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"And this is where my mind is": space, place, and "student mental health and wellbeing" (SMHWB) in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Declining 'Student Mental Health and Wellbeing' (SMHWB) remains a concern in UK Higher Education (UKHE); within this the space(s)/place(s)-SMHWB nexus is underexplored. This underappreciation is in large part fuelled by sectoral neoliberal emphases and methodological imbalances; obscured remain valuable qualitative insights. This article discusses spatial aspects arising from a project exploring SMHWB experiences. Informed by a research lens comprising of perspectives drawn from The Power Threat Meaning Framework, the sociology of emotions and emotional geographies, (alongside a researcher 'living experience'), Free Association Narrative interviews, fronted by a Social Media Elicitation reflection task, were conducted with 21 UK undergraduates. Generated via Reflexive Thematic Analysis was qualitative insight into students' space-/place-related mental health associations/labels; needs/wants to 'feel at home'; desires for personal spatial control, and meaning-making in experiences of university (support) spaces. Such important contextual details provide crucial information to enhance understanding of (the spatial (narrative and framing) emotionalities of current) SMHWB.

KEYWORDS

Emotion; mental health; reflexive thematic analysis; Student; University

Introduction

Mapping current UK 'student mental health and wellbeing' (SMHWB)

This article takes as its starting point the continuing concern that is rising rates of recorded university student mental distress in the UK. Alongside a "veritable blizzard of articles and reports" (Morgan 2024) signposting urgency, increasingly detailed statistical reporting makes clear a continuing and concerning upward trajectory in UK students' distress levels (Thorley 2017; Morgan 2024). Current information outlines students' reporting of mental health conditions as being, "almost five times higher than [it was] a decade earlier" (Lewis and Stiebahl 2025, 4); loneliness has been identified as a growing issue of concern (Malta et al. 2022; Frampton and Smithies 2021), and universities are themselves noting surging demand for financial aid and

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welfare services whilst simultaneously having to grapple with their own rising operational costs (Office for Students 2025). Research signallings of ongoing connections between student mental health deterioration and the COVID19pandemic and 'cost of living crisis' (Hall 2022a, 2022b; Office for National Statistics 2023a; Russell Group Students' Unions 2023; Frampton and Smithies 2021; Chen and Lucock 2022) indicate university experiences as now frequently characterised by intertwined experiences of anxiety, isolation and financial hardship (Office for National Statistics 2023b; Frampton and Smithies 2021) (including food insecurity (Lewis 2023)); post-graduation uncertainty also adds to the pressures (Tomlinson, Reedy, and Burg 2023). Altogether, such facets illustrate the multiple factors contributing to the still-evolving, complex issue labelled 'student mental health and wellbeing' (SMHWB).

In response to the concerning SMHWB landscape, sectoral and institutional proclamations of increased concern and commitment to act are being made. Indeed, student support is core in continuing discussions about what "post-coronial" universities should *be* and *do* (Eringfeld 2021; Raaper and Brown 2020; Waddington 2021). Interventions are being piloted and/or implemented (Dhingra, Klonsky, and Tapola 2018; Mistry 2018; Hughes and Spanner 2019; Office for Students 2020; Universities UK 2018a, 2018b, 2020); new advice and guidance are being issued (Universities UK 2018b, 2022a, 2022b; Office for Students 2023). Central to sector SMHWB pronouncements and improvement efforts is the idea of taking 'a whole university approach' toward the issue (Barrett and Twycross 2020; Brewster and Cox 2023; Pollard et al. 2021; Worsley, Harrison, and Corcoran 2023; Office for Students 2021). Such an approach, it is claimed, "recognises the effect of culture and environment, and specific inequalities, on mental health and wellbeing" and "seeks to transform the university into a healthy setting" (Universities UK 2020, 12). Such an aim is explicitly outlined in the University Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner 2019), which clearly identifies "the physical environment as pivotal in creating a supportive environment for the promotion of mental health" (Boyd 2022, 1). To perhaps be inferred are two elements: first, that to contribute to improved states and experiences of SMHWB there is particular need to unite the still disparate and disconnected spaces that comprise 'University', and second, that SMHWB as *situated in place* is in need of better acknowledgement.

SMHWB: Neoliberal emphases and methodological imbalances

Though sector intentions may appear positive, research regarding SMHWB still points to large gaps in awareness and fully effective support provision (Dhingra, Klonsky, and Tapola 2018; Gask et al. 2017; Yasuhiro, Conway, and Van Gordon 2018; Batchelor et al. 2020). There are thus elements of the

current engagement requiring of review. That UK universities have become more uncertain regarding their priorities, purpose, indeed *place*, is of first significance to acknowledge (O'Connor 2021 as quoted in Brooks and O'Shea 2021; Desierto and de Maio 2020; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018). What cannot be underestimated in this conversation is the UKHE sector's experiencing of change, "linked to consumerisation, neo-liberalisation, 1990s expansion, widening participation policies since 1997, [and] tuition fee rise' (Sykes 2021 as quoted in Brooks and O'Shea 2021, 79; Robbins 2019). The reference here to neo-liberalisation is particularly important. As the dominant guiding political and economic ideology of the last few decades (Monbiot 2016), neoliberalism emphasises free markets and individualism (Desierto and de Maio 2020). In reference to higher education specifically, neoliberalisation refers to the marketization and commodification of education (Canaan and Shumar 2008), importantly involving a shift in emphasis from social and educational value to competition (Desierto and de Maio 2020). Under neoliberalism, universities have become businesses for whom the primary concern is securing income (Morrish 2019); this has in turn led to a rapid and substantial expansion, or "massification," of UKHE (Evans et al. 2021; Giannakis and Bullivant 2016).

The specific SMHWB ramifications of this remain largely unclear; research attention has only recently commenced (Priestley 2019). However, visible are suggestions that the UKHE sector's alignment with neoliberal ideology may be in part responsible for some student difficulties (Desierto and de Maio 2020; Priestley 2019). Identified has been the "toxic positivity" of institutions' "selling" themselves "in highly positive and idealised ways" (Danvers and Hinton-Smith 2021 as quoted in Brooks and O'Shea 2021, 71–2); evidence indicating exposure to neoliberal ideology as negatively impactful due to accompanying senses of reduced social connection and increased loneliness has been discussed (Becker, Hartwich, and Haslam 2021; DeLaquil 2021; Peterson 2019). Such indications signpost real need to revisit students' mental states and experiences (and universities' responses) to take full, specific account of how:

> The [mental health] crisis we are embedded within is a direct and unavoidable consequence of the neoliberal remaking of education. (Roberts 2019 as quoted in Vos, Roberts, and Davies 2019, 84)

That a key element of neoliberal ideology involves a "normative privileging of the individual" (Teghtsoonian 2009, 28), an emphasising of individual independence and self-reliance (Robbins 2019 as quoted in Reay 2019), is also significant in reference to SMHWB. UKHE's alignment with neoliberalism perpetuates the dominance of deficit-oriented, individualising models of mental health within the sector—that is to say, in UK university contexts there persists a foregrounding of, loyalty to and reliance on *in-the-individual* understandings and discourses of mental health, distress and wellbeing

(Lawrence 2021). This embedded-ness of individualising mental health and wellbeing models in UK universities is made visible via the mechanisms organised to support students—not only is the quantity of support often insufficient, but the interventions themselves qualitatively do not always meet need:

> interventions are likely to focus on service provision and not pay critical attention to existent institutional policies, curriculum and social structure that indelibly form and figure the character of the organisation and student experiences within it. (Lawrence 2021, 131)

Through the neoliberal lens, universities can arguably be seen as framing SMHWB themselves, in particular and potentially unhelpful ways, because of non-recognition of "broader social, cultural, and discursive approaches" (Lawrence 2021, 151) to the issue.

