyon, 2002). Moreover, for international students, "transition" also refers to the process of transferring from mother culture to foreign culture, leading to a "double-transition" process. This research tries to discover this double transition process from international students' everyday housing strategies, through which they feel particularly hard to anchor, resulting as the "floating" experience of their everyday life.

Meanwhile, housing is not solely a physical space for sheltering, but also a place to attain security and self-identity (Bate, 2018; Nasreen et al., 2021). Therefore, living in rental housing for student tenants is not purely a functional thing, but is also related to the “homemaking” process. The homemaking process in western countries has long been closely connected with homeownership, and the influences of rental housing on homemaking practices of tenants remains debatable (Easthope, 2014), however, it is still obvious that rental housing is a place for homemaking (Bate, 2018). Although literature has shifted the focus towards the living conditions and limitations of private rental housing (Overtoom, 2022), the majority of which maintained to be policy analysis, lacking in the living experiences of tenants themselves. While empirical studies have been conducted in other countries, the reality of the Dutch situation remains undiscovered. For instance, van Lanen’s research revealed the impact of austerity on housing, leading to the home-unmaking for urban youth in Ireland, consequently causing everyday emotional and personal crises (van Lanen, 2022). Studies anchored in Australia have already revealed how tenants in shared rental housing attain the sense of home (Nasreen et al., 2021). Considering the differences in housing market structures between the Netherlands and other countries, it becomes crucial to present the conditions specific to the Netherlands within the academic realm.

1.2 Significance and Research Question

The Netherlands is quite international in terms of higher educational students, which complicates the student housing situation. According to the central bureau of statistics, about a quarter of first-year students in higher education are international in the 2021-2022 academic year, with a steady increase during the past 16 years (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). Because Dutch universities are responsible for providing dormitories, students are tasked with the responsibility of seeking housing, potentially amplifying the challenges associated with homemaking. International students in the Netherlands are not only facing the highly competitive environment for house-seeking under the shortage of 27 thousand student housing (Hoger Onderwijs Persbureau, 2022), but also passively start their foreign adult life on an isolated basis. Therefore, it is significant and worthwhile to focus more on revealing international students' homemaking process in the Netherlands.

Scholars have proved that both material culture and social relations have impacts on the homemaking process (Nasreen et al., 2021). Legislation is also a crucial factor in determining tenants' senses of home (Easthope, 2014). Current national and local policies in Dutch are criticized to have negative influences on student tenants' homemaking process. For example, the legalization of temporary contracts endows landlords the rights to choose and evict tenants by signing temporary contracts (Huisman, 2016), which may diminish students' senses of stability.

Easthope (2014), borrowed the notion "ontological security" to describe the process that tenants are trying to achieve in the rental housing department. In considering whether households live in a situation that facilitates the creation of a valued identity and lifestyle, a key concept is that of 'ontological security'. Ontological security has been defined by Giddens (Giddens, 1991:92) as: "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of their social and material environments". Basic to a feeling of ontological security is a sense of the reliability of persons and things. Based on this definition, this research measures international students' ontological security from three layers: secure occupancy, autonomy and self-identity, which is enhanced by the homemaking practices in both social interactions and spatial environments. Taking homemaking as an embodiment that links social and spatial factors in the process, this research is expected to add to the current research framework of measuring ontological security in rental housing sectors. Therefore, this research using qualitative methods, tries to reveal the living conditions and homemaking practices of international students in rental housing which help them to enhance the extent of ontological security.

The central research question is formulated as follows:

How do international students perceive "home" in their rental housing and what homemaking practices they have done to achieve ontological security in the Netherlands?

To answer the central research question, several sub-questions are formulated:

1. *What are the institutive situations of international students in rental housing? How does the current institutive situation affect their ontological security and what are the countermeasures?*

2. *What are the material conditions of international students in rental housing? How does the current material situation affect their ontological security and what are the countermeasures?*
3. *What are the social configurations of international students in rental housing? How does the current societal situation affect their ontological security and what are the countermeasures?*

Taking Groningen as an example, by discovering the international student's homemaking processes, this research anticipates to enrich the theoretical framework of homemaking and ontological security, and provide policy suggestions for planning practitioners in Groningen and in comparable circumstances.

1.3 Expected Results and Societal Relevance

Student housing has become an urgent problem in the Netherlands. This research seeks to reveal the living experiences and practices of the international student tenants without homeownership, therefore have to bend for rental housing markets. By doing such, this research attempts to provide international students' angles for rental housing planning and distribution processes, and whether under varied institutional contexts, status quo and corresponding policy making should be diverse.

Meanwhile, this research could be valuable for Dutch planning institutions and housing providers which are in urgency to solve the societal contradiction, for the reason that international students' special needs in terms of housing are anticipated to be revealed. What's more, this research adds to the understanding of the measurement of ontological security, and a normative framework to research.

1.4 Outline

The remaining part of this research is structured as follows:

In chapter 2 the theoretical framework is constructed after the literature review. Literature about homemaking and ontological security, homemaking and international students are concluded and discussed for further conceptual framework. The conceptual framework illustrated in chapter 2 presents the key influencers of homemaking and ontological security named as governance of occupancy, material conditions and social configurations. This also lays the foundation for further analysis.

In chapter 3, the details of the methodology are presented. Chapter 3 introduces the selection and scientific evidence of the methodology, and how the methods are conducted in a scientific way. Chapter 3 also includes a chart of characteristics of interviewees, and why the demographic features are helpful for answering the research questions. The coding logic of interview materials are presented at the end of this chapter.

In chapter 4, empirical results are analyzed according to the structure of conceptual model, divided into three main parts as governance of occupancy, material conditions and social configurations. Subsequently, how the ontological security is influenced by these three aspects of homemaking processes are presented by three layers of ontological security.

In chapter 5, the conclusion and the discussion are presented. In chapter 5 the results from chapter 4 are lined out and discussed with the use of literature in the theoretical framework in chapter 2. Limitations of the research are also discussed here for future studies. Policy recommendations for planner and official sectors are shown at the end of this chapter.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Home and homemaking

The meaning of home varies from literature to literature according to their epistemological and methodological references. As a projection of people's emotional feelings, home is usually understood as a material place with a psychological aspect (Bate, 2018). It is widely acknowledged that despite the everyday living space, home can also be associated with country or homeland, or even be considered as an incorporeal imagination of the future. Yet it is still a valuable tool to discover the meaning of home within the specific housing context (Blunt et al., 2006; Easthope, 2014).

In the past ten years, an ongoing debate about the connection between home and homeownership drew public attention to rental housing (Clapham, 2011; Easthope, 2014; Bate, 2018). In western countries, owner-occupied tenure has been a dominant form since World War II, therefore normalizing the linkage between homemaking and homeownership (Bate, 2018). Besides, researchers discussed that the temporal dimension of home requires for the stability and longevity of staying in one place, which may restrain the homemaking potential in temporary housing (Hiscock, et al., 2001). Other scholars argued that it is feelings, senses and physical actions that matters to home, not literature meanings or fixed materiality (Clapham, 2011). Therefore, though temporary tenure may have negative effects on financial security, living stability and feelings of autonomy, treating rental housing as home is beneficial for revealing the homemaking practices of a large portion of people (Bate, 2018).

2.1.1 Homemaking and its aspects

Home is conceived as a place filled with personalized meanings through inhabiting and maintaining. The process to perform the embodied identity within a certain place to gain the feeling of home is considered as homemaking. Scholars enunciated that the use and meaning of home is both affected not only by the conditions of property, but also by the homemaking process which reflects the tenant's ability of making changes to the dwellings (Easthope, 2014). Literature

also suggested that home is both a physical space and an imaginary space, imbued with feelings, senses and emotions (Nasreen et al., 2021). Homemaking process is the way to realize the imaginations into social realities in the physical entities. It is essential to unravel the homemaking process in order to understand the meaning of home.

