

## Student Housing Choices and Aspirations: Private Renting or Ownership? The Case of Tallinn in Post-socialist Estonia

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### Abstract

Gaining housing autonomy in ownership-oriented housing systems has been observed as increasingly difficult for contemporary youth, including university students. This article analyses how students make sense of their experiences in private rentals, which is assumed to shape their dispositions and capacities to act in the housing market in the future. We contribute to the conceptualisation of young people's housing choices and aspirations by offering evidence from the understudied post-socialist context of Tallinn, Estonia. Inspired by Bourdieu's theory of practice and combining in-depth interviews with a survey, we show how the student experience in a weakly regulated private rental market supports their self-perception as established 'players' in the market, while developing a distinct investment-minded disposition to housing. Furthermore, the high symbolic value of homeownership conveyed by families in a 'super-homeownership' society has rather strengthened among students, despite restricted opportunities to market entry.

**Keywords:** housing aspirations, students, private renting, homeownership, post-socialist.

### Introduction

With the expansion of higher education, students as a social group is becoming larger as well as more diverse. In the structural circumstances of increasing individualisation across societies and the neoliberalisation of higher education, a growing share of students are looking for housing outside university campuses. This phenomenon cannot be explained by the shortage of university accommodation alone. Rather, research suggests that the preference for rental housing has specific meaning reflecting an aspiration towards greater housing autonomy during this period of the students' lives. There exists an extensive body of research from Western Europe, the US and Australia (for recent overviews see e.g., McKee, 2012; Preece et al., 2019) on youth housing preferences and aspirations. Much less is known about how young people and students in particular conceive of and attribute meanings to different types of tenure in post-socialist countries. This contribution addresses the gap in the literature by exploring the situation in post-socialist countries, where during the last 30 years since the transformation from state socialism to market economies, typically high levels of private ownership are combined with marginalised public housing provision and modest social housing policies (cf. Lux & Sunega, 2014). More specifically, we analyse how students construct the meaning of private renting in the post-socialist 'super-homeownership' context of Tallinn, the capital and largest city in Estonia, and how this current experience interconnects with the formation of their aspirations and future choices in the housing market.

Private rental housing tends to be the preferred option for the new generation starting their independent life. Whether the private rental sector can provide an alternative to housing ownership is a question that has gained attention across Europe, where ownership-oriented housing systems are increasingly failing to *fulfil the promise* for young highly educated professionals (cf. Arundel & Doling, 2017; Arundel & Ronald, 2021; Bobek et al., 2020; McKee et al., 2017). This equally concerns the youth in post-socialist neoliberal societies with even greater owner occupation. Furthermore, a series of recent and ongoing societal crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, rising energy costs

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and the war in Ukraine, is affecting the affordability of housing across Europe.

To elucidate how students in the private rental sector in Tallinn experience and perceive their current housing choices, as well as those they aspire to in the future, this article presents findings from in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in 2019–2020 and survey results from 2013. By drawing on recent academic observations on youth housing aspirations and choices, and Bourdieu's theory of practice, the article seeks answers to the following questions: How do students make sense of their choice of and experience in rental housing? How does this experience mould the capacities to perceive, understand and act in the housing field as well as shape their future housing aspirations?

We proceed from the ontological position that recognises the interrelationship between subjective agency and the dynamic of socio-cultural and economic structural circumstances in the specific time-space context (Crawford & McKee, 2016, 2018; McKee et al., 2017; Ojamäe, 2009; Paadam, 2003). Epistemologically, students as the subjects of the study are seen as actively making sense of the opportunities perceived as desirable but also available in present societal and economic realities; and more specifically, as giving meaning to how different forms of tenure and potential ways of residing (Paadam et al., 2017) might meet their expectations for future housing. Preferences or housing desires in the present reflect a particular habitus (Bourdieu, 1999), which individuals make sense of upon and in relation to more abstract aspirations, conceptualised as dreams or ideals projected into the future and perceived as achievable under favourable conditions (Preece et al., 2019). In conceptual terms, however, it is important to distinguish housing preferences and aspirations from choices as actual housing moves (e.g. see Ilmonen, 2017; van Ham, 2012).

This article proceeds by exploring the process of students' transition to independent housing, followed by theoretical elaborations on the formation of homeownership aspirations in specific symbolically loaded structural circumstances. This is continued by the related discussion of how individual capacities and strategic orientations to act in the market are shaped, and how the housing field has evolved in Tallinn and Estonia. The section on the research methodology is followed by a presentation of findings from a study of students in Tallinn, with further discussion of the formation of youth housing choices and aspirations in highly homeownership-oriented societies.