That the generation of data informing SMHWB guiding policy and UKHE initiatives itself remains dominated by certain ideologically aligned *research approaches* is also significant. Whilst increased acknowledgement of the need to include authentic SMHWB voices is visible (Ask and Abidin 2018; Brown and Collins 2018; Dalton 2020; Moreton and Greenfield 2022; Priestley et al. 2022; Sampson et al. 2022), qualitative explorations remain afforded limited space, to the extent that in-depth knowledge pertaining to students' own understandings and reflections on mental health, distress and wellbeing is lacking and incomplete (Broughan and Prinsloo 2020; Koshkin, Rassolov, and Novikov 2017). There thus persists problematic compartmentalising that perpetuates a 'snapshot' nature to the SMHWB information available (e.g., focusing only on particular student year-groups and/or would-be professions or specific 'risk factors' (Rich et al. 2023; Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2014)). Participants are also still often approached as 'student first', as opposed to 'whole person', and their 'student perspectives' are generally still only permitted within the parameters of researcher-determined topic-area foci.

Such identifications chime with the already-existing clear and dominant methodological entwinement of SMHWB as a research topic with quantitative research approaches (Foster and Francis 2019; Koshkin, Rassolov, and Novikov 2017). The majority of current explanations and declarations pertaining to SMHWB tend to draw most heavily on statistical reporting (Worsley, Harrison, and Corcoran 2023), "Data/Learning Analytics" principles (Foster and Francis 2019) and survey methods (Koshkin, Rassolov, and Novikov 2017). Ultimately, heavier reliance on such approaches can obscure diversity and varied dynamics in students' responses as participants are asked to 'contain' their experiences and align their perspectives with those predetermined elsewhere (Bourke and MacDonald 2018). Furthermore, there remain many underexplored elements all specifically from students' perspectives—for example, limited is consideration of 'good' SMHWB; appreciation

of time and fluidity in students' experiences; examination of the role of "the culture and practices of an institution" (Lawrence 2021, 132), and, importantly for the purposes of this article, exploration of how space and place are understood and made meaningful in students' lived/ing SMHWB experiences.

Students' spaces and places: current research landscape

Given such wider contextualising elements, where exactly space and place currently feature as part of SMHWB discussions becomes important to examine. Growing is attention to how environments impact SMHWB (Baur 2022; Boyd 2022; Cage et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2022; Smith 2023; Loder, Schwerdtfeger, and van Poppel 2020), and visible has been a recent burgeoning (perhaps accelerated by COVID19pandemic contextualised endeavours) of research appreciation for more *felt* dimensions of students' spatial experiences at university. Studies appear to be increasingly foregrounding of students' emotional connections to spaces to highlight how feelings of (un)belonging, (un) safety, 'home', and place-attachment may shape their wellbeing (Holton 2017; Alexander et al. 2023; Ahn and Davis 2020; Graff, Ridge, and Zaugg 2019; Allen, Fenaughty, and Cowie 2022; Al-Oraibi et al. 2022; Benedetti et al. 2020; Remskar et al. 2022; Cox and Brewster 2020; Cox 2023; Kim and Yang 2022; Brewster and Cox 2023; Priestley et al. 2022; Sampson et al. 2022; Phillips et al. 2022; Lister, Seale, and Douce 2023; Coughlan and Lister 2022; Wigg and Ehrlin 2021; Dazkir 2018). However, to be noted is that important *qualitative depth* concerning such spatial elements and their interconnections with SMHWB remains underdeveloped.

To be generally discerned is that the spaces and places of university experiences remain mostly constituted as (assumed) 'SMHWB isolated and static islands' despite students' everydays involving the simultaneous carrying, navigating of and movement between multiple physical and mental spaces and places. In particular, elements such as fluid and over-time "place-making" activities (Holton 2017), nuanced details regarding relationships across a range of locations (McGeachan and Philo 2017), and experiences of physical spatial power dynamics (Reynolds 2016) and how these may influence human relationships within SMHWB stories remain underexplored. Limited has been (and is) appreciation of student geographies as *intertwined* with 'before-university' space and place attachments and associated memories (Scannell and Gifford 2010; Bridger 2022). Remaining underexamined is the experience of needing to navigate personal senses of liminality wrought by physical and mental movement between multiple spaces and places. Arguably, even the collocation 'whole university' itself reveals a problematic spatial overlooking—emphasis remains on the (physical) *inside* of university and there is an assumptive focus still on 'The Campus' as core to students' experiences (Boyd 2022). Indeed, long-fostered assumptions regarding 'the where' of

'The Student Experience' persist—continuing is regard of students' experiences (in the UK) as revolving around the "spatial dynamics of learning" (Reynolds 2016, 1; Lange, Reynolds, and White 2016; Reynolds and Sokolow 2022), academic libraries, blocks of shared accommodation (Foulkes et al. 2021; Holton 2017; Lister, Seale, and Douce 2023; McCartney and Rosenvasser 2023; Smith 2008; Worsley, Harrison, and Corcoran 2023), and even Student Unions and places within which alcohol consumption is central (Gambles et al. 2022). Importantly excluded are students' *everyday life* spaces and places *not* formally designated as part of a (physical or imagined) university institution; therein a large part of 'The Student (space and place) Experience' is both unacknowledged and underexplored in reference to SMHWB.

In essence, the spatial dimensions of SMHWB research might still best be described as 'boundaried'—the research in this area remains "space-compressed" (McGeachan and Philo 2017) and as such obscured is the *combined* meaning of these spatial experiences to individuals' own understanding and mapping of their SMHWB. Seeking to develop and deepen qualitative understanding regarding how individual students themselves situate and map the space- and place-related complexities connected with their own SMHWB is therefore important. This matters not to achieve immediate deployment of changes to 'make university spaces therapeutic' (Rose 2012; McGeachan and Philo 2017) or to 'make students better', (since any such intervention(s) would arguably reinforce the existing dominant 'boundaried' (neoliberal, individualised) conceptualisation of the issue)—rather, gaining deeper insight into students' own perspectives regarding "university as a physical, symbolic and emotional place" (Ahn and Davis 2020, 629) would offer a richer, more holistic understanding of how SMHWB is fluid as well as individually *and* relationally shaped. Such detail would appear crucial to garner to inform the development of support mechanisms better able to resonate with students' lived/ing realities, and to foster university environments more acknowledging of the continuous interplay between students' inner experiences and outside world(s).

Research lens(es) – SMHWB and a need for interdisciplinarity

Despite professions of commitment to equal consideration of all elements and acknowledgement of the area's inherent complexity, in reference to SMHWB clear is that "explanations… broadly speaking fall into one of two camps: biological explanations and social explanations" (Barry and Yuill 2022, 116). How SMHWB has been approached and described to date may have obscured crucial elements because of its framing. There is therefore need to augment existing research approaches to enable access to overlooked information because "no one discipline can provide all the tools" (Phoenix 2015 as quoted

in Twamley, Doidge, and Scott 2015, 175; Lawrence 2021)—emphases in one discipline can serve to obscure rather than illuminate; recognised must be that:

> the interpersonal is part of nested systems that operate at micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels over time. (Phoenix 2015 as quoted in Twamley, Doidge, and Scott 2015, 174–5)

Facilitated via an interdisciplinary perspective and approach to mental health research can be critical reappraisal of taken-for-granted assumptions, especially in reference to ideas often presumed to be 'common-sense' (Barry and Yuill 2022). Thus, the research here cited was guided by a lens integrating of details drawn from the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) (Johnstone and Boyle 2018), sociological perspectives on emotion(s) (Barbalet 2002; Bericat 2016; Brooks 2024; Turner 2009), and emotional geographies (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005).