Eghbali created an empirical framework for researchers to analyze students' homemaking based on three mutually inclusive methodological categories (Eghbali, 2023). This framework further expanded the scopes and extensions of homemaking, illustrated it from everyday practices, material culture and home-city relations. First, by introducing the relations between "strategies" and "tactics" of de Certeau, he explained how everyday practices create familiarities out of placelessness, mobilize preferences, arrange furniture, organize space, composing the "life narrative" (de Certeau et al., 1998, p. 145). Second, Eghbali argued that material homemaking is able to optimize the living conditions and therefore provide a sense of home for them. Additionally, Eghbali explained how homemaking occurs at multiple scales and is linked to social relations. By mentioning the importance of everyday practices in the city, Eghbali illustrated how homemaking can happen outside of the physical property (Eghbali, 2023). As a first stage in theorizing homemaking, Eghbali's framework allows us to analyze homemaking from emotional, material (spatial), social perspectives. While emotional aspects constitute an invaluable component of homemaking, their operationalization is complex due to their intricate entanglement and deep-rooted nature within the other two aspects.

The material aspect of homemaking can be specified from three layers: spatial configuration with meaningful objects, architectural spaces and spatial regulations (Eghbali, 2023). Objects in the living environments are mobilized and endowed with special meanings for their owners through the homemaking process. It will be too complicated and rough not to examine the homemaking process from its basic material elements. Therefore, a reductionist angle requires tracing meanings back to materials. The rearrangements of the categories and positions of objects (furniture, decorations, appliances) are vital to the keeping of feelings of home (Mallett, 2004). Second, the human-spatial relations suggest that the architectural settings are crucial for generating peoples' emotional feelings. For example, Thomson proved that institutional housing with a specific targeting group (hospitals, geriatric care housing, student housing) can restrict people's homemaking process, for the reason that it's hard for people to personalize in the pre-

designed architectural space (Thomson, 2007). Third, regulations that confirm residents' capacities of modifying and rearranging these objects have impacts on people's home feeling and homemaking processes (Nasreen et al., 2021).

The social aspect of homemaking also can be specified from three layers: collective participation, social integration and institutional relations. Collective participation refers to residents' social events held within the living environments, including both guest hosting and social interactions with roommates (in shared housing). Overtoom mentioned that the way residents receive guests depends on what home meant to them (Overtoom et al., 2022). Different forms and frequencies of social events also affect residents' preferences of homemaking. For example, people who tend to welcome friends at his home are more likely to do cleaning more often, and feel more comfortable with a bigger living room which separates their private and public spaces (Overtoom et al., 2023). Meanwhile, home is a place of creating and extending social relations. According to the current studies, residents who have more intimate relationships with their roommates in everyday life have a higher willingness to call their places home, and stay in that place longer (Nasreen et al., 2021). What's more, institutional factors also have impacts on homemaking processes. Scholars argued how the longevity and termination conditions determine whether tenants or landlords have more autonomy on housing (Huisman, 2016; Bate, 2018). Public policies regulating people's rights in home is also an important part of the social aspect of homemaking.

2.1.2 Homemaking as a process

The temporal and relational nature of home inherently dictates that its meaning is constantly evolving and reshaping over time. Nasreen elaborated that the physical elements, emotional geographies and power relations result in the fact that the meaning of home is constructed and molded together with the entanglement of elements (Nasreen et al., 2021). As for an individual, home can be made, unmade, or transformed through space and time, therefore should be regarded as a process instead of static symbols. The dynamic nature of the meaning of home can be comprehended from both societal and individual perspective.

The implementation of the neoliberal welfare state since the 1980s has significantly diminished the welfare safety-net available to citizens, leading to a shift in the way people traditionally

conceive, establish, and perceive their homes. Situations in the Netherlands are synchronized with the majority of countries where rental housing has become a normal tenure (Hoolachan et al., 2017). Meanwhile, together with the economic crisis and instability of labor markets, housing markets turned rental housing tenure the only affordable path for young adults to achieve a sense of home (McKee et al., 2020). In Dutch, astonishing housing prices and structural housing market reform since 2013 continued to marginalize permanent contracts, especially for young adults (Huisman, 2016). The necessity of rental housing persistently affects people's possibility of attaining home and their imagination of future home. On the other hand, globalization and informationalization has changed the modes and flows of trans-national migration, complicated the way of settling. Consequently, housing experiences and practices are changing and adapting in response to this highly mobilized age (Lloyd et al., 2017; Nasreen et al., 2021). The highly mobilized social environment also contributes to the significance of home, due to the fact that pursuing the stability that home provides becomes a counteraction to mobility and pace (Clapham 2005).

Individuals consistently restructure their way of accepting and implementing the meaning of home. This is especially obvious at the turning point between different life stages. Kenyon assumed a "future home" to state how students' past housing experiences and current home practices can establish their anticipation of the home that they wish to attain in the future (Kenyon, 2002). Hauge proved that Young people tend to associate their self-identity with home more frequently than the elders, which also reflects the life-long changing process of the meaning of home (Hauge et al., 2007).

Bate concluded that home does not simply exist, but is a process that is created through various homemaking practices (Bate, 2018). Clapham also resonated with Bate, believing practices "that take place within a dwelling which involve embodied interactions with material and social objects", endowed housing the meaning of home towards an individual (Hoolachan et al., 2017: 66). Therefore, homemaking practices consisting of self-identities and emotions are not only the reification of people's understanding of home, but also lays the foundation of the futuristic implications of home of their own. Home as a process is incubated, transformed and reinforced through the entanglements of living experiences and practices. This also results in the importance

of discovering the private homemaking practices, and provides evidence of why it is beneficial for understanding the dynamic meaning of home.

Homemaking also bears the possibility of being ruptured, intermitted or terminated. As a bidirectional process that continuously shapes and changes over time, homemaking can encounter miseries that are detrimental to the meaning-searching process. Baxter and Brickell named it as “home unmaking”, as opposed to the emotional, material and social entanglement (Baxter et al., 2014). It does not necessarily result in a total destruction of what has already been achieved, but rather the insecurity, instability or displacement that are intermittently or persistently experienced by people (Nasreen et al., 2021). The nature of home unmaking resonates with the relational feature of home, that the attributes of the surroundings influence the extent to which a place can be called home. For example, the dirt, odor, chaos, disbelief, hatred, restrictions and insecurity of keeping away from the above all accumulated to the unmaking results. It is implied that a certain level of stability and continuity should also be assured for residents to establish the sense of home. This is what the latter chapter will explore, through the concept of “ontological security”.

2.1.3 Homemaking and identity

Homemaking process is filled with emotional practices that reflect one's' identities, which already combine the internal and external aspects of one's behaviors. Few of the literature conceived the emotional aspect of homemaking separately from residents' identities. One of the reasons is that emotions are embedded in the social and spatial relations of home, therefore difficult to dis sever as an independent part.

As aforementioned, home as a relational image reflects its residents' identities. This is accomplished through everyday practical processes imbued and entangled with feelings, senses and emotions. Scholars in housing fields employed the notion of “place” to explain the complex linkages between housing and identities (Easthope, 2004). Developed from this tradition, Easthope applied “the affective bonds” to describe the identity formation within home and residents' interactions with the outside world through their bodies, resonating with the “emotional turn” in human geography (Easthope, 2014). Here, the body as the actor connecting

the externalities and home was considered as an active part, separated from the mind. With the actions and practices realizing the affective bonds to the “place”, home as an embodiment of identity organically combines the human body and the mind physically, socially and spatially.