## Theoretical and empirical basis

### Choosing private renting: the transition to independent housing

The housing experiences of students need to be understood in the context of their transition to independent adulthood, which takes place simultaneously in different fields. Increasingly mobile, non-linear and fragmented biographies in late modernity (Giddens, 1991) are reflected in the diversity and complexity of youth housing trajectories, exemplified in the boomerang or yo-yo 'routes in-and-out of the parental home' caused by job instability (Arundel & Ronald, 2015, p. 887), as well as in the phenomenon of generation rent (among others, see e.g. Fuster et al., 2018; McKee et al., 2017). In parallel, contemporary students have arguably become more demanding about the standard of study accommodation. Along with the individualisation of preferences, they appear to be more prone to turn to private rental markets in societies with very different education and housing systems (e.g. Zasina & Antczak, 2021; Żróbek-Róžańska & Szulc, 2018; Thomsen & Eikemo, 2010; Verhetsel et al., 2016). Concurrently in public and policy discourses, private renting is often treated as a transitory stage before the eventual entry into home ownership (cf. Bate, 2020; Bobek et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, transient housing (Thomsen, 2007) in student years has implications for further choices as part of forming housing pathways (cf. Clapham, 2005). Research on housing histories (Paadam, 2003) shows that all earlier residential experiences, including parental homes, continue to shape housing aspirations, with the '*passing* stage' of student years functioning as a 'prologue' to the individual's independent housing career (Paadam, 2003, p. 143). Along with

Bourdieu (1994), the complex capacity built by every social experience inscribed in an individual's habitus 'realizes itself only in relation to the field it inhabits' (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 116). Hence, the students' experiences of private renting under observation here, in combination with their earlier residential and social experiences are assumed to broaden their understanding in terms of individual capacity and opportunities in the housing field. This means that individual actions or strategies in the field 'cannot be deduced from either the immediate position or immediate situation' but need to be linked to 'individual history' (Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 211-212), and therefore are assumed to 'be controlled through awakening of consciousness...' (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 116). Although research on this topic has remained scarce in post-socialist conditions, evidence from other societies shows that the independent housing experience during the student-period provides 'essential education in housing' (Rugg et al., 2004, p. 19) and enhances graduates' prospects in the field compared to other young people (cf. also Christie et al., 2010; Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2014). Therefore, research from different societies and residential cultures seems to suggest that individual aspirations and actual housing choices ought to be understood in light of dispositions and capacities as continuously shaped in the interplay of individual experiences and the dynamics of societal circumstances.

### Symbolic significance of ownership

It has been observed, especially in homeowner societies, that the ownership of housing property is loaded with strong connotations as a respected form of tenure and sought after identity regardless of individual capacity to access ownership (e.g. see Aramburu, 2015; Arundel & Ronald, 2021; Fuster et al., 2018; Ilmonen, 2017; Preece et al., 2019; Rowlands & Gurney, 2000). As often denoting an equivalent of *home*, acquiring housing property entails emotional value extending beyond its economic value. However, taken as a specific form of cultural production, contemporary residential culture developing in terms of lifestyle-driven ever-diversifying ways of residing (Paadam et al., 2017) but continuously under the circumstances of normalised homeownership, produces symbolic goods in two ways – commodities and symbolic objects (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 113). Hence, starting a home (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 20) holds the promise of being endowed with symbolic capital, a 'degree of accumulated prestige [...] founded in a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*)' (Johnson, 1993, p. 7 on Bourdieu, 1993), which 'rescues agents from insignificance, the absence of importance and of meaning' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 242). Along these lines, it has been argued that homeownership *per se* belongs to the realm of myths taking 'the form of moral tales, or images' (Kemeny, 1992, p. 87), enhanced in the increasing commodification of housing. Likewise, Bourdieu (2005) brings to our attention the socially constituted nature of the desire for housing ownership, the seductive power of the 'mythopoeitics' (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 24) inscribed in the synergy of words (political, commercial discourses) and things (materiality of property). Mythologised ownership as a component of 'symbolic meaning structures' (Ilmonen, 2017, p. 49) affects the shaping of diverse dispositions, aspirations, preferences and, indeed, actual housing choices, as well as individuals' capacities to interpret the circumstances in the field against their capacities. This is to emphasise the distinctness between individuals' capacities disposing them not only towards following a particular *dream* but also to *dream* of a particular housing or residence or tenure. As put by Bourdieu (2000, p. 149), 'Dispositions do not lead in a determinate way to a determinate action; they are revealed and fulfilled only in appropriate circumstances and in relationship with the situation. They may therefore remain in a virtual state...'. The volume and structure of species of capital (economic, social, cultural) at the disposal of young people is crucial on entering the property market to meet their preferences, or (re)decide in favour of renting or buying (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 26). Bourdieu also indicates a paradoxical difference between conceiving of a preference for and achieving property ownership, which for the younger generation denotes meeting their housing needs 'while at the same time building up a patrimony in terms of real estate' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 25). Moreover, along with the neoliberalisation of welfare systems, where housing property is positioned as a primary investment target for individuals to build up their welfare by themselves, the rise of investment mentalities is inherent to contemporary social systems (Watson, 2009). This is seen as shaping housing dispositions so that ownership might be valued not only for 'nesting' but also 'investing' (as in Doling & Ford, 2003, p. 221), adding another layer to the meaning of housing ownership. For example, Nethercote (2018) has observed changing