First, the PTMF offers a compelling aid for research on SMHWB given its status as a "conceptual resource" (Johnstone et al. 2019, 47), an evolving set of ideas and principles inviting of interest and translation-trial into practice in different settings (Morrill 2019; O'Toole 2022). To date, the PTMF has not been applied to UK undergraduates and university settings as a lens through which to think about and question SMHWB, yet its description as a "more systemic alternative" (Milligan 2022, 22; Johnstone and Boyle 2018) to medicalised approaches to mental health highlights its potential value and applicability to the current UKHE space and the SMHWB experienced within. The framework (with its acknowledgment of impacts stemming from "negative operations of power," such as inequality, discrimination, and, importantly, ideological power (Johnstone and Boyle 2018)) permits focus on understanding emotional distress as meaningful *in context*. By asking "What has happened to you?," as opposed to "What is wrong with you?" (Boyle and Johnstone 2020), centred by the PTMF is personal meaning-making, something that aligns well with efforts to challenge the aforementioned individualising and deficit-based approach to SMHWB. Moreover, the PTMF's emphasis on storytelling/narrative presents as enabling of more granular level details to come to the fore—indeed, the want to capture "the local and textured character of [SMHWB] experience against the simplifying abstractions of behaviourist theorizing" (Polletta et al. 2011, 110) led this project to draw on the PTMF's prioritising of narrative as a core tool precisely because the process of storytelling permits agency, allowing tellers to identify, make sense and situate elements of significance in their *own* contexts (Ainsworth and Hardy 2012).

Second, perspectives drawn from the sociology of emotions aided the framing for this SMHWB research. Standpoints here too shift the focus from individualised, biomedical understandings of emotion(s) to contextually embedded, relational and structurally mediated experiences. Recognised are

emotions as not solely internal states—they are shaped by and themselves shape institutional norms, power relations and social expectations (e.g. "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979)) (Brooks 2024; Ahmed 2004a, 2004b, 2010; Guschke, Christensen, and Burø 2022). Limited attentiveness has thus far been afforded the emotion dimensions of students' experiences in general (Quinlan 2016); the "sentiments of mental health framings" (Pavlova and Berkers 2022, 638–9) (i.e., the emotional tones attached to particular ways of framing mental health in public discourse) amongst students themselves, and in reference to SMHWB specifically, have also not been deeply questioned or explored. (And the latter may in particular matter as, "knowing the sentiment of mental health frames will help identify what frames are more problematic and what frames are more hopeful" (Pavlova and Berkers 2022, 639)). By centring emotion(s) as both structurally produced and agentic—as "emotions link structure and agency" (Barbalet 2002, 3)—including sociological perspectives on emotion(s) as part of a theoretical research lens enables exploration of how students' affective responses may actually be key to their mapping and navigation of their SMHWB experiences. What students might do (in relation to their self-perceptions of their SMHWB), may be intricately connected to how they feel emotionally in and/or about any interaction/relationship connected with their university setting. Considering SMHWB through such a lens element allows deeper interrogation of how students' emotional lives may be formed, governed/framed and made meaningful by and through university relationships, cultures, communications and, indeed, places and spaces.

As final components in this work's research lens, also integrated are an emotional geographies–informed perspective (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005) and the 'theoretical tool' of "narrative environments", as mapped by Vytniorgu et al. (2023). While also emphasising emotions as not simply internal states but shaped through and in interaction with varying, dynamic contexts, emotional geographies as a field extends the aforementioned sociological considerations of emotion(s) to specifically consider spatiality (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005). Davidson and Milligan's (2004) outline of an "emotio-spatial hermeneutic" is particularly illustrative of the applicable perspective:

> emotions are understandable—'sensible'—only in the context of
>
> particular places. Likewise, place must be *felt* to make sense. (Davidson and Milligan 2004, 524)

Thus, in reference to (addressing) SMHWB specifically, what perhaps becomes essential is research movement beyond review of "entirely interiorised subjective mental states" to understand experiences as derived via "socio-*spatial* mediation and articulation" (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005, 3; Kenway and Youdell 2011).

In tandem, "narrative environments" (Vytniorgu et al. 2023), as a concept somewhat complementary to the PTMF's narrative emphasis whilst also spotlighting spatiality, offers further means to reconceptualise how institutional cultures and setting arrangements/interactions/experiences may be(come) storied and emotionally interpreted by students. "Narrative environments" concerns the communication *of* narratives *within* and *by* environments (Vytniorgu et al. 2023). In reference to university contexts specifically, as Vytniorgu et al. (2023) argue, "narrative environments" is a critical theoretical tool for evaluating how environmental factors may influence students' emotional experiences, given that:

> By the time students arrive at university, they have already begun to negotiate university narrative environments . . . expectations about 'the student experience' affect the kind of narrative environment in which students situate themselves—and are situated—when they come to university. (Vytniorgu et al. 2023, 3)

Whilst central to "narrative environments" as outlined by Vytniorgu et al. (2023) are loneliness and belonging concerns, a focus on this concept nonetheless more widely "invites attention to students' *agency [this author's emphasis]* in navigating a range of university environments and infrastructure" (Vytniorgu et al. 2023, 6), hence its value to the broader SMHWB research examination here at hand. Including "narrative environments" as part of the research lens for this SMHWB research is important because unlike other approaches that position environments as static, the concept emphasises *active* interaction—spaces communicate, circulate and shape narratives; students navigate, absorb, or resist said narratives.

Overall facilitated by such a multi-pronged, interdisciplinary and integrative research lens (and the subsequent methodological approach adopted) is not only a reframing of how 'the what' of SMHWB experiences might be asked for/about but also greater illumination as to *where and how* the experiences may be shaped by, through and in current UKHE settings and cultures. Indeed, the components of this lens signpost alternative ways of asking about and understanding SMHWB in contrast to prevailing individualistic, pathologizing and quantitative (measuring) approaches that can fail to grasp the complexities of and temporal and spatial shifts in SMHWB experiences. Ultimately, this cumulative framework facilitated research that (sought to) foreground students' subjective experiences and agency, generating data further encouraging of a move beyond dominant (arguably superficial) SMHWB discourses and initiatives to deeper address fundamental conditions and contexts shaping SMHWB experiences.

Researcher positionality

It is here pertinent to also present a researcher-standpoint reflection (Folkes 2022). My witnessing of the mental distress of my brother Martin, difficulties which culminated in his death by suicide whilst on a deferral from his own university studies, is the experience most significant to my researcher role. I noted my brother's deterioration as connected to a multitude of circumstances but of significance was the relationship I viewed between his mental distress and experiences of/in academic settings. Martin's connection with UKHE and his 'student identity' are to me significant elements in the with-hindsight roadmap to his passing (Sutherland 2024).

Such a personally impactful experience prompts new questions and readings/understandings/explanations of (even long-past) circumstances to develop. Martin's death was horrific, but his departure has over the ensuing years of living with the loss guided me to reflect on, question, rethink and re-evaluate elements falling under the label that is 'mental health'; to always pursue thinking about 'the layers beneath', the lines that could be running parallel.

Uniting the cited-above details of the current UKHE and SMHWB landscapes, research lens facets and perspectives generated via *living* experience, the assertion put forth here is that there is need to 'think differently' about SMHWB. There is identifiable need for review and evaluation of existing information and research approaches to augment and deepen our understanding of the subject in a more meaningful way. To achieve more refined knowledge and understanding, it is necessary to return to students themselves, to hear and learn from their personal experiences, to illuminate the granularity within the complex issue that is SMHWB.