The relationship between homemaking and identity, reminds us to focus on everyday practices conducted by bodies, because “the performance of everyday activities and social practices that enact identities” (Clapham, 2011). Housing researchers have already observed this emotional turn in the field, and tried to employ it with empirical materials. For example, Hoolachan discussed how younger generations settle down in private rental housing under the pressure of unstable employment and welfare cuts (Hoolachan et al., 2017). She discovered how younger generations managed to home-make in insecure housing by embodied practices. Nasreen studied how residents in shared rental rooms negotiate with environments for homemaking, doing “embodied adjustments” everyday (Nasreen et al., 2021: 163). Boccagni illustrated how small objects international students brought from their domestic countries can create the sense of home in the temporary rental housing they live in the foreign countries, proved more evidence of how material objects can become the reflection of emotions, and the embodiment of identity across time and space (Boccagni et al., 2022). All of the aforementioned examples have highlighted how younger generations express and shape their identities within their rental housing through their daily routines, reminding us to re-examine the everyday practices of certain social groups.

This kind of ability to use and modify material objects not only provide residents with autonomy, but also generate the feeling of home and attachment to places. Home as an embodiment of identity paves the way for the success of homemaking, in other words, the achievement of ontological security. Housing researchers have proved with empirical evidence that rental housing is also a possible place for homemaking, but how this process is activated and developed remains heterogeneous between different groups of people with distinct social characteristics and identities.

2.2 Ontological security and homemaking

The concept of “ontological security” has been widely used in housing studies in relation to tenants’ living experiences and emotions. Laing first introduced this concept to discuss that an

individual needs to feel firm and stable about the identity of his own and the others, to avoid anxiety and insecurity (Laing, 2010; Genz et al., 2022). Giddens further expanded the notion, stating that consistency and continuity in the environments are essential for the establishment of identity security. More specifically, ontological security is defined by Giddens as:

The confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of their social and material environments. Basic to a feeling of ontological security is a sense of the reliability of persons and things. (Giddens, 1991: 92)

Giddens reoriented and connected the establishment of identity with the spatial factors, emphasizing on the psychological and emotional influences of environments. Later on, housing researchers identified the influential environments as housing, where people spend most of their time. Consequently, in terms of ontological security, it is thought that a person's home is the place in which the security can be derived (Genz et al., 2022). Saunders, as the first a few scholars who introduced ontological security into housing fields argued that home ownership can provide a stronger sense of ontological security than rental housing (Saunders, 1990). Hiscock remained skeptical of the decisive significance of tenure on the achievement of ontological security, which was supported by a series of empirical studies afterwards (Hiscock, et al., 2001; Easthope, 2014; Nasreen et al., 2021).

Affected by financial, political and cultural situations, ontological security as a dynamic sensation is continuously negotiating and shifting. Genz explained how the transformation of housing markets caused by the economic crisis resulted in the gentrification and displacement of low-income renters that deepened the housing insecurity (Genz et al., 2022). In considering the ontological security within the rental housing, three layers of ontological security were examined to reflect its deeper meanings, from which its extent can be influenced by external factors (Easthope, 2014).

The first layer is defined as “secure occupancy”, which means “the extent to which households can make a home and stay there for reasonable periods of time if they wish to do so, provided that they meet their tenancy obligations” (Hulse et al., 2011: 20). Secure occupancy reflects how much control residents have over the time limit of their tenure. This is so much determined by

the residents' financial positions in the housing markets. Meanwhile, policies related to tenant-landlord relationships which varied between countries also deeply molds secure occupancy (Nasreen et al., 2021). Nasreen mentioned that despite the financial conditions and juristical rules, tenants' capacities to understand their agreements and legal rights affect the secure occupancy on a significant level. This is especially obvious in immigrant groups (Nasreen et al., 2021).

The second layer is specified as autonomy, which refers to tenants' freedom to personalize their living space, within which they can perform their lifestyles as they wish (Kearns et al., 2000; Bate, 2018). In terms of homemaking, the extent of autonomy is pretty much determined by the policies that regulate tenants' behaviors. Scholars claimed that the often-biased policy is rooted in the social norms especially in the Western countries, where people are believed to achieve home ownership in the future. Therefore, rental housing is deemed to be a house which people who physically reside have less control over (Easthope. 2014; Bate, 2018). The lack of autonomy is considered to highly limited tenants' homemaking willing, which results in both a weaker sense of ontological security and a slimmer opportunity to regain it.

Identity is also an expression of ontological security, due to the fact that home is considered to be the reflection of residents' self-identity. Self-identity serves as a way to construct ontological security from not only the process of homemaking, but also through the convergence of homogeneous social groups in rental housing. First, it is examined that homemaking is effective in demonstrating tenants' desired self-identity; Second, People whose roommates or neighbors share the mutually-inclusive self-identity with them are more likely to stay longer and feel the sense of home, due to the reason of a strong sense of ontological security (Bate, 2018).

Certain research on the relationships between homemaking and indoor physical environment is conducted (Overtoom et al., 2019). However, international students' needs are not covered in the analyzing process. Other Scholars proved that the particularity of international students' identities exists, but how they may have impacts on internationals' homemaking practices and ontological security is not further mentioned (Boccagni et al., 2022; Eghbali, 2023). Based on the current research gap in the field of international students' housing experiences and practices, this research aims to analyze the Dutch situation with the homemaking and ontological security framework that has been concluded and improved from the previous studies.

2.3 Conceptual framework

Based on the aforementioned literature review on homemaking and ontological security, this research tries to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework for analyzing the living experiences and homemaking practices of rental housing tenants, taking international students as an example. By applying this framework, not only the authenticity and vividness of international students’ rental housing situations and their responses are detected, but also the relationship between homemaking and ontological security is revealed and enriched.

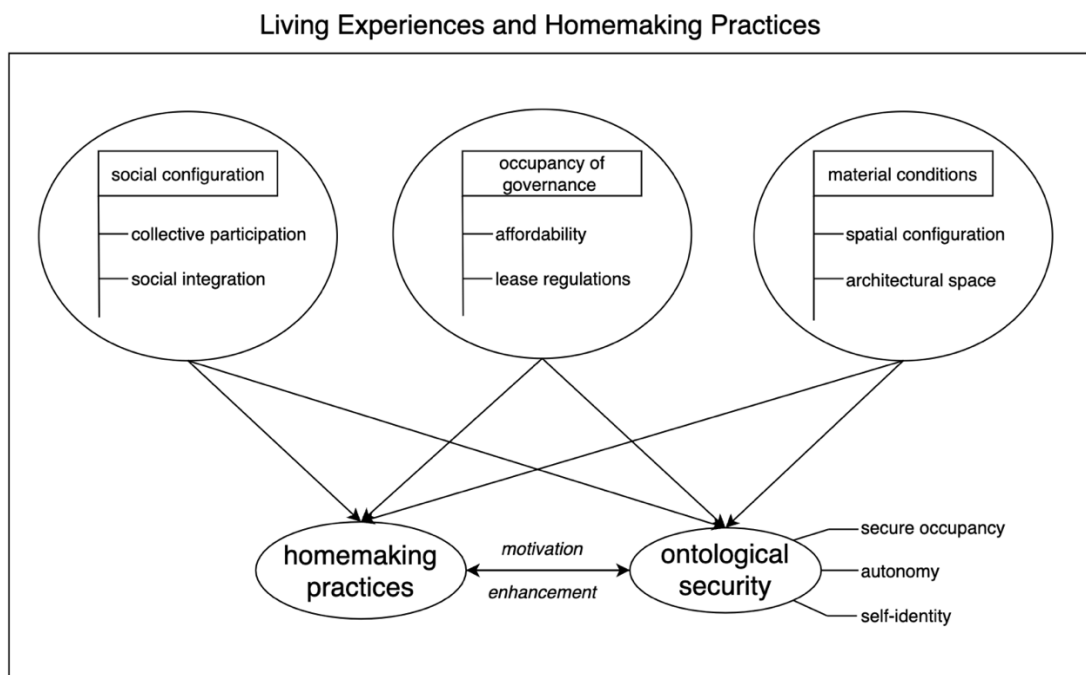


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Derived from Eghbali’s empirical framework of homemaking (Eghbali, 2023), this research expanded on the material and social dimensions. It introduced a novel perspective of “occupancy of governance”, linked to institutional conditions. Additionally, the emotional aspects which entangled with both material and social aspects, find representation in the concept of “ontological security”. This ontological security is not only impacted by the three homemaking dimensions but also holds influence over homemaking practices.