cultures of housing consumption among middle-class residents in Australia: an emergence of investor-centric priorities in addition to more traditional home-centred ambitions. Much less is known about the socialisation of younger generations into investment cultures in post-socialist societies with the relatively recent experience of replacing the state-socialist system of public housing with extreme 'super-homeownership' (Stephens et al., 2015) and a market-liberal housing system.

Drawing on Bourdieu (2005), the transfer of parental resources concerns not only economic capital, as obvious for entering the housing market, but also social, cultural, and certainly symbolic capital, denoting multimodal conversions of capital (Bourdieu, 1999). The increasing significance of intergenerational support has been observed across Europe (Coulter et al., 2020; McKee, 2012; Ronald & Lennartz, 2018). Therefore, understanding the aspirations of the today's youth requires insights into individual housing histories intertwined with biographical experience in parental homes and the wider dynamic of structural processes.

### **Tallinn, the capital of Estonia: present and past legacies**

The attitudes of students towards ownership become explicit in the current tenure structure in Estonia (formed after the ownership reform in the 1990s), where the owner occupation rate is as high as 81% (as of 2020, EUROSTAT, 2020), and public housing rate as low as 1% (2% in Tallinn, Statistics Estonia, 2011). This ultimately shows the state's withdrawal from active housing policy.

However, the housing field, residential culture and people's aspirations in Estonia today need to be understood against the backdrop of two profound societal transformations during the 20th century. While ownership of housing and private renting dominated in the independent state of Estonia before WWII, the subsequent Soviet occupation brought 50 years of socialist disruption. Private ownership and private renting of housing were re-normalised only after Estonia regained its independence in 1991. The research suggests that the symbolic value of homeownership and the new rise of such aspirations in the 1990s were reinforced, on the one hand, by the people's desire to distance themselves from the Soviet centralised housing system and concurrently, by the image of the preserved stock of detached housing from before and after WWII, on the other hand. Despite the fact that detached houses were the minority among housing types (30% in Estonia, 10% in Tallinn), they became increasingly desirable because they functioned as a symbol of private ownership (Bourdieu, 2005) throughout the socialist system (Paadam & Ojamäe, 2013). The 1990s return to market relations was, however, exceptional as the ownership reform made it possible to privatise the formerly public housing property for practically all tenants of miscellaneous socio-economic capacities. The highly disparate quality and market value of privatised dwellings placed the new property owners into distinct starting positions in the emerging market, replicating the inequality patterns of the socialist period (see also Stephens et al., 2015). Therefore, to understand current youth or student aspirations and choices, it is necessary to carefully consider the interplay of processes on multiple scales of time and space.

Unlike most post-socialist countries with typically minimal financialisation of housing (Stephens et al., 2015), Estonia has a functioning property market where the mortgaged ownership rate is the highest among post-socialist countries (23% in 2019, EUROSTAT, 2020); high levels of housing transactions have until recently coincided with a high real house price index (Stephens et al., 2015) and low interest rates. The capital city of Tallinn (458,000 residents), together with the surrounding county Harjumaa, forms 63% of Estonia's GDP and 46% of the country's population (as of 2021, StatisticsEstonia, n.d.). Therefore, a significant share of housing market activities is concentrated in and around Tallinn, explaining the current article's focus on the capital city.

The free-market housing policy in Estonia has been upheld by a dominant discourse that presumes housing as an individual responsibility. This is also reflected in the low regulation of the private rental market (Dinse, 2015), where a significant share of rental flats is owned by private individuals with one or more flats rented out (Hussar, 2014). While private renting is strong in central areas and in attractive new housing developments in Tallinn, the lower quality privatised dwellings in the large-scale Soviet-type housing areas still quantitatively dominate the Tallinn housing stock

(Kuulpak, 2021), and provide the bulk of affordable rentals for students. So far, there are no private capital investments in rental housing specifically targeting the student population (e.g. as in French et al., 2018). Although some concentrations of students around the main campuses can be noticed, the processes of residential studentification are not so evident in Tallinn as typical of cities in post-socialist societies (e.g. see Grabkowska & Frankowski, 2016; Murzyn-Kupisz & Szymtkowska, 2015; Zasina & Antczak, 2021).