Research question and conduct

Given this project's aim to explore how undergraduate students themselves account for and make sense of their SMHWB experiences, adopted was a qualitative approach (Groenewald 2004; Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio 2019). The work was conducted within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Kelly 2017; Pretorius 2024; Schwandt 1994), fully acknowledging of my own positionality as "an integral part of the research" (Pretorius 2024, 2701), as well as embracing of individually diverse *meanings* attached to experiences. Such a paradigm facilitates the development of integrated and contextualised understandings of phenomena. The approach placed emphasis on appreciating complexities and dynamics via the emic point of view, i.e., the subjective perspectives, views, beliefs of those with first-hand experience (Schwandt 1994). In adopting this stance, the hope was to amplify participants' authentic voices.

The following overall question guided the research:

> What do undergraduate students themselves qualitatively express about their mental health and wellbeing experiences during their 'undergraduate stories'?

The broad nature of this question was intentional, chiming with the objective of the project to facilitate students' agency, to permit them to 'lead the agenda' in terms of areas of importance in SMHWB. This question allowed exploration of undergraduate students' lived/ing SMHWB experiences and self-reflections *in and on their own terms*. In asking in this open way, this research aimed to garner insight into how/where/when students interpret and navigate periods of change, distress and coping across academic years; describe SMHWB intersections with broader life roles and identities; engage with sources of support, etc. Importantly, in adopting a narrative way of asking, hoped for was access to deeper understanding regarding how students themselves define and use terms such as 'mental health', 'wellbeing', and other related concepts within the context of their overall lives.

Ensconced in the UK social-distancing context of the COVID19 pandemic,[1] fieldwork proceeded after ethical approval was granted via the Northumbria University Ethics Online System in October 2020 (ref.120.1020). Twenty-one first- and final-year undergraduate students were recruited from a single university in the North of England, and multiple data gathering techniques were amalgamated and employed to capture and explore individual experiences and personal meanings. Adopted was an online-conducted Free Association Narrative (FAN) interview format (Hollway and Jefferson 2008), fronted by a researcher-developed Social Media Elicitation (SME) task (Sutherland 2024). It is not unheard of for participants to struggle in telling stories within seemingly formal narrative interview contexts (Hollway and Jefferson 2008); there was need within this research to augment the interview format according to the specificities of both the consulted population and the subject matter being explored. Thus, given how online spaces have become largely 'naturally occurring' settings in/for many students' everyday lives (Marshall and Rossman 2011) and self-presentations (Kerrigan and Hart 2016; Thomas et al. 2017), to aid the "anchoring [of] people's accounts" (Hollway and Jefferson 2008, 307) and elicit more in-depth SMHWB reflections, the pre-interview SME task was designed and implemented to assist the opening up of participants' expressions.

[1]Online interviews were feared inhibitive of the research but ultimately facilitated movement from the COVID19 pandemic context as wholly limiting/determining of stories to one in which its strengths for the research topic could be brought to the fore. Virtual interviews facilitated participant confidence/openness and enabled access to home environments and everyday-context spaces and places not normally accessible or accessed in SMHWB research (Bridger 2013; Howlett 2022; Moran and Caetano 2022). Overall permitted was a taking of SMHWB *out* of university spaces into places where students' wider lives and roles actually exist, increasing the visibility of these aspects and consequently generating important insights—the COVID19 pandemic context provided opportunity for re-evaluations regarding the where, alongside the what, of SMHWB research (Howlett 2022).

Prior to each interview, participants were asked to curate five of their social media posts from their preceding academic year—the posts chosen were to mean to themselves, 'my SMHWB at *that* time'. These posts were not themselves data; their role was as elicitation-prompt for spoken story sharing. The online interview context itself opened with uninterrupted time for the participants to tell the stories *behind* their posts. Following conclusion of the participants' narratives, developed-in-interview probing questions were asked. Overall, participants were asked to engage in 2 interviews at different timepoints (winter 2020; summer 2021) and in total 16 students completed both timepoint sessions (five others engaged in the first, but not the second). Two interview timepoints were instigated to allow students to reflect on and across different sections of their undergraduate experiences. Those in their first year were able to reflect on their pre-university experiences, their transition *into* undergraduate study, their current Year 1 experiences, and their thoughts about going forward into Year 2; those in their final year could reflect on their preceding undergraduate years and their current experience, as well as offer perceptions connected to post-graduation and their university exit. Also important was that two timepoints allowed reflections from outside as well as within the COVID19 pandemic context to be considered in relationship with one another; the pandemic itself acted as an across-time experience reflection *lens/orienter* in these students' stories. The two timepoints therefore facilitated access and insight into SMHWB across whole timespans (past, present, and future) and contexts of undergraduate experiences.

All 37 completed interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams; all were audio-only recorded, and the average interview length was 2.75 hours. Verbatim transcription of all the interviews was manually conducted, and all identifiable information (including references to geographical places of personal significance) was anonymised or pseudonymised (Heaton 2022).

Reflexive thematic analysis

The purpose of the analysis was not to find a singular, 'truthful', explanation or understanding, but rather to explore a range of experiences and their meanings to individuals. Important also was researcher alignment with the argument that themes do not simply reside in data, waiting to be uncovered (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2021a; McAllum et al. 2019). Thus, sought for the data analysis approach was a means through which to mesh 'within' and 'across' case information and patterns (Ayres, Kavanaugh, and Knafl 2003), whilst also permitting researcher living experience interaction with the data, to overall allow reflexive and interpretative descriptions (Byrne 2022). As such, given it offers an approach to data analysis aligning with the view that, "qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated" (Braun and Clarke 2019, 591; Braun

and Clarke 2021b), Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was adopted (Braun and Clarke 2022).

This project employed the 6 RTA phase-labels (Braun and Clarke 2022) as guidelines rather than ordered rules to follow. Moreover, recognising RTA as an approach to be considered as a flexible, rather than prescriptive, set of tools (Braun and Clarke 2019), encouraging of researcher reflexivity and choice-making specific to the data and research objectives, a decision was taken for this project to also retain attentiveness to narrative analysis elements (Carson et al. 2017; Riessman 2008). Such elements included language use and word play, underpinning meta-narratives, points of emphasis in stories, and value judgements implied in experience accounts (Carson et al. 2017; Feldman et al. 2004). Employing RTA whilst remaining sensitive to narrative elements was determined as facilitative of an appropriately detailed analysis approach to develop interpretations and explain data patterns without becoming anecdotal.

During familiarisation, transcripts were smoothed, i.e., non-lexical utterances and unnecessary repetitions were cleared, though where these were clearly indicative of meaningful pauses they were retained. Impression notes were taken; highlights of points of interest were marked manually on transcripts. A research journal was kept, and individual transcript memos were created. Guided by Braun and Clarke (2022) and Reed and Towers (2023), memos recorded brief content summaries, reflections on a range of elements (such as research design/methods, disciplinary aspects and researcher emotional responses), as well as any initial analytic impressions. Recalling the project's intention to amplify SMHWB definitions and understandings as determined by students themselves, a particularly notable data element at this stage was the enhanced visibility afforded by the participants to the spatial organisation and situation of their stories and experiences; the analysis proceeded, therefore, with careful attentiveness to spatial elucidations. Srivastava and Hopwood's (2009) 'reflexive framework questions' also provided thought-aids in reference to noting 'what does the data tell me that it might not tell someone else?'(Srivastava and Hopwood 2009, 81). Indeed, important to acknowledge here is that whilst the importance of *being* reflexive was embedded from the outset of the project, the *doing* of reflexivity (Mauthner and Doucet 2003) throughout it evolved. Reflexivity was individually and *relationally* (Nikischer 2019) incorporated across the project in several ways. Key strategies involved research journaling and engaging in debriefing conversations (during transcription and analysis phases as well as interview periods). Alternative 'self-care' and sensorial strategies, such as walking and music use, were employed. In reference to engagement with the generated data, it was important to chart personal reflections in connection to coding, theming, etc., given that these can act as a 'filter' in the analysis process (McAllum et al.