More specifically, the framework is composed by five elements that linked with each other. The upper three elements are factors that constitute living experiences, and can have effects on homemaking practices and ontological security. The first aspect named as governance of occupancy, mainly refers to the affordability and lease regulations, which either permit or restrict student tenants from engaging in certain activities. The second aspect, social configuration, is composed by collective participation, which refers to the interactions happen in the housing, with guests or roommates; social integration, which refers to the interactions happen between tenants and broader social relations, usually with the community or the neighbors. The third aspect, material conditions, are composed by spatial configuration, which refers to the appearance and layout of material objects; architectural space which refers to the types and pre-defined design of housing.

The bottom right element attempts to analyze rental housing tenants' living experiences through the concept of "ontological security", which is layered as secure occupancy, autonomy and self-identity. As aforementioned, secure occupancy mainly focuses on the extent of control tenants have over their mobility. Autonomy stresses on tenants' freedom to personalize their rental housing environments. Self-identity reflects how much do the living environments and social relations permit tenants to express their way of lifestyles. All three layers constitute the extent of ontological security tenants have from their current rental housing.

Another segment of this framework that needs to be noticed is the relationship between ontological security and homemaking. The extent of ontological security affects tenants' wishes to home-make, with less ontological security they sense in the living environments, the weaker inclination they have to devote time and energy in making their rental house home. On the other hand, embodied homemaking practices is a beneficial way to achieve a stronger sense of ontological security, which is functioned on the three layers. In this case, ontological security can be seen as the motivation of homemaking, and homemaking is the enhancement of ontological security.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in conducting the qualitative research for this thesis. The research aims to explore the living experiences and homemaking practices of international students who live in the rental housing in the Netherlands. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the respondents' subjective experiences and perceptions. This section discusses the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures employed in the study.

For the research design, a qualitative research design is employed to investigate the living experiences and homemaking practices of international students. This approach focuses on understanding the subjective perceptions and meaning of a particular phenomenon as experienced by individuals. It allows an exploration of the usually ignored participants' perspectives, emotions, and interpretations of their experiences, providing a rich and contextual understanding of the ontological security of international students. By taking the perspective of the respondents, the salience and relevance are increased to provide a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Kitchin et al., 2013: 215).

For the participant selection, this research focuses on international students as a whole group, in other words, the diversity within this group is not stressed during the selection process. This makes a small-sample qualitative method reasonable. This research will use snowballing methods to collect 8 international-student samples, with nationality, gender, age distribution considered, but not strictly limited. Meanwhile, the proportion of housing types (private housing & institutional housing, shared housing and studio) is considered in the sample selection process. A total of 8 respondents were selected, ensuring a balance between the elements listed above.

Respondent	age	gender	Nationality	Housing types	Monthly rent (euro)
1	24	Female	Chinese	Shared private housing	750 + utility bill
2	25	Male	Indonesian	Studio in private housing	500
3	24	Male	German	Shared institutional housing	310 + utility bill

4	24	Female	Chinese	Studio institutional housing	820
5	25	Male	Romanian	Studio in private housing	1100
6	28	Female	American	Studio in private housing	1300
7	23	Female	Chinese	Shared private housing	700 + utility bill
8	23	Male	German	Studio institutional housing	900

Figure 2. key characteristics of respondents

For the data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary method of data collection. The interviews allowed for open-ended questioning and encouraged participants to share their personal experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to their sense of home and homemaking practices. The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives, relevant literature and the conceptual model. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable and private setting, ensuring a safe and confidential environment for participants to freely express their thoughts and emotions. In addition to interviews, field notes and recordings were utilized as supplementary data collection methods. These data collection methods are confidential and stored securely, only used for academic purposes.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the collected data. This approach allowed for the identification and interpretation of patterns, themes, and meanings within the data. The analysis process involved several steps. Firstly, all interview recordings were transcribed into texts. Next, a process of coding was taken, under the construction of conceptual framework. The analysis was supported by the use of qualitative data analysis software atlas.ti to facilitate organization of the data.

4. Results

The contents below are structured along the three aspects of living experience that influencing homemaking practices and ontological security of international students, as outlined in the conceptual framework. These aspects, referred to as “governance of occupancy”, “material conditions”, and “social configuration” are analysed in terms of their general conditions and the potential effects they have on international students’ sense of home and their motivations for engaging in homemaking practices. As aforementioned, the two-way relationship between homemaking and ontological security determines that the latter is not static, but rather fluctuates and evolves over time. To gain further insights into the dynamic nature of ontological security, the interview results related to the three different layers of ontological security are also included in the final part of this chapter.

4.1 Governance of occupancy

The first and foremost aspect of living experience is governance of occupancy. As explained in the conceptual framework part, this aspect mainly refers to the affordability and lease regulations, which either permit or restrict student tenants from engaging in certain activities. Based on the empirical results, it becomes evident that international students in Groningen encounter an adverse “accumulative effect” that further worsens the issue of housing affordability, specifically in terms of financial perspectives. Being an international student imposes limitations on the available options for settling down in Groningen, ultimately leading to the necessity of making compromises among various factors.

Consequently, this compromises the eligibility of some students for housing allowances provided by the Dutch government. Simultaneously, even though the majority of lease agreements grant tenants significant freedom and lack explicit restrictions within the premises, student tenants’ actions are still constrained by their doubtful perception of potential consequences, limiting their scope of practices.

This combination of factors results in a challenging situation for international students in Groningen, where financial constraints, limited housing options, and self-imposed limitations

intertwine, exacerbating the overall affordability of housing in the region and affecting the ontological security and ways of homemaking.

4.1.1 An adverse accumulative effect on affordability

The affordability for students in Groningen varies depending on the type of housing and amenities provided. However, a significant disparity exists between the officially estimated price range and the actual housing prices paid by international students. According to the official report of student housing by University of Groningen, the housing prices range from 300 euros to 660 euros per month, including all utilities (RUG, 2023). However, out of our respondents, only two have monthly fees that fall within the estimated range, with the lowest being around 500 euros and the highest exceeding 1300 euros. Since institutional housing is explicitly targeting at students, it is undoubtedly that the prices of institutional housing are more steady and more reasonable for students compared to the private rental housing, with the latter one has a more extreme price range. Considering the linkage between conditions of housing amenities and housing prices, although private rental housing provide a more affordable way of settling down in the city, the living environments in terms of housing are accordingly miserable and below expectations.

Among the various factors that international students consider when choosing a place to settle down, housing price stands out as the most prominent. However, it is also a complex factor that is intertwined with other considerations. Respondents frequently mentioned additional factors such as privacy, amenities, and accessibility as important considerations in their decision-making process. It is worth noting that specific requirements or preferences can directly impact the housing price, potentially creating a financial burden for international students striving to achieve their desired lifestyle. For example, respondents who paid over 1000 euros a month mentioned that paying extra is the only way to fulfill their special needs.

“I pay 1,100 a month [...] I don't think the room is worth the price, but I think this is the price you should pay, basically if you want to live alone at the moment, unless you find the student house, but only people from first year get moving to a student house, that is not an option (for me)”. (Alen)

According to Alen, while affordability is a significant consideration, it is influenced by various factors such as specific needs, preferences, and the availability of suitable housing options. The quote demonstrates how these factors can directly impact the housing price and pose financial challenges for international students in their search for accommodation.

Although Dutch students may also find the substantial impact of special needs on housing prices irritating, international students typically make greater sacrifices when searching for their preferred housing. International students are particularly vulnerable to the risk of either obtaining a room in a remote location or sharing a room with poor conditions.