## Methodology and data

To discuss the questions posed in the introduction, we draw on a series of studies conducted in Estonia. The empirical analysis is primarily based on findings from the qualitative study of students in private rentals in Tallinn, with supporting insights provided by data from our earlier quantitative survey conducted among university students in Estonia.

Qualitative research comprising 16 in-depth interviews was carried out in 2019 and 2020 with students renting in the private sector in Tallinn, to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. Through purposeful selection, students studying at bachelor and master's level in different public universities and study programmes (social sciences, engineering, arts) were recruited in Tallinn. The sample was balanced in terms of gender (M=7, F=9) and varied in terms of residential settings (4 living alone, 5 with roommate(s), 7 with partner). All interviewees come from middle-class families from various regions of Estonia (including Tallinn), and as characteristic of their generation, have grown up in homes owned by the family. They have all moved to (or stayed in) Tallinn to access the highest variety of university education options available in Estonia. The age range of the interviewees is 19–23 years. All interviewees live autonomously apart from their parents but to a varying degree are semi-dependent on their financial support; all of them are working at some intensity to cover their living expenses, as common among Estonian students.

The interviewed students were recruited via calls in social media and university mailing lists. Later snowballing and personal networks were used to recruit interviewees defined by the initial analysis as necessary to enrich the dataset. All interviewees were informed about the goals of the research, guaranteed full anonymity and confidentiality of data processing, and as such the consent of all interviewees was received.

The interviewing strategy combined biographical and semi-structured interviews. During the first phase, the interviewees were encouraged to share their housing histories from childhood in parental home(s) to their current circumstances. During the second phase, the interviews focused more on the students' current experiences in the private rental sector as well as on their future housing aspirations. The interviews were completed either face-to-face or online using video conference software.

To conduct an inductive thematic analysis of the interviews, audio-recordings and transcriptions were both used. Repeatedly listening to the recordings to retain the sense of the biographical whole of the interviews complemented the coding and developing of themes from the transcripts and supported the interpretation of the students' stories in the context of their personal housing histories.

The findings from the qualitative analysis conducted in Tallinn are complemented by descriptive quantitative data from an online survey among bachelor and master's students in all six public universities in Estonia, in the cities of Tallinn (4 universities) and Tartu (2 universities) in 2013. The calls to participate in the survey were distributed by university administrators via official e-mail lists. The final sample of 2,724 students is representative in terms of gender and distribution of students across different study areas and levels at the time. In this article, we focus on tenants in the private rental sector (33% of the total sample,  $n = 907$ ). The figures provided in the following chapters are calculated for this specific subsample if not stated otherwise. Despite the time-lag between the two studies, there is no reason to presume any substantial shift had occurred among students in the housing field in Estonia, as was also confirmed by the analysis of the data demonstrating concurrent tendencies.

Therefore, we subsequently combine the data from both studies to analyse the experience and meaning of private rental accommodation for university students in relation to their current preferences as well as their housing aspirations and prospects imagined for the future. While the qualitative in-depth interviews are considered the primary data for realising the aims of the current article, the quantitative survey provides the opportunity to situate the in-depth interpretations within the wider population of private rental students in Estonia.

The quotations from the interviews in the article are translated from Estonian and presented as unmodified and anonymised using pseudonyms.

## Students in the private rental market: current choice and future aspirations

### Present preference and choice – renting

#### *Why?*

Leaving the parental home is an important part of the transition to adulthood and contains powerful cultural ideas and societal norms about the proper timing and method for accomplishing it (cf. Clapham, 2005). The findings from our qualitative study clearly show that students consider entering the rental market as a significant step towards independence, an individual achievement and a source of pride.

*For me, this independent life in my very own [rental] housing suits really well. I believe I made this step at the right moment. (Pille)*

In-depth analysis of the interviews reinforced by evidence from the survey allows us to assert that students in the private rental sector form a specific group with quite refined preferences towards greater housing autonomy. Apparently, their decisions to enter the rental market are not primarily influenced by a shortage of dormitory places, as only 11% of students in the survey confirmed that to have been the reason for moving. While 67% of the respondents considered privacy the main advantage of rental accommodation, the interviewees also admit that autonomous use and maintenance of the dwelling, a calmer and quieter environment for studying and no need to share the space with potentially unsuitable roommates are important qualities of private renting.

*...when you live together [in a dormitory] with four people, well, there is relatively little privacy. I wanted to have a room of my own at least. (Johanna)*

*...privacy above all. Then I know that everything is as I left it and then it is simply pleasant to return. The place is clean and organised in my way and there is no-one else there. (Karol)*

When choosing their rental flat, it is the overall quality of the dwelling the students compromise most on to meet their budget. A central location would also be preferable but findings from the survey show that accessible rental housing with all the basic conveniences is available mainly in Soviet-era pre-fabricated blocks in large-scale housing areas. The interviews equally demonstrated the students' readiness to adjust to what is found to be accessible.