2019). Here it was in some respects useful to draw on impacts of enduring suicide bereavement—for me, living with suicide loss involves learning to fully embrace uncertainty and this formed an important part of the approach taken to the data. For example, accepted were both the capacity for analysis categories to change/evolve multiple times and the need to avoid too-quick commitment to theme labels and descriptions.

Systematic coding of the transcripts, at both semantic and latent levels, proceeded via a blended inductive-deductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2022). Subsequent to the "clustering" of codes into broader topic summaries (Braun and Clarke 2022, 79), further re-review of the data led to the development of two specific areas of *Initial Thematic Impressions*, the groups headed respectively as 'Explicit/Manifest elements to SMHWB' and 'Implied/Latent elements to SMHWB' (and in reference to both, the codes 'describing spaces' and 'feelings about places' became prominent, as such encouraging enhanced attention to where spatial facets of experience were explained or alluded to as the analysis subsequently proceeded). At this initial thematic stage (and recalling that a purpose of this research was the development of granular detail), I decided that it would be beneficial to continue with a co-analysis element via the inclusion of third 'resonance conversations' with existing participants. An amendment to the original ethics application was sought and granted via EthicsOnline@Northumbria (ref. 40 833) in order to re-approach participants to ask for their engagement in a third interview to explore the resonance of the current analysis state with their experiences. Two participants agreed to engage. The purpose of these conversations was not confirmation of analysis, but rather continued recognition and amplification of the students' voices in the final data interpretation. As such, these further interactions were conceived in alignment with principles informing the technique of "Synthesised Member Checking" (Birt et al. 2016), whereby participants are provided after their original interviews with "an opportunity to engage with, and add to, interview and interpreted data" (Birt et al. 2016, 1802; Erdmann and Potthoff 2023). Moreover, these third interactions were also undertaken with a view to enhancing reflexive action, to check the *researcher*-member, i.e., as part of a process to monitor any *over* imposition of researcher-voice dominance in the ongoing analysis (Birt et al. 2016; Erdmann and Potthoff 2023). The participating students provided overall positive replies in response to the analysis-to-date story and preliminary-theme descriptions, though also spotlighted avenues requiring researcher-return to the transcripts for review and refinement at a more nuanced level (Birt et al. 2016). Ultimately, the 'resonance conversations' were not simply a "technical step" (Erdmann and Potthoff 2023, 10), but rather core to an iterative, "intellectual process" (Birt et al. 2016, 1810), acting as useful and meaningful aids in further theme refinement as the overall data analysis was completed. Subsequent revisiting and theme re-evolution was conducted,

leading to a deepened development of the final 'patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke 2022).

Generated data: space(s) and place(s) in students' SMHWB stories

Through the interviews, SMHWB stories united by emotion-grounded undercurrents were elicited; multi-layered data to deepen understanding of current SMHWB was generated. The 'felt life' underpinning to the students' accounts was indicated via the weaving together of SMHWB experiences in their 'general life' (their overall-life contexts) and their 'university life' (connected with/to particular elements of the students' university). Noticeable in and across all these contexts were participants' references to their senses of themselves in terms of space and place, and it is to the thematic granularity of these SMHWB spatial references this article now turns—significant emotional associations with and labelling of varying locations for 'mental health purposes' as "*Happy*," *"Safe," and "Me" Places* were relayed; *Space and Place Properties* of significance were recorded; students' senses of (needing to engage in) *Organising and Controlling Spaces* were illuminated; much indication of seeking *(Feeling At) Home* was present; *University Restrictiveness* was recounted, as were emotional consequences and issues pertaining to (*Accessing) University Support Spaces and Places*.

"Happy," "Safe," and "Me" Places

Key to participants' accounts were emotional associations attached to specific locations—noticeably those personally labelled "happy" and "safe" places. These locations were talked of as self-resetting and coping mechanisms, places to which individuals would want to physically travel when experiencing difficulties. Such places were described as locations *where* thinking about/'working on' own mental health and wellbeing states was permitted:

> there's this... tree that's been bent over and it's got moss on the top so it's nice and padded and it's basically a seat in my eyes. And whenever I was stressed or overwhelmed or if something bad's happened, I'll just go have a little sit... that for me is my happy place... it makes me feel warm and comforted inside. [Cherry]

> I live in a very small town... I know the area, and I can go to the forest, alone, and I feel pretty confident, and I'm not scared. I feel just better here. [Beryl]

Interestingly, the positive mental health association with such places was presented as having been established over time (often since childhood), as a consequence of repeated visiting. Such locations were conveyed as emotionally-anchoring places to which return visits could, and should, be made due to the positivity the individuals attached to them. The personal emotionally-positive identification and labelling of places also brought attention to ideas of ownership in relation to spaces/places as important. Overall implied

through such descriptions was that an individuals' mental and emotional self may at times be experienced as somewhat suppressed outside of a designated/chosen "me place"—being in these 'purposefully me' locations was suggested as providing of relief, rejuvenation, and motivation.

Space and Place Properties

Also important were students' reflections on how different (properties of) physical settings either supported or undermined their capacity to experience balanced SMHWB, underscoring the centrality of place-based *emotional* experience in students' lives. Indeed, the stories here captured how the SMHWB experiences of students can be shaped by the physical and symbolic properties of the places they inhabit (and move between). For example, comments on the potential impacts of living in a city with an established reputation for certain activities (particularly given the location of the institution from which the participants were drawn) were prominent. Many referenced pre-university expectations regarding the 'normal student experience' they expected in their new locality:

> one of the big things that people think especially when they're coming to [city] is, like, the party scene. [Sara]

> [it's] a drinking city... people come [here] because they want the party... if you choose **not** *[participant emphasis]* to, how isolated you can become. [Charlotte]

Moving beyond reputational properties, wider references indicating attentiveness to other emotionally impactful properties were also visible. Contrasts between urban and natural environments were noted as impactful in SMHWB management—most present across participants' stories were indications of assessments of their city's sensory intensity as provocative of disconnection, loneliness and pressure, while rural or coastal spaces were deemed as offering properties more capable of inducing feelings of escape/relief, reflection, and senses of emotional recalibration. Beryl and Lucy, for example, provided similar perspectives on this:

> in a city, it's not that OK, that great, because it's very noisy, a lot of shops, and a lot of people. But when you go to the woods, it's calming and helpful. [Beryl]

> that getting out into the fresh air is so important... you can feel very under pressure in a city... It's easy to feel like you're falling behind or not doing as well as everybody else. But I think once... you go and walk to the beach, you just... think "well, maybe there's more to life." [Lucy]

In terms of the specific detail as to why open spaces were considered crucial in aiding SMHWB, the ability of their properties to induce of "a feeling of freedom" was highlighted. Indeed, Lucy illustrated this by explaining how

this particular property-derived feeling provided for her a meaningful counterbalance to the emotion overload of her citified student life:

> just feeling a little bit of **freedom** *[participant emphasis]* of going to the beach or going to a forest. . . it's really important for your mental health and it works for me. [Lucy]

Indeed, Lucy's reflection on the emancipatory sense offered/provided by and in nature perhaps signposts how physical environment properties (especially those accompanied by openness and quiet) may play a vital role in supporting SMHWB. Overall, indicated across this data were students' deeply considered perceptions of space and place properties as emotionally charged, impactful and *central* to their own understanding and management of SMHWB.