“I went to see the house. I stopped to the salesperson. And then she told me, we’re gonna make a choice. We’re gonna have to figure it out and you’re the right person and everything. And we’re gonna actually decide who get to live here. [...] I think I moved the fastest [...] cause honestly, I can’t find any other reason, because most of the people live there were Dutch. So, I think they would have preferred the Dutch people. But I can’t find any other reason (why I was chosen)”. (Alen)

“And then the landlord decides if he wants to make a contact with us. And the cases are that most of them doesn't really make contact with us. This one, my landlord here is the first probably the only one that responds to my contact. That's how I end up here”. (Eman)

Due to the scarcity of housing options and the disadvantaged position of international students, they are more likely than other social groups to end up residing in a house that does not adequately meet their needs. This negative effect is partially enhanced by the “huurdersselectie” (tenant selection) process that international students will encounter when limited student housing has no position left for them. According to Alen and Eman, their house-seeking processes are hampered by the limitations imposed by their nationalities, resulting in a restricted range of housing options and ultimately leading to less satisfying outcomes. This aligns with what Fang has detected as “structural discrimination” in the Netherlands’ housing markets, that “a sizable proportion of rooms was categorically unavailable” (Fang et al., 2021: 830).

Due to various factors including limited housing options and a biased tenant selection process (Fang et al., 2021), an adverse “accumulative effect” is observed within the international student community. This effect not only increases the likelihood of international students paying higher rents for their rental houses, but also restricts the eligibility of some students for housing allowances provided by the Dutch government. These allowances, which can compensate for up to 30% of monthly fees, are limited to certain housing types, further exacerbating the financial burden on international students. One prominent example is the "huurtoeslag" (housing benefits), which is specifically targeted at low-income tenants residing in self-contained rooms. To be eligible for huurtoeslag, tenants must have their own entrance door that can be locked, as well as a kitchen and a toilet within the unit. The basic rent should not exceed 452.20 euros for tenants aged between 18 and 23, or 808.06 euros for tenants aged over 23, according to the Dutch Ministry of Finance (Ministerie van Financiën, 2023). Unfortunately, these eligibility criteria exclude international students who reside in shared houses or more expensive accommodations, leaving them without the option to receive housing benefits. Consequently, this further exacerbates their financial affordability, as they are unable to access the support provided by huurtoeslag due to their specific living arrangements.

“Right now, I feel it’s a little bit expensive, but back then comparing it to what I can find on Helewang (a website for Chinese immigrants) and I can’t get student housing. So back then I feel like I can accept that (price)”. (Ying)

“...and it is also near the school, very convenient, and you can apply for the housing benefits. Since I didn't get a studio from SSH, I decided to choose this house although the rent is higher”. (Liu)

De Certeau described the everyday practices of marginalized individuals who strive to live under the control of power using the term “tactics” (de Certeau et al., 1998). This form of “arts of living” can be observed in the rental process of international students. When faced with limitations on housing allowances due to excessive rental prices, international students and landlords have devised a solution.

“So, I came here, and then I contacted this person, and he said that even though it's a bit expensive. he can adjust the contract for you. We can lower the prices on the contracts, so we can apply for some allowances, so the actual price can be lowered a bit” (Meng)

The rent remains the same, but the landlord agrees to keep the basic rent on the lease lower than the restricted amount, enabling the tenants to be eligible for housing allowances. While this “tactic” effectively alleviates the financial burden, it also creates a sense of being a less “official or formal resident” in the house (Ying), thereby limiting the potential for establishing a true sense of home.

4.1.2 The ambiguity of lease regulations

The other aspect of governance of occupancy is lease regulations. This involves the legal rights, obligations, and restrictions outlined in the signed rental contract by both landlords and tenants. According to governmental documents, a valid tenancy agreement should contain at least four key pieces of information: the date on which the rent will be increased each year; maintenance agreements; house rules; the tenant’s and the landlord’s signatures (Government of the Netherlands, 2023). Based on empirical findings, most leases include the aforementioned information. However, the clarity and elaboration of house rules vary across different housing types. Respondents residing in institutional housing are more likely to have an English version of the lease, which provides better understanding of obligations and restrictions. Conversely, those in private rental housing tend to have leases available only in Dutch. Respondents mentioned that translating the lease themselves is manageable and helpful for comprehension, but it can potentially lead to misunderstandings due to language barriers.

Despite the variations in leases among different housing types, one common characteristic is the lack of clarity in the clauses. Most lease agreements do not explicitly outline specific restrictions within the room. On one hand, this provides tenants with flexibility in their homemaking practices and tacitly recognizes their authority over the room. On the other hand, although the information provided in the lease is sufficient for a legally binding agreement, it leaves room for potential conflicts and deepens tenants' concerns. For instance, Liu resides in institutional housing where

the lease does not mention anything about posters on the door. However, when other tenants attempted to put up chunlian (traditional Chinese New Year decorations), they were fined 50 euros for occupying public space without permission. This example highlights the risks and uncertainties that arise from the lack of explicit regulations in the lease agreements.

“For example, if you stick Chunlian (traditional Chinese decorations) outside your door, you may be fined 50 euros if the staff notice it. We have roommates who have received warning notices and fines for doing so [...] I believe the contract mentioned some general restrictions, such as not obstructing the hallway passage, but it lacks specific details, such as not allowing you to put your trash outside. There may be some factors involved, but it is not specified in such detail”. (Liu)

What’s more, due to the lack of clarity, student tenants’ actions are constrained by their perception of potential consequences, limiting their scope of practices.

“I have read it (the lease). I don’t think there are specific rules [...] Our landlords, like she gave us this kind of impression that the requirements she need for us to maintain the house is very high. So we actually don’t wanna risk on this kind of things”. (Ying)

“...but as far as I remember, it was quite loose [...] I suppose because on the contract it says that if I failed to like keep the place not according to the contract, yeah, then I won't get my deposits back”. (Eman)

Despite under most circumstance leases ended up simple and brief, one of the reasons for the ambiguity in leases is that international students often sign their contracts within a short period of time. This can be due to landlords want to expedite the process or because international students handle the process online, without the opportunity to negotiate the details with the landlords.

“I never met anyone as far as I’m concerned. I just did online and then I was given keys I think I have to go to the office from the housing institution to get the keys.

Then I just got here and since then I've never talked to anyone from the organizations or from the housing association". (Jan)

Jan's situation well reflected the fact that for international students living in institutional housing, they may not even sign the contract with an individual person, which limits their ability to voice their own requirements and address any concerns they may have.

4.2 Material conditions

The second aspect of the living experience is material conditions. As explained in the conceptual framework, material conditions encompass spatial configuration, which refers to the appearance and layout of material objects, as well as architectural space, which pertains to the housing types and pre-defined design of housing. Based on the empirical findings, it becomes evident that material conditions keep producing and enhancing the sense of temporariness among international students, ultimately diminishing their motivation for homemaking. Consequently, the most significant practice for establishing a sense of home revolves around the presence and adaptation of objects. These objects are the result of "an involuntary adaptation to a shortage of space" (Baudrillard, 1988: 17). Moreover, the sense of temporariness also impacts the contested relationship between functionality and ornamentation, where the former takes on heightened importance. However, ornamentation is still evident as an expression of self-identity, intricately intertwined with the functional adaptation of objects.

Another set of elements within architectural space are privacy and hospitality, both of which have been compromised due to limited spatial arrangements, resulting in a lack of sense of home. Additional factors influencing international students' homemaking practices within architectural space include soundproofing, indoor lighting and colour schemes. While some level of dissatisfaction with these elements can be tolerated over an extended period of time, when it exceeds a certain threshold, it has a detrimental impact on the overall sense of home.