*If I had a flat of my own, I would have painted something, changed the wallpaper, fixed the kitchen, and furniture [...] I do not feel like buying something for this flat ... neither did we start redecorating as we knew we would not stay here forever [...] this is not the home of our dreams. Well, but we manage all right here. (Tarmo)*

Evidently, our research participants appreciate their transitory housing situation foremost for the symbolic meaning of independence and individual control it provides, both in comparison to their parental home and the dormitory. Demonstrating a relatively high level of adaptability to what is offered on the rental market, there is still a baseline expectation of privacy and decent quality.

## How?

Access to the private rental market requires resources. The economic capital at the disposal of our research participants varies. According to the survey, a quarter (25%) of the renting students cover their living expenses fully by themselves. Another quarter (23%) share expenses with a partner, the rental costs for one fifth (19%) are fully covered by their parents and the remaining third (34%) uses different combinations of resources.

For the interviewees, working alongside their studies is important to secure access to independent housing, enabling them to cover the costs of the rented flat and other living expenses, but not to save for the future. Student work – often in non-professional and low-paid positions – is normalised in Estonian society and the employment rate for Estonian students is among the highest in Europe (Brooks, 2017): in a recent Eurostudent survey, 68% of students in Estonia reported they were working, and covering housing expenses was mentioned as the most frequent reason for students working (Koppel et al., 2020). However, working alongside studies demands compromises which the interviewees themselves do not seem to find problematic. Quite the contrary, they tend to take pride in the achievement of managing their lives independently.

Obviously, sharing a flat and the associated costs is one of the financially most accessible options. About a third (33%) of renting students share with friends or peers, slightly more (36%) share the flat with a partner, and a quarter (26%) rent alone. Sharing with friends is most common at the beginning of studies, and the interviews provide evidence of how sharing with friends in ‘intentional’ communities is a valued practice, yet a choice that is primarily considered suitable for this period of their life.

*If at all, then it's now [...] this is the age to live together [...] to sense the taste of communal living before we all part into our own lives [...] young people do need to socialise with others. (David)*

In the later phases of their studies, sharing with friends is increasingly replaced by sharing with a partner that also contributes to the accessibility of rental housing, using their combined resources.

Therefore, sharing is paradoxically key to moving towards individual independence; especially considering the survey data, according to which only a limited share of students are granted full parental provision. The interviews, however, indicate that parental support comes in different packages of various types of capital and explicitly represent the unique as well as more general nature of the intergenerational conversion of capital. Support ranges from monthly payments to occasional or one-off contributions, such as helping to pay for furniture or other supplies for the flat. Furthermore, the interviewees’ stories reveal that the presence of the parental home is seen as a form of reserve capital to be used if needed, easing the mental burden of coping.

*I can always return home, indeed, although they [parents] rather favour the thought of starting my own life. But in case something happened, they would not throw me out in such a situation. (Johanna)*

However, returning to the parental home is not considered likely – or at least, desirable – by the interviewees. For many it would not be possible because of the distance between the parental home and university. Even more importantly, this move would not match the students’ view of themselves as independent adults, neither in mental nor in practical terms.

*In an emergency [I can return], for sure. But, in principle, no. My acquaintances have also said that if you returned to your parents’ home now, you cannot possibly start your own life. (Stella)*

Although it is well known from previous research that this kind of yo-yo movement in-and-out of the parental home is quite common among today’s youth (Arundel & Ronald, 2015), the interviews allow us to claim that having already gained at least a semi-independent status, the students would perceive such a move as a considerable decrease of self-esteem and a setback in identity building. At the same time, the opportunity to return may still have special value as parental support that they can count on.

### *Experience and meaning*

The survey results indicate the students are fairly satisfied with their rental situation, despite their relatively insecure legal position. A third (34%) claim to have only oral agreements; about half of the written rental contracts appear to be on a fixed-term basis. Among the fixed-term contracts, 93% are set for a maximum period of one year. At the same time, only 4% of the renting students expressed clear dissatisfaction with their landlord.

The high rate of satisfaction can be explained by how students view rental accommodation – as *transitory* and suitable for their mobile lifestyle. The interviewed students appear prepared for potential changes in their housing situation originating from changes in other fields. This kind of indeterminacy is prioritised over the security of a rental relationship. For example, Heleri demonstrates flexibility in relation to the uncertainties of her current housing situation:

*...at the moment it is not fixed [rental agreement without a term], although we mentioned [to the landlord] that one could never know what life might bring. Between us we discussed that we will stay here at last up to the end of the year. But one can only guess, my flatmate is about to enter a relationship; I do not know what comes next. (Heleri, oral agreement with 1-month notice)*