Organising and Controlling Spaces

Also implied by participants were needs to have personal senses of spatial control. Here the research context of the COVID19 pandemic was explicitly acknowledged by participants as an *orienting* feature in forming their reflections, though also stated was that prior to the pandemic being able to move between spaces and places, to implement boundaries within spaces and to employ different spaces for different purposes, was an important mental health and wellbeing facets for them, particularly in reference to work and rest. Having a sense of choice regarding space/place purpose, organisation and use appeared as something allowing these individuals to feel more in control of their mental states more broadly. A particularly articulate example was provided by Dave:

> in my head I need to have a work spacing area etc., you know, "And this is where my mind is." . . .In my head there's a wall that runs across the edge over here. This side of the room that you can see now is the study. That side there is my living space, and then there's another invisible wall on the far end, that's my bedroom. . . The only space I've got is my room, so the boundaries are even more important. It's important that I set them up for my mental health. [Dave]

This 'mental space allocation' control was also made visible in participants' references to their evaluations of and behaviours in virtual spaces. Descriptions of social media use made further apparent participants' wishes to personally contain where their emotional and mental experiences appear. Accounts of decisiveness and actions taken to control *where* personal mental health and/or distress-related content would be placed frequently arose. Having and maintaining control over different virtual spaces presented almost as equating to a perception of having control over their mental health. Several indicated how having multiple "public" and "private" digital spaces for different personal purposes, each presenting different content dependent on the spaces' audiences, was an important feature in thinking about mental health and wellbeing more generally:

> I have a public Instagram where... I'll post it for anyone to see... And then the private one is people I trust... is for my friends and people I actually speak to, people that I want to see my good days and my bad days. [Pippa]

> my Facebook is completely locked down... my entire profile is private... I only accept people I know... I know with my Facebook it's OK to have [a] vent... it is my place for me... my Twitter is open, it's a public forum in that sense... I don't know who's seeing and I quite limit what I post into there. [Dave]

Connected to the elements above was an identifiable emphasis on 'the *who* of space/place control' in the narratives. Students' accounts drew attention to times when they felt spatial decision-making became restricted, the cause of the restriction stemming from actions of others connected to the same locations that induced *feelings of* entrapment. Many of the examples concerned accommodation spaces. For example:

> I did feel really, really trapped in my room... there was nowhere that I could go, especially when I wasn't getting on with one of my flatmates. [Amy]

> I was scared to leave my bedroom to go into the kitchen... and there was no way to leave. [Gemma]

> my bedroom was connected to the living room, so they would come home after a night out and they would be up partying in the next room... I would message and say, "Oh, do you mind keeping it down?" ...this argument slowly developed... [and] I kind of got stuck in my room... I was always staying in the bedroom and it just got to the point where I'd had enough. [Jorja]

Such examples provide insight into *feelings of* being "trapped," "stuck," "unsafe," (the latter particularly appearing in stories recounted by women students), in space because of circumstances perceived as outside of their own control. Overall, there was a sense of a want to both compartmentalise and control the where of their mental health and wellbeing (in both digital and physical spaces). Implied was that having spatial command, especially in locations central to their everyday living, subsequently enabled positive SMHWB senses and experiences.

(Feeling At) Home

Present also was a focus on the idea of (feeling at) home. Navigation of questions such as '*where* can/do I feel at home?' and '*how* can/do I feel at home?' appeared to underpin many of these individuals' mental health and wellbeing experiences. Essentially, participants reflected on what it meant to feel "at home" in both literal and symbolic terms, ultimately indicating how this feeling contributed to the shaping of their ability to settle, cope and experience 'positive SMHWB' while at university.

For many, university was indicated as an environment initially identified as *inherently* un-home-like, requiring of work to recreate or approximate that

emotional sense. In this, participants' descriptions of home *before* university appeared to guide and inform how they sought to achieve (feeling at) home once *at* university, especially if geographical transition for their studies had occurred. Even where participants had not moved to attend university, the importance to SMHWB of 'sensing home' within university spaces was stressed:

> it was really hard because [it] didn't feel like home. It just doesn't, you know. [Gemma]

> You're probably not gonna be any more comfortable than you are at home. . . if you can have that nice, homely environment there [at university] it makes everything a bit nicer, it feels more like you're at home. [Maguire]

Participants expanded upon this and indicated desires and attempts to construct a sense of home (and family) within their university lives, through elements such as shared activities or accommodation-decorating plans:

> [we said] that we'd make it a house, and we'd go to IKEA and decorate, and I was really excited, y'know, like a proper flat, proper homely. [Charlotte]

> We'd go on a shopping trip, get some snacks in and just have a family games night. We used to call them "family games night" [laughs]. We always used to, if someone was down. [Anna]

Examples such as these indicated that encompassing home-meaning elements were wide-ranging, varying from home-associated interactions to high levels of cleanliness, to even associated food-related choices (shared meals, notably roast dinners). (Re)creating and/or maintaining 'home' whilst at university was thus conveyed as an important management strategy for SMHWB.

However, alongside visible/physical attempts at '*making* home at university', indicated was that '*feeling* at home' was not simply about replicating environments but about navigating senses of relational continuity and emotional safety in light of prior-to-university attachments and life (including mental health/distress-related) experiences. Ideas of 'home' were thus intertwined with mappings of meaningful social connections, and participants' comments on relationship dynamics revealed particular layers of what 'home' (and subsequently '*feeling* at home at university') might mean in the context of SMHWB. This was particularly indicated via participants' own labelling—notable were recurring distinctions between "*home friends*" and "*uni friends*" implying of an important emotional place-related hierarchy with SMHWB consequences. Longstanding pre-university, *home-boundaried* relationships were often described as more authentic, trust-full and reliable; university, *non-home* friendships were rather indicated as predominantly circumstantial and lacking in emotional depth:

> uni friends are great but to me your home friends is what's important... it's alright knowing people for two years, but it's the closeness that I feel you can't get... you've done so many things with them [home friends], we've gone on holiday, we've been to festivals, and it's those sort of memories you can't make, or I won't make, with people from uni. [Dave]

> "the main person I speak to is my friend from home, who knows all about my situation from school, and she was the only person I really spoke to as well. [Lily]

Navigating *who* feels 'home-real' (and who feels 'uni-temporary') appeared a crucial undercurrent in these students' SMHWB experiences and their management. Cumulatively, the emphasis placed on all expressions about (feeling at) home appeared as an important reference in the mapping of these participants' emotional and mental states generally, perhaps bringing to attention the need to connect individuals' wider and across-time living space experiences to SMHWB.

University Restrictiveness

Contrasting with 'at home' notions and comfort were identifications of university as inhibiting of individual spatial control, which subsequently connected with identifications of negative SMHWB experience(s). For instance, that student-to-student relationships were often determined by accommodation placement was significant. First-year student accommodation experiences in particular were described as often inducing and involving difficulty because of the lack of personal control over who an individual was allocated to share space with:

> they're just gonna put you with anyone and you just have to hope that they're nice... there's nothing that you can do about it. You get put with who you get put with and you just have to deal with it... you just have to get on with it because you have no control over it. [Amy]

Whilst for some students such externally orchestrated living-space allocations and corresponding relationships proved positive, (providing calm and relief that also facilitated their 'student experience' adhering to expectations), for others the opposite became the case—several participants described resultant, forced peer-to-peer encounters as negatively affecting both university living-spatial experiences and, indeed, their overall SMHWB.

Similarly, a negative 'triggering' element referenced participants' in-university-developed realisations that their university 'lacked space' for certain need(s), of university as *not* the space/place for certain life (emotional) experiences. Notable were accounts of a lack of institutional physical and emotional space for revealed bereavements. Whilst expecting from their university (what was deemed) appropriate compassionate and understanding responses and support, experiences were often not forthcoming in this regard. Problematic for SMHWB were university responses appearing to require students to "carry

on regardless"—participants implied feeling dismissed where no acknowledgement of loss was incorporated:

> there was just no space in uni to talk about it. . . university just don't really acknowledge that we go through normal things like normal people. . . there was no one for [my friend] to talk to. His [sibling] died. . . and it was like, "What does he do? Who does he talk to? Where does he go?" There was just no space for that. [Gemma]

Within these participants' accounts, unmet hopeful expectations of their university as a comforting and accommodating space after bereavement were connected to negative SMHWB experiences. Conveyed was an apparent shift from optimistic perceptions and expectations of the university space as emotionally welcoming to one dominated by disappointment and frustration because of participants' experiences. The negative perceptions and/or expectations appeared formed as a consequence of students coming to identify their institution as a space detached from their 'real' lives and, importantly, mismatched with their ideas regarding what university spaces *should* be and do.