4.2.1 Spatial configuration

When talking about the spatial conditions of their current rooms, the majority of international students highlighted the pervasive sense of temporariness they experienced in their daily lives. This perception of temporariness stems not only from their awareness of living as students abroad but is also deeply rooted and intensified by their everyday spatial encounters both inside and outside their rooms. Even before arriving at their current locations, many international students already identify themselves as temporary residents of the city. For those who have been residing in the city for several years, the rented nature of their housing continues to produce a sense of temporariness. While personalizing their private rooms or residing in fully furnished environments may help alleviate this sense to some extent, it cannot be entirely eliminated, as it is influenced not only by the past and present, but also by the uncertain future.

“...I consider my home in (home country), is because my home also related to like my future plans, like future career plans. But if I just don't see myself work in the Netherlands, I would feel I would go eventually, my life here is temporary”. (Ying)

The pervasive sense of temporariness serves as a reminder for us to take note of its influence on the everyday homemaking practices of international students. One of the most common and apparent methods of homemaking is the acquisition of commodities for decorating, furnishing, and rearranging layouts (Eghbali, 2023). However, among international students, the desire to engage in homemaking diminishes. Instead, their focus lies on the functionality of commodities rather than their ornamental value. Nevertheless, this does not imply that ornamentality has disappeared; on the contrary, it has become integrated into the functional aspects of their practices, transforming pure functionality into a distinct form of personalized functionality. This personalized functionality is characterized by objects that embody expressions of self-identity, such as bringing traditional cook-ricers instead of “Dutch rice cooker” (Eman), carrying personal bed-sheets from home, and using tote bags with special slogans as wall decorations. These selective processes of daily necessities fulfill the desire for self-expression, reflecting the simplified practices and intertwined entanglements between functionality and ornamental value under the awareness of temporariness.

Another approach to homemaking involves creatively adapting the original functions of objects to suit the owner's individual needs. This could be seen as "an involuntary adaptation to a shortage of space" (Baudrillard, 1988: 17). According to Baudrillard, objects function as relational carriers that reflect the larger social structure. The increased multifunctionality of modern furniture sets, for instance, "reflects a greater openness in his social relationships" (ibid.). As for international students, the adaptation of objects, "things fold and unfold, are concealed, appear only when needed", serves as "a shortage of space", and the awareness of temporariness (ibid.). For example, due to the lack of space and the unwillingness to devote more time and energy to purchase new things, international student tenants flexibly adapt their belongings for less urgent functions.

"I have a habit of foot bath before sleep everyday [...] When I first arrived, I couldn't find a proper basin to buy. But later on, I found a garbage bin I have. I ended up not using it as a bin but as a foot-bathing tool". (Liu)

"...for the suitcases I use it as a coat hanger. Like when I first came here, I need a place to put my coat, but I feel like it's a little bit dirty to put in a wardrobe, so I just lay them on the suitcases. (Ying)

For Ying, she randomly placed the suitcases she came with in the centre of the room and using them as hangers instead of purchasing proper ones. Interestingly, this decision was not driven by financial constraints, but rather by a simple reluctance to buy new items. As Ying stated, she "didn't feel like buying a new one", which can be seen as a response to the sense of temporariness she experienced. Therefore, the objects people carried with have become something more than just the objects themselves, but elements that can be activated and utilized innovatively. Rather than restricting their abilities of homemaking, this involuntary reaction of spatial shortage produces a special kind of homemaking of international students, embedded perception of home within the creative adaptation of functionality.

However, it should be noted that while these tactics employed by international students can be viewed as a form of homemaking, fostering a sense of belonging, they can also have the

unintended consequence of amplifying the feeling of temporariness by reminding international students with the presence of the randomness.

In conclusion, the pervasive sense of temporariness experienced by international students profoundly influences their everyday lives and homemaking practices. This sense of temporariness is not only a result of their status as students abroad but is further intensified by their spatial encounters within and outside their rooms. The rented nature of their housing and the awareness of their temporary residency in the city contribute to this perception. While personalizing their rooms and adapting objects creatively provide some sense of self-expression and functionality, they also serve as reminders of their transitory status. The desire for self-expression and the adaptation of objects to suit individual needs reflect the simplified practices and intertwined entanglements between functionality and ornamental value. However, these tactics employed by international students, while serving as a form of homemaking, can also unintentionally amplify the feeling of temporariness by constantly reminding them of the randomness and impermanence of their current situation.

4.2.2 Architectural space

Few of the housing preferences are identified among international students, however, they do have a dialectical desire for privacy. On one hand, they seek private living spaces where they can retreat undisturbed, creating a personal “oasis” (Alen). On the other hand, they are also open to socializing and living with roommates under the same rooftop. This pursuit of privacy leads to specific architectural requirements. Generally, an ideal option for student tenants would be a studio with a locked door, private bathroom, and kitchen. However, for tenants residing in a studio, there arises a challenging issue regarding hospitality. Since a studio typically combines all functional areas into a single room, the distinction between private and public spaces begins at the front gate, leaving no designated area for guests. This limitation reduces the home's capacity to facilitate social connections and consequently diminishes the sense of home.

“I don't like really inviting a lot of people over. And also I don't think this house is quite built for like having people over, you have to go through the bedroom, to the

bedroom and everybody will be there. Kind of inconvenient. But I like have people visiting me". (Beca)

For tenants who share a room with other roommates, spatial discomfort often arises in the context of the shared toilets. Due to different schedule arrangements and limited space, the toilet and shower are typically combined into a single locked room. This arrangement reduces the efficiency of spatial utilization and can lead to conflicts among roommates. Additionally, the lack of a clear separation between wet and dry areas hinders the ability for individuals who have just finished showering to transition smoothly to their private spaces.

"Sometimes, when you come out of the bathroom, you're still a bit wet, and you want to freshen up before doing other things, separating the wet and dry areas. It's that kind of feeling. Currently, I have to come out of the shower and enter my room first, and then, sometimes, if I forget to close the curtains, it's not very convenient. If possible, I would really like to have a small space next to the shower where I can tidy myself up before stepping out to do other things". (Ying)

Both tenants living in studios and shared rooms face privacy issues that are connected to the presence of large, often transparent windows. This "transparency" of their living spaces, particularly experienced by international students in the Netherlands, creates a unique situation. Tenants living with these large windows facing the street often feel a sense of being "monitored", blurring the boundaries between their private and public spaces.

"...It's like delivery guys who come for the people upstairs and then they knock on the door and no one answers. And then they look at me (through my windows), they like, why are you not answering? [...] And also the postman and every neighbour who comes with the package and come to me, and I was like it, I have work to do. They just knock on my window. It's like just annoying. (Beca)

Some tenants who have experienced issues with their windows often find themselves making compromises in order to preserve their basic privacy. For instance, Eman mentioned that he always turn off all the lights in his room to avoid attracting the attention of passers-by and prevent

them from peering inside. As Eman stated, “Because if it's brighter inside, then people can look inside”.

Other aspects of architectural space that tenants have expressed concerns about includes soundproofing and stairs. While some level of dissatisfaction with noise nuisance can be tolerated over an extended period of time, when it exceeds a certain threshold, it has a detrimental impact on the overall sense of home. Moreover, excessive noise can also lead to conflicts between tenants, roommates, or neighbours.

“There are some occasions that I think it could be like a small noise that I wouldn't hurt. But because the walls are basically, as I said, it's made of wood and I can hear everything. So it happens all the time and it became annoying for me [...] the way I have been involved with my neighbours when they make noise, sometimes I don't really respond quite well”. (Eman)

According to Eman, the spatial unsatisfactory conditions, such as thin walls, squeaking stairs, have had a significant impact on the tenants' overall experience and have subsequently led to social conflicts among residents. As a result, these ongoing social conflicts not only disrupt the harmonious living environment but also have a lasting effect on the tenants' sense of home, making it challenging for them to find solace and a true feeling of belonging within their living space.