What appears from the interviews is that students, still newcomers in the market, construct their understanding of the rental market based on their own experiences, where short-term contracts, limited tenant rights and the stronger position of the owner in negotiations are a reality, as observed also elsewhere (e.g. for UK, see McKee et al., 2019). The students tend to have low expectations and lack specific knowledge about their legal rights: the conditions offered by the owner are usually accepted without much consideration or negotiation, especially when choosing their first rental flats. The renting experience of the interviewees comprised a series of moves between different places, which they appreciated for the way this improved their knowledgeability. Seen this way, the experience of renting plays a significant role in the socialisation of students as market actors. Their interest and need to observe the rental market situation and their deepening ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1994) has particular impact on the growth of the cultural capital at their disposal that might prove relevant for subsequent market activities. This journey has also provided opportunities for them to gradually learn about their own preferences, which might have been rather ambiguous and non-articulated when they first entered the market. Accordingly, their ability to evaluate different options available on the market has improved.

*...back then we had few criteria as this was the first flat of our own; I could not think of anything [...] with this first flat... we got some experience. We learned what we want and what we do not want. I certainly understood what I like and what I dislike. (Pille)*

Individual stories also indicate increased self-confidence in negotiating and standing up for their rights. This is something that the interviewees highlight as an important skill in the market, especially after having experienced stereotypical attitudes or even discrimination from their landlords, as exemplified in Jarek’s story:

**Jarek:** *[when we were searching for a flat with a friend as] two young men, students – the owners, they simply declined us at once; but when we started searching for a flat with my partner ... then it was quite the other way round, we could choose a flat and there was no owner to turn us away.*

**Interviewer:** *Were students mistrusted?*

**Jarek:** *Yes, you could say so. When we looked for a flat with my partner then we did not play this card that openly, rather we told them that we worked part-time and we mentioned at once our professions to look at least a little bit... more important (laughing).*

Learning to present themselves as equal ‘players’ in the field is one of the unintended consequences of their first market choices and experiences, contributing to their future capacity as market actors.



### Future aspirations – owning

The dominant Estonian ideal of becoming an owner of housing property is also evident from the students' aspirations. The status of a homeowner is constructed by the interviewed students quite traditionally as a normalised step in their future housing career and as a pre-requisite for a *normal* family life. This particular construction reflects the persistent normative basis in a super-homeownership society. Another recurrent argument in the interviews relates to the perceptions of structural opportunities; due to the lack of long-term and affordable rental opportunities, students see no other option than to purchase property. The students estimate the cost of monthly rental as roughly equal to loan re-payments, and seen from an investment-perspective renting is considered a waste of economic capital.

*I investigate and observe [the property market situation]. In sum, there is no district in Tallinn where renting would be cheaper than buying a flat. (Villem)*

*Actually, I have always been a little bit against renting and think that I am simply wasting my money and, in principle, blowing it to the air. [...] If I had the possibility I would take a loan, then I would have something what was entirely mine. (Heleri)*

The students' renting experience has not weakened their homeownership aspirations, and for some, these aspirations have even strengthened. Limited autonomy and control in renting is not considered constraining in their current transitory housing phase. However, they do believe it forms an important constraint on homemaking in the future, in more stable phases of life where homeownership is expected to provide safe and controllable conditions for personal as well as family life.

Although considerations about the timing of a purchase were rather ambiguous, a recurrent theme was quite traditional: becoming an owner is expected to happen at the latest as life starts to stabilise in other fields, such as work, education or family. Settling down and creating a own home in a rental flat is not part of those young people's future dreams because of their own experiences of insecurity and temporality in the rental sector.

*When we have a child, I would prefer him/her to have their own home [...] in a rental home you never know what will happen next, perhaps you really need to move out at three-months' notice, and you are attached to the place and especially with children, I would not wish to move. I dislike this [idea]. I would like them to be in one place. Having a home of one's own is a different matter, you can redecorate [your home]. In a rental home you cannot do things the way you want to. (Anette)*

However, different individual dispositions towards property ownership also appear to be significant in how the interviewees construct the meaning of ownership. In the case of a more traditional **home-creation** disposition, buying property and taking a housing loan is not seen to be compatible with the mobile lifestyle students assume for themselves.

*Right now, I feel my lifestyle is quite like, it is not that stable that I would dare to buy property yet. I rather think that I am in the position of a tenant [...] when I am not sure what I would do next or whether I go abroad... then what shall I do with a house or a flat. (Johanna)*

In the case of a kind of novel **investment-oriented** disposition, the students consider buying property as one way to increase their *financial freedom*, and hence not constraining but enabling a mobile lifestyle. For this group, property is seen as an asset that can be used flexibly to support any momentary life project – either to live in as a home or rent out, with the constant option of withdrawing the equity or selling the property.