(Accessing) University Support Spaces and Places

A final significant spatial facet in participant accounts referred to SMHWB impacts stemming from experiences connected with various elements of their university's formal SMHWB support spaces. First, confusion and/or lack of knowledge regarding *where* to access support was described; second, students' judgements regarding support-place options (notably those provided by the university versus those in the National Health Service (NHS)) were indicated, and third, alluded to were impacts derived from interactions with the university support (access) spaces.

First, then, emotional difficulty arose from the students' being unaware or confused about where to access forms of support. There was a perception of their university as having support and being permissive of support-seeking yet remaining vague in reference to guidance on where to go for said support:

> I feel like they're talking a lot about mental health but at the same time I'm not sure where should I go if I actually need any support. [Beryl]

In this regard, the tension between student personal responsibility and university responsibility to provide clear information about support spaces upfront was visible. Whilst there may be arguments suggesting students *should* take personal responsibility in reference to SMHWB, that they should uncover for themselves where to access support, these participants did raise the point that clear(er) signposting can help in itself, especially when institutional rhetoric is encouraging of help-seeking. Implied by participants was that access to clear information and knowledge about university support spaces could potentially be a means to facilitate more individual agency in the overall matter.

Second, participants' indicated judgements regarding the relative merits of different support spaces ('what support you can get where') were important in their engagement decision-making. Most significantly, examples drew attention to comparisons with NHS support spaces as influential. For instance, Nicola highlighted awareness of NHS-located support as being problematic in relation to that at her university, prompting her to "go for" the latter space first:

> [the doctor] did say, "get in touch with your university." But I'd already been in touch with them about the counselling service, just because the NHS one is months and months wait. [Nicola]

Indicated was that within the NHS and amongst students there may exist somewhat of a recognition that there are support space-related advantages to being attached to a university, that students have access to support spaces and accompanying resources for mental health and wellbeing that the general public do not. This can consequently manifest in deliberate choices to access university support spaces over any 'outside'. Whilst university support was often criticised (particularly regarding lack of responsiveness and tailoring), nonetheless determined was that it would be better than any support space elsewhere, and that as students they were overall fortunate to have their own support spaces:

> I know there's other people who don't have the support and students are lucky that we have services. [Charlotte]

The third area described comprised direct experiences of university support spaces, in terms of both negative and positive emotional impacts. In reference to the latter, when access to university support spaces was secured, the physical qualities of support spaces—notably their aesthetics, comfort provisions and general atmosphere—were described as inducing of senses of security and safety, in turn facilitative of emotional stability (over time):

> [the support service] didn't feel like. . . anywhere weird or scary. It felt quite comfortable and safe; it was a nice environment to be in. Those rooms that they have there, they're lovely, and the physical space was really calming. [Gemma]

> where I used to go and see my counsellor. The rooms make me so happy. . . used to make me smile, seeing them rooms. . . always a really nice, safe place for me to go, just sit on the couches. Even if I didn't have a counselling session, that's where I like to sit. . . that is definitely my safe space. [Dolly]

Such descriptions as these certainly amplify a need to consider university support spaces not just in terms of their being formal or static components of a wider institutional system but important material-affective environments functioning as important emotional anchors in SMHWB experiences.

However, there were also tangential space-related elements more problematic as part of some students' SMHWB experiences. The *access-to*-support spaces, triage-communication pathways for help-seeking, were for example indicated as emotionally problematic, potentially distressing in themselves, (even if procedurally correct for the support-space access sought). There was indication of help-seeking avoidance precisely because of the requirements of the liminal *access* space; whilst acknowledging the reasoning behind the formalities, nonetheless indicated were negative emotional impacts stemming from the need to "provide evidence" for access to university support spaces:

> How do you email someone your deepest, darkest emotions and thoughts?... You can't do that... I couldn't write an email to a psychologist when I was at my lowest... So I've avoided the student support. [Andrew]

> Why do I have to get evidence that I'm sad?... Why do you have to see my prescription for this [diagnosis] medication?... It made it feel a bit shameful. [Pippa]

The requirement to provide evidence to even access the university's support was perceived by students as signifying the end-goal spaces themselves as *un*caring because 'you have to *prove* your problem to get into this space'—interpreted was institutional invalidating disbelief regarding their need within spaces directly labelled as 'supportive'. Furthermore, importantly implicit across stories was a perception of 'support space applications', particularly for mental distress support, as subject to hierarchical judgement:

> I used to tell people, even if they weren't, and I know it's horrendous, "even if you're not suicidal, tick the suicidal box because you'll be seen quicker." [Charlotte]

Indicated was a perception that mental distress support-space access was accompanied by an implied emotional requirement, that this space could be more swiftly entered if a student's circumstance was judged 'serious'—i.e., mental distress university support spaces are *for crisis*. For many of these students, thus fostered through their overall experientially grounded impressions of access spaces appeared a replacement of hope with frustration on the part of the help-seekers, many of whom conveyed a resulting regard of university support spaces as *un*helpful, even exacerbating of difficulty. Implied in turn was a discernment of their university as an *un*caring and *un*supportive space and place (in opposition to any institutional intentions), more associated with negative over positive mappings of SMHWB.

The overall attention afforded in participants' narratives to a range of emotional impacts in reference to university support spaces certainly signposts need for deeper consideration as to how, for example, access spaces as much as physical-environment designs and atmospheres might function in not just supporting but shaping students' senses of their SMHWB.

Concluding discussion

The overarching purpose of this research was to facilitate greater student agency in describing and making sense of their own SMHWB experiences; in doing so, permitted through the research process was enhanced visibility of the importance of space and place meanings and attachments in SMHWB definings, understandings and orientations. In adopting the PTMF's mode of questioning (Johnstone and Boyle 2018; Johnstone 2022) for this research, the resulting generated narratives indicated SMHWB as profoundly influenced, shaped and mapped by experiences of (physical and virtual) spaces and places. Moreover, while the importance of different spatial facets in these students' lives was perhaps brought more to the fore in light of their COVID19 pandemic (restriction) experiences at the time of the research conduct, what the pandemic importantly facilitated was deeper *across time* reflection on elements of significance *already in existence*, particularly in reference to emotional-meaning dimensions of space/place connections. The analysis conducted thus generated thematic granularity of/in SMHWB spatial references revolving around "*Happy," "Safe," and "Me" Places*; *Space and Place Properties; Organising and Controlling Spaces*; *(Feeling At) Home*; *University Restrictiveness,* and (*Accessing) University Support Spaces and Places*. The insights within these themes provide important contextual information, both enriching of our understanding of SMHWB and urging of re-evaluation of this particular overlooked aspect of students' lives.