4.3 Social configuration

The third aspect of the living experience analyzed in the conceptual model is social configuration. As discussed in the conceptual framework section, this aspect primarily refers to collective participation with roommates and guests and social integration with the community. Social interactions are composed by two main components: collective participation, which refers to interactions occurring within the housing unit among guests or roommates, and social integration, which involves interactions between tenants and a broader social network, typically the community or neighbors.

Based on the empirical findings, it is evident that the extent and quality of collective participation with guests or roommates are heavily influenced by the spatial layout and capacity of the housing. Furthermore, it is apparent that the quality of collective participation has a significant impact on international students' perception of home in rental housing, consequently affecting their sense of ontological security.

When it comes to social integration, international students generally have limited participation in neighborhood activities, primarily due to language and cultural barriers they encounter in their daily lives. Although there is a certain degree of willingness to engage in local interactions, the existing range of local neighborhood activities lacks inclusiveness for international students. This not only hinders their ability to feel a sense of belonging in their everyday living environment but also inhibits mutual understanding and communications between local residents and international students.

4.3.1 Collective participation

Positive collective participation with roommates and hospitality towards guests in the housing can greatly enhance the sense of home and, as a result, encourage tenants to engage in homemaking practices more actively. However, the empirical findings of this research not only highlight the impact of collective participation on the sense of home but also shed light on how limited space and overcrowded material environments can hinder collective participation.

Home can be regarded as a space for social connections, but when these connections are constrained or limited, the concept of home becomes fragmented, lacking in ontological security. This is particularly evident for those who living in shared rooms with roommates, where the issue becomes more visible in areas with overcrowded residents.

“...before, there were three people living here, which really exceeded the capacity of these two floors [...] Our relationship became bad because the house was not suitable for three people, and it wasn't anyone's fault. There were many little things, like disagreements over shower times, so it's possible that our relationship wasn't as good as it could have been”. (Ying)

Despite strict regulations towards the “overcrowding tenants” and a social security system bounded with individual’s address, the phenomenon still persists due to a mismatch between housing demands and availability. According to Ying, their house is only designed for 2 people, but ended up containing 3 tenants. Consequently, conflicts can arise when the number of occupants surpasses the reasonable capacity or intended occupancy of the rental space.

On the other hand, a positive roommate relationship can have a significant impact on the sense of belonging and can further motivate individuals to engage in homemaking activities. This finding aligns with previous studies that have highlighted the influence of social relationships on individuals’ attachment to their homes and the process of home-making (Fowler et al., 2010; Nasreen et al., 2021). A healthy relationship between tenants not only facilitates the negotiation of daily tasks, such as sharing bills, handling parcels, and disposing of trash but also contributes to the co-creation of a nurturing “home” environment. Conversely, for those who lack a close bond with their housemates, there tends to be less collective involvement in homemaking practices. The contrast in the impact of a positive roommate relationship on the homemaking of shared house is evident through the following comparison.

“We (me and my roommate) have a very good and deep relationship Because we go out to do stuffs like she invited me to go to bar with her us [...] so now I would buy flowers and vase to decorate the house in our kitchen area”. (Ying)

“I don't have the best connection with my roommates [...] the fact that we don't really use the space together like the kitchen and downstairs. We could do a lot with it. I think we could make it a nice space, but if we don't gather there together anyways and there's no incentive for each one of us to put in the work to make it look nice.” (Van)

For those who live in a studio without roommates, the spatial effects on their collective participation extend beyond just hosting guests as stated before. The limited size and layout of the studio can also affect their ability to engage in social activities within their living space. With

no separate rooms or designated areas for different activities, such as dining, entertaining, or talking, the boundaries between different aspects of their lives become blurred.

“...and also I don't think this house is quite built for having people over, you have to go through the bedroom to the sofa, and everybody can see what's in there (the bedroom), Kind of inconvenient”. (Alen)

This lack of spatial distinction can make it challenging to create a relaxing environment for socializing or entertaining guests. Consequently, the absence of guest areas within the studio can make tenants hesitant to invite others over. They feel self-conscious about the lack of privacy into their personal living space. This can result in a diminished sense of hospitality and a reluctance to engage in collective participation with guests, and therefore limits the option of homemaking.

4.3.2 Social integration

Social integration refers to the interactions that international students have beyond the physical boundaries of their housing, as they seek to become part of the local neighborhood and society at large. According to the findings of this study, the most common form of social interaction between international students and their neighbors is through greetings. Some respondents also mentioned receiving assistance from neighbors with daily tasks such as waste disposal and carrying heavy items. However, when it comes to community activities, respondents reported a lack of engagement. This can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, there is a lack of activities specifically targeted towards students in the neighborhood, leaving international students with limited options for involvement. Despite physically residing in the neighborhood, both international and local students often find themselves socially excluded from active participation in the local community. This situation is detrimental to both students and locals, particularly considering the prevalence of misunderstandings and communication gaps between these social groups, which often arise due to differences in lifestyles and living habits.

Another reason that international students merely engage in local activities is language barriers. This challenge is not only evident during interactions with local individuals but also impacts their ability to access information about available activities. The most common method for

international students to learn about activities is through billboards in front of community centers or posters displayed on the streets. However, these notices are mostly written in Dutch, which not only hinders internationals from noticing them but also gives them the impression of being unwelcome, even though this may not be the intention behind it. The language barrier creates a sense of exclusion and may incidentally contribute to international students feeling less encouraged to participate in local activities.

“It's not that the language itself is the problem. I can use my phone to scan and get a general idea of what the posters say. But when the poster is not in English, it makes me wonder, if I only know how to speak English and not Dutch, will it be a bit awkward for me to participate in those activities? It's not like they intentionally don't want to welcome me, but maybe they just haven't thought about accommodating non-Dutch speakers who aren't local residents. So, maybe it's better for me to not try too hard to fit in”. (Ying)

According to the quote, it is not the language itself that hampers internationals to engage in community activities, but rather the excluded perceptions that resist them and act as obstacles, preventing them from fully immersing themselves in the community, participating in meaningful interactions, and accessing opportunities that could foster their senses of home.

4.4 Ontological security

Ontological security, as a process, is influenced by both the current living environments and the homemaking practices undertaken by tenants in response to their reality. The previous analysis in this thesis has provided a comprehensive understanding of the current living environments of international students, highlighting the crucial role they play in tenants' sense of ontological security within rental housing. Additionally, these experiences of ontological security serve as a motivating factor for respondents to actively engage in homemaking practices aimed at improving their living conditions and further enhancing their ontological security.

This section aims to illustrate the transformative effects and improvements that have resulted from the homemaking practices discussed in previous sections. In line with the conceptual

framework, the concept of ontological security will be explored through three key layers: “secure occupancy”, “autonomy” and “self-identity”. By examining these layers, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the tenants’ senses of ontological security have evolved and been strengthened through their active engagement in homemaking practices.

4.4.1 Secure occupancy

Secure occupancy refers to the extent of control and stability that tenants have over their housing. The empirical findings reveal that the motivation for homemaking practices among international students is greatly influenced by the inherent sense of temporariness they experience from the beginning of their life abroad. However, despite this temporal aspect, secure occupancy remains intact as tenants have a clear understanding of their anticipated departure time.

Secure occupancy can be analyzed from three key aspects. Firstly, in terms of governance of occupancy, despite the intense housing market for international students, their secure occupancy is not significantly affected due to the tenant-friendly contracts. Even if the contract is temporary in nature, landlords are unable to terminate it without valid reasons. However, affordability remains a concern for maintaining secure occupancy among international students. To address this, they actively engage in negotiations with landlords, seeking eligibility for housing allowances as a means to improve their financial stability and secure their housing.

Secondly, in terms of material conditions, variations in secure occupancy can be observed in relation to the objects and furniture within the rooms. International students often make adaptations and use objects in creative ways to meet their needs, thereby enhancing their sense of home. However, the randomness and impermanence of these objects can serve as reminders of their temporary status, potentially restraining the maintenance of secure occupancy. On the other hand, fully furnished rooms, although offering less opportunity for personalization, tend to provide a higher sense of security. In such cases, tenants feel anchored rather than floated, contributing to a stronger sense of secure occupancy.