*My plan is to earn more money to save, then buy a flat in Estonia and possibly rent it out when I am abroad. (David)*

*When I arrived in Tallinn, I had the idea of buying a flat at once if possible. The system itself has caught my interest, like making a full purchase payment for one flat and putting it up for rent, well, then at some point you could buy another flat and cover the expenses; for example, the monthly loan payments, from the payments coming from renting your flat. Well, I have always seen this [scheme] as an investment. (Toomas)*

The investment orientation appears to be a well-suited housing strategy for a financialised housing field, which a specific group of students seem to identify with rather easily. What is remarkable is that while some interviewees refrained from using the investment disposition when talking about their imagined homes, other interviewees used both interchangeably, depending on the narrative context. In the next quote, Heleri explains her strategy to create her home(s) through a sequence of investments:

*I would like to have a house of my own, for sure. But, yes, I may start with a flat. Today, a lot of people buy a flat first, live there for a short period of time, then later rent it out or sell it and then buy a house. This is the plan I wish to realise one day. (Heleri)*

Therefore, a dwelling is not only seen, or sometimes not even primarily seen, as a place to settle down in and create a home, but also as property with exchange value that is expected at the right moment to be tradable for profit on the market.

### **Perceiving capacities to fulfil aspirations**

As it appears from the survey, the desire to become an owner right after graduation is expressed most strongly among those students that are renting privately (46%), in comparison to those living in university dormitories (33%) or the parental home (35%), who tend to plan to enter the rental market first, and purchase property sometime later. This difference cannot be sufficiently explained by volumes of economic capital. There appeared no significant difference in the students' estimations of their access to housing loans: 70% of all survey participants irrespective of their current living arrangements expect it will require significant effort. Furthermore, anticipations of parental transfers are lowest amongst rental sector students: 38% of renting students expect to receive partial parental support in comparison to 48% of those living in the parental home or 46% living in dormitories. In the survey, the respondents expressed expectations about the future but not their actual options for realising these hopes; therefore, such differences can at least partly be explained by the distinct ways the students currently identify and position themselves as housing market actors. As shown above, market experience shapes the development of specific cultural capital in the sample group and their disposition and courage to imagine the next step in their housing career in a more ambitious way.

Even if entering the housing market as a buyer is a clear aspiration bound up with a professional career and starting a family, the students' perceptions of the future are kind of ambivalent. On the one hand, there are classical modern expectations of a linear progression in work, family, and housing. On the other hand, there is an awareness of the difficulties in realising those expectations with two central points of concern: their limited capacity to save for a mortgage down payment (in the survey results, 72% of renting students consider this step highly difficult), and to be qualified for the housing loan (39% respectively) because of their precarious position in the labour market. Feelings of uncertainty towards the future were also presented in the interviews. Buying a property with a housing loan is bound to a relatively established economic and labour market position. Reaching this level of income security is not necessarily taken for granted even after graduation. Anette's statement below reveals her doubts together with her strategy aimed at building status to qualify for a housing loan.

*I do not know what is ahead. It can depend on the economic state of affairs; for example, not being eligible for a loan, not having sufficient income or savings to make the down payment, which is quite high. Maybe I will not have the sum needed /.../ I'm paid in cash, off the books. But since I am about to receive my BA degree now, I plan to find a job at once and start raising my status as an employee. At this moment I am unemployed in the eyes of the state and the bank, with zero income. (Anette)*

From the survey, only 39% of renting students hoped to receive partial economic support for a property purchase from their parents. However, the influence of the parents appears to be significant in multiple respects beyond the provision of economic capital. This implies the socialisation environment, the acquisition of cultural and social capital in a broad sense as holding particular value, as well as experiencing and learning how different choices are attributed meaning and prioritised within the family. Toomas' story displays a case of intergenerational transfer and the conversion of multiple capitals. By the time of our interview, he was in the middle of finalising a long-term plan to move from a rental flat into his first recently purchased flat. Toomas and his partner received economic support from their parents. But not only, the parents also made use of their social circle to enable more favourable conditions for their children's property purchase.

*...it came ... in principle thanks to my partner's family, we got a very good offer [...] we didn't look for it, the opportunity simply opened for us [...] both parents supported with down payments for the loan. (Toomas)*

There are salient expectations of economic value accumulation through property, and of an ever-increasing level of security for homeowners in comparison to tenants, shared by both investment-minded as well as home-creation oriented students. Although the risks associated with housing loans and ownership are acknowledged in principle, they are not counted as affecting future aspirations. These findings from the interviews are strongly supported by the survey results, where 98% of respondents agreed that there are risks involved in loan taking, whereas more than 90% considered buying a property as an investment enabling them to financially secure their future. This allows us to conclude that in addition to the lower degree of autonomy and security currently attributed to rental housing, the accumulation of economic value promised by ownership is something that the students seem to fear missing out on. Our research data does not allow us to assess whether our participants' aspirations are successfully realised, but the existence of such an investment disposition towards housing ownership among students is remarkable and explains part of why their ownership aspirations persist, reinforced by their socialisation, structural circumstances, and the cultural norms in the market-led and ownership-centred housing context in Estonia.