”So like there was a tv, they had like couches, like rocky table. It felt like something like you could just move in and feel comfortable. It wasn't like something where you

have to buy a lot of stuff to like make it feel like a home. That makes sense".
(Beca)

Thirdly, in terms of social configuration, secure occupancy is particularly influenced in shared housing, where the quality of relationships between roommates can significantly impact the stability of one's living situation. When there is an intense or negative relationship among roommates, it can create an environment of uncertainty and insecurity, restraining the sense of secure occupancy. Conversely, a positive and harmonious relationship among roommates can contribute to a more stable and secure living experience, fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring that tenants feel comfortable and supported in their living environments.

4.4.2 Autonomy

Autonomy emphasizes the freedom of tenants to personalize their rental housing environments. However, this freedom is often limited by housing tenures and regulations. Additionally, material conditions and social configuration can also impact the degree of autonomy experienced by tenants.

Firstly, due to the ambiguity of lease regulations and concerns about potential consequences, international students often feel hesitant to make significant changes in their rooms, such as decorating, rearranging furniture. This lack of freedom can restrict their ability to create a space that truly reflects their individuality and preferences. Nevertheless, tenants still seek to expand their autonomy by making minor adjustments, such as strategically placing objects that are both functional and ornamental. These small modifications allow them to exert some level of control over their environment and express their unique identity within the limitations imposed by the housing regulations.

In terms of social configuration, international students experience a greater sense of autonomy when they have complete privacy within their rooms, which they perceive as their personal "oasis". In this private space, they feel liberated to engage in activities without fear of disturbing or being judged by others. With the freedom afforded by privacy, they can be untidy, snore, shout, or even dance without concern for the consequences or reactions from others. This level of

privacy allows them to fully express themselves and engage in activities that bring them joy or relaxation, fostering a sense of personal autonomy and freedom within their living environment.

Other practices related to autonomy are influenced by both material and social configurations. Respondents often engage in personalized practices within their perceived private spaces, where they have full authority as tenants. In these spaces, they do not need to negotiate or seek approval from their roommates, which is particularly evident in shared housing situations. This autonomy allows them to make choices and modifications according to their personal preferences without having to consider the preferences or opinions of others. By exercising their tenant authority, they can create an environment that reflects their individuality and enhances their sense of autonomy within the shared living arrangement.

4.4.3 Self-identity

Self-identity reflects the extent to which living environments and social relationships allow tenants to express their unique lifestyles. Based on the empirical findings, most international students feel comfortable expressing their true selves in their living environments. However, the power of social norms can impact the ontological security of international students even before they have settled into their housing. This occurs through the "huurderselectie" (tenant selection) process, which grants landlords the authority to judge and select tenants based on their satisfaction. As a result, international students may feel compelled to conceal certain aspects of their identities that could potentially lead to rejection of their application.

The issue of self-identity also arises after tenants have settled into the housing, particularly in relation to their interactions with neighbors. Differences in lifestyles can lead to conflicts between student tenants and other social groups, impacting the livability of both parties. However, this does not imply that students should be isolated from other groups; instead, it calls for communication and mutual interactions to foster resilience within the neighborhood. This may require community centers to organize activities that promote this objective and facilitate greater cohesion among diverse residents.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Amid the pressing housing crisis in the Netherlands, this research endeavors to address the critical issue of homemaking experiences within rental housing, recognizing the potential for creating a more inclusive and sustainable living environment. With a specific focus on international students, this study aims to uncover their unique living experiences and homemaking practices while residing in rental housing in Groningen. Drawing inspiration from Eghbali's research framework (Eghbali, 2023) on students' homemaking studies, this research examines homemaking through the lenses of occupancy governance, material conditions, and social configuration, each of which constitutes a sub-research question.

Furthermore, this study incorporates the concept of ontological security as a fundamental element to explore the emotional and identity stability of international students. By examining the dynamic interplay between the three aspects of homemaking processes and the three layers of ontological security, this essay unveils the interconnected relationships within the context of the Netherlands. Through this comprehensive analysis, a deeper understanding of the complexities and dynamics of homemaking among international students can be gained, leading to potential insights for improving housing conditions and fostering a sense of security and well-being for all.

Based on eight interviews conducted between May and June 2023, this essay highlights the heightened vulnerability of international students in Groningen regarding rental housing when compared to local students. It is evident that an adverse cumulative effect on affordability has had a detrimental impact on their financial well-being. Additionally, the ambiguity surrounding lease agreements poses potential risks for their future homemaking practices. Compounded by the scarcity of available space and a perceived sense of temporariness, international students have resorted to creative methods of homemaking to attain ontological security. These methods include adapting existing objects, incorporating ornamental elements into functional furniture, and engaging in negotiations with landlords. It is important to note that while these homemaking practices contribute to a sense of stability, they can also reinforce the transitory nature of their living situation through the presence of temporary objects.

Furthermore, this research reveals the existence of institutional, spatial, and social limitations within the rental housing system that hinder international students' ability to achieve ontological security. In light of these findings, this research provides inspirations for policymakers, housing providers, and local communities to address these challenges. By implementing appropriate policies and fostering supportive environments, it is possible to enhance the housing conditions and overall well-being of international students in Groningen.

More specifically, while the municipality of Groningen is striving to solve the housing shortage of students, their previous plan of providing 400 more additional housing units for international students were shelved due to the inflation in construction costs (The northern Times, 2023). Although an alternative approach, termed “plan B” (Fabrizi, 2022), aims to connect Groningen residents with available spare bedrooms for students seeking accommodation, it potentially brings forth concealed challenges impacting homemaking and ontological security for international students. This assistance model could lead to imbalanced power dynamics between landlords and tenants, curbing tenant authority and self-expression. Meanwhile, the temporariness embedded in this form of rental housing reaches its peak, undermining the formation of a sense of belonging within the dwelling. What’s more, officials have contemplated the idea of having two individuals share a single room to alleviate housing pressure, a scenario that might hinder roommates and tenants from cultivating a “home” sentiment among international students.

Due to practical constraints, this research acknowledges certain limitations that were unable to be fully addressed in its current stage. However, these limitations can be taken into account for future studies. Firstly, this essay intentionally treats international students as a homogeneous collective, disregarding the variations arising from economic, social, and cultural factors within this group. Secondly, the absence of empirical data from local students as a reference point may overlook common issues faced by students and instead attribute them as unique experiences of international students. It is recommended that future studies address these empirical gaps to enhance the comprehensiveness of the research.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

General information

Gender/Nationality/Age/length of staying abroad/housing types

Where do you think can be best described as your home? What does “home” mean to you?

How long do you live in the current room? Do you feel like being at home here? Can you give me a room tour? (introduce the objects/layout/environment)

What is your dream home like? What elements are needed to make a house “your dream home”?

Occupancy of governance

affordability

How did you find this room and manage to live here?

Do you feel the room is worth the price?

lease regulations

How did you sign the contract?

Could you describe through what way did you sign the contract with your landlords?

Are there any obligations/regulations you have to abide by on the contract?

Have you had any conflicts with your landlords?

Material conditions

spatial configuration

What objects would mostly remind you of home? Have you placed anything in this room to make this space more home-like?

Have you ever changed the layout of your room?

architectural space

What do you like most/least about your room?

If you have a choice, which type of house you would choose to live as a student? High-rise building or low-rise housing?

Have you ever done sth. that is against the room restrictions?

-

Social configuration

collective participation

Have you ever treated your friends in your room?

How do you usually get along with your roommates?

Do you feel safe being an international student in this room and in this neighborhood?

social integration

How do you get along with your neighbors?

Do you consider yourself being part of this city/country?_

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Closing questions

Is there anything else we need to know or that you want to share with us?

Thank you very much.