## Discussion and conclusions

Our research aimed to understand the formation of the housing choices and aspirations of university students, set within the particular structural and cultural context of post-socialist Estonia. The findings allow us to assert that homeownership appears to be a deeply internalised preference, with the private rental sector providing the only alternative in student years and beyond. For students who are starting their independent housing careers, the private rental market meets their needs for transitory or short-term housing, but it is not perceived as a long-term solution. These soon-to-be highly educated young people belong to the most mobile groups in contemporary societies, and in principle could be considered relatively more disposed towards continuous renting after graduation, especially in circumstances of diminishing access to housing ownership. Our research participants tend not to confirm that view, especially where ownership aspirations are concerned, which have not lost significance after their first experiences in the private rental market, rather the contrary. As typical of lightly regulated rental markets (e.g. McKee et al., 2019), the attractiveness of the private rental sector as a stable tenure is hampered by its insecurity. As stressed in other societal contexts, neoliberal policy regulations and public discourse tend to not consider a rental dwelling a home (cf. Bate, 2020), and in a financialised housing field, renting denotes a 'waste of money' from the student perspective. What makes a 'super-homeownership' context specific is the near non-existent provision of public housing and lack of alternatives to market-based housing.

Identifying housing needs and finding suitable rental market offers in the context of diverse sales strategies does not appear to be a natural skill but needs to be learned by the individual in the housing market as a field in the *Bourdieuian* sense. Young people with different family backgrounds, housing histories and capacities, unsurprisingly have different dispositions. The

choice to leave the parental home and/or university accommodation can be considered an experience and simultaneously a symbol of independence, granting students a certain sense of self-esteem and position in the housing market. Our research, in particular, shows how the students' first experiences in the rental market play a considerable role in acquiring capacity – knowledge about various options and their feasibility in the specific housing market context. Our findings align with Nethercote (2018), who demonstrates in her research in Australia how middle-class residents relate to their privately owned housing property not only as an object of consumption ('home-centred ambitions'), but increasingly also as a mode of consumption ('investor-centric priorities'), conditioned through within-family socialisation. Due to the specific societal history, a significant majority of current youth in Estonia across different societal strata has grown up in homes owned by their parents. We see current student behaviour patterns and future aspirations in the housing market as strongly supported by their socialisation circumstances in parental homes and their own personal experiences in the rental market. Through these processes, these young people seem to have internalised the neoliberal housing market culture without much questioning, and obtained investment-mindedness and some self-confidence as market actors.

Ownership aspirations are often observed as tied to an anticipated emotional and economic stabilisation of their housing situation. Our study shows that a share of young people in Estonia envisage their housing property kept as capital in constant circulation in the market, as a means of meeting their more ambitious housing aspirations in the future. This kind of (imagined) mobility is usually attributed to renting as a tenure option but occurs here as a distinct strategy of sequential moving towards higher quality property. Students identifying as *financialised selves* (Watson, 2009) appear to display a coping strategy in the housing system, where housing is distributed almost entirely via the market and the dominant homeownership ideology presumes housing wealth as central in securing individual well-being. This presents an *asset-based welfare system par excellence*, primarily discussed previously in the context of Western societies (e.g. see Arundel & Ronald, 2021) but taken to the maximum in a neoliberal super-homeownership society.

Our study has demonstrated how rental sector students appear to be a social group who, despite all the late-modern risks and uncertainties, still see themselves on the winning side of financialised housing systems. This expectation is supported equally by their identities as experienced market actors in comparison to their generational peers, as well as being accustomed to steadily increasing housing prices in recent decades. Considering the recent multiple societal crises in Europe, and their potential combined impact on the diminishing affordability of housing, the prospects for students today of fulfilling the dream of ownership might remain virtual (Bourdieu, 2000) or limited. In combination with differing opportunities for the intergenerational transfer and conversion of capital, including the symbolic capital aspired to via the acquisition of homeownership, the reproduction of existing socio-economic positions and accumulation of housing wealth (in line with Bourdieu, 2005; c.f. also Ronald & Lennartz, 2018) can only be expected to increase. It has been noted across Europe that contemporary housing markets function increasingly as an important dimension of growing inequality and insecurity (Arundel & Ronald, 2021; McKee, 2012; McKee et al., 2017). In Estonia, as in other societies with nearly non-existent or minimal institutional support for young people entering the market, and with no buffer provided by public housing provision, the repercussions of the structural processes mentioned above can be expected to continue to severely affect the process of starting an independent housing career.

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