SMHWB as emotionally mapped and framed

Of particular importance in the generated data were both explicit and alluded-to emotion mappings of SMHWB. Consistently spoken about by participants were notions of and self-labelled "Happy," "Safe," and "Me" places as crucial coping mechanisms and spaces for self-reflection, inducing of sensations of calm and comfort (implying also that their emotional selves might otherwise be suppressed outside of these locations). Such findings in particular invite conscientious redress of the existing underappreciation of emotional intertwinements between *before*-university space and place attachments with those *during* (Bridger 2022; Scannell and Gifford 2010). The inherent properties of different settings were also significant to these students' SMHWB experiences, with urban environments inducing of negative emotion identification, while the escape/relief/freedom provisions of rural or coastal rendered these 'positive SMHWB spaces'. Such an observation of rural/coastal areas as offering of escape/relief due to their permitting of a 'feeling of freedom' certainly aligns with broader literature concerning relationships between nature and mental health (Liu et al. 2022, Baur 2022; Loder, Schwerdtfeger, and van Poppel 2020; Birch, Payne, and Payne 2020), adding also further details that may be

incorporated into wider thinking in universities regarding "how nature may be integrated to improve students' mental health" (Boyd 2022). Moreover, at a broader theoretical level, the emotion-grounded contrast drawn by participants between urban environments and natural spaces exemplifies Davidson and Milligan's (2004, 524) aforementioned "emotio-spatial hermeneutic" (students' emotions should be considered understandable in *their* specific contexts).

Striking in the participants' stories were clear wants (needs) for *senses of* personal spatial control and *feelings of* home. In reference to the former, the exploration of students' needs for personal spatial control, whether in reference to physical locations or (public/private) digital spaces, significantly adds to understandings regarding "place-making" activities as discussed by Holton (2017) and provides empirical detail regarding physical spatial power dynamics (Reynolds 2016), (beyond those concerned with learning), at play in university spaces. In reference to the latter, such a feeling was signposted by these participants as fundamental to both settling into and experiencing 'good SMHWB' across their undergraduate timelines. Such comments on (feeling at) home concur with research conducted by Worsley, Harrison, and Corcoran (2023) and Holton (2017), adding further to their expressed need for connections between student accommodation/living-arrangement experiences and SMHWB to be noted. Moreover, the nuanced distinction participants made between *"home friends"* and *"uni friends"* and the efforts they described undertaking to recreate a feeling of home through relational continuity adds further detail to discussions regarding the role and functions of relationships across a range of locations (McGeachan and Philo 2017).

In reference to institutional elements specifically, the themes here demonstrate clear general theoretical agreement with and empirical illustration of SMHWB as produced and shaped by the "intertwining of the affective and the structural" (Whitehead 2023, 8; Hunter 2022) as purported within both the sociology of emotions and emotional geographies (Brooks 2024; Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005). Significantly, participants' comments and stories connecting their university-related perceptions and expectations to their SMHWB experiences can be seen as very much linking to the argument that "emotion emerges as a result of a newly grasped reality. . . as it clashes against the template of prior expectations" (Hochschild as quoted in Robb et al. 2004, 249). Often indicated here were judgements of the university environment as restrictive, inhibitive and 'lacking in space' for certain life experiences (notably bereavements, chiming with findings identified by Hay et al. (2022)), in turn provocative of feelings of dismissal and frustration. Similarly, while some physical qualities of university SMHWB support spaces were described in positive emotional terms, the accompanying *access-to*-support spaces were more frequently identified as emotionally problematic, even distressing, prompting of views of the *overall* university as an *un*supportive place. It is

here useful to return to Vytniorgu et al.'s (2023) outline of "narrative environments". Whilst a university may regard itself as communicating a caring, 'supportive-environment narrative', provided in this research were clear examples of how such a narrative may be rejected as a consequence of contrasting emotionally mapped, direct lived/ing experiences—what may instead be perceived and constructed is an alternative "university narrative environment" (Vytniorgu et al. 2023, 3) (one misaligned with students' everyday realities and needs, and characterising of SMHWB as being about 'crisis').

Important overall is that the generated themes respond and indeed add to the burgeoning research appreciation for *felt* dimensions of students' spatial experiences at university (Quinlan 2016). Emphases in these students' stories provide empirical backing for research earlier noted as foregrounding these aspects in reference to, for example, (un)belonging, (un) safety, and place-attachment, etc. (Ahn and Davis 2020; Alexander et al. 2023; Coughlan and Lister 2022; Holton 2017; Lister, Seale, and Douce 2023; Phillips et al. 2022; Priestley et al. 2022; Sampson et al. 2022; Wigg and Ehrlin 2021). However, a particular point of significance for discussion (that further emphasises the call for greater emotio-*spatial* attention in reference to SMHWB) lies in the enhanced illumination afforded to students' particular positive and problematic sentiments *as derived from space/place encounters* that are apparently crucial to/in their general framing of SMHWB (Pavlova and Berkers 2022). In essence, as devices of definition/meaning-making, this research signals students' 'feeling frames' of SMHWB as frequently, in large part, originating in/via their wider spatial relationships.

Given that, as Pavlova and Berkers (2022) indicate, sentiments of mental health framing might be considered indicative of 'collective emotional tones defining of a broader thematic understanding of mental health', suggested potential labels for the sentiments underpinning students' own SMHWB frames as indicated through this data could include, for example, 'comfort', 'freedom', 'continuity', 'frustration', 'uncertainty', 'entrapment', etc. Such framings are significant not solely because they indicate the centrality of emotion(s) as part of students' university-experience meaning-making in general but because, thinking further through the lens of Pavlova and Berkers' (2022) work, nuanced distinctions between how neoliberal UKHE sector/institutions 'produce' SMHWB and how it may actually be framed (and consequently navigated) by students' themselves are also signposted. Arguably, the sentiments of the SMHWB frames suggested here hold power to shift dominant narratives in reference to the topic overall via their signposting of how emotio-spatially-framed experiences may function as central to/in a general 'SMHWB language' determined by students' themselves, a discourse that challenges institutions' neoliberal underpinnings by

making clearly visible the need for movement *away* from an individualised/ing approach to the issue. Whilst the students' stories did suggest neoliberal values play a role in shaping their SMHWB understandings (there were example reflections indicative of recognition of individual self-responsibility/ownership in distress, and indeed autonomy as protective), nonetheless striking across the stories were undermined feelings of authentic connection alongside feelings of isolation/disconnection described as fused not only with the institution's apparent crisis-oriented regard of SMHWB but the bureaucratic, 'boundaried' processes of their massified university space (Evans et al. 2021; Giannakis and Bullivant 2016). In foregrounding space and place-derived 'feeling frames' of/in their SMHWB experiences, these students signposted need for more concerted efforts to move beyond a regard of and approach to SMHWB as a matter of internal, individualised psychological states, to understand it (and experiences) as shaped through socio-spatial processes and interactions (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005).

As Pavlova and Berkers (2022) point out, understanding how publics themselves frame mental health is crucial to "provide more targeted care, facilitate positive change, and do no harm" (639)—indicated via this research therefore is that greater UKHE sector/institutional attentiveness to students' *emotio-spatial* SMHWB 'feeling frames' is warranted. The generated and charted insights above matter to universities, not because they can be tied to intervention design or implementation—and such deployment of qualitative exploratory data would naturally be inappropriate and indeed contrary to the outset intentions of this research—but because they do highlight SMHWB contextualisation details and under-considered impacts of institutional action/decision-making. What is to be encouraged, then, is deeper thought and reflection at institution level regarding potential impacts of their own particular geographies; institutions should also perhaps endeavour to explore and consider their own student populations' *qualitative* experiences in light of locality specifics. Open questions, such as the following broad, initial examples developed via thinking through the themes generated in this research, could be useful starting points for institutions:

- *What dominant emotion-guided tones are being used to define our students' mental health and wellbeing experiences?*
- *Where do our institutional narratives diverge from students' felt realities (and what changes might assist in bridging any gap(s))?*
- *Ultimately, how are our university's spaces and places emotionally mapped by our students; what feelings (positive and/or problematic) do these mappings reveal?*

Methodological learnings and an invitation

Such questions as those suggested above underscore the need signalled through this research for UKHE institutions to more proactively engage with students' complex emotional geographies in order to better respond to issues of SMHWB. However, doing this effectively also requires a fundamental rethink about how student voice is conceptualised and elicited (Robinson and Taylor 2007; Seale 2009). A closing discussion point beyond inviting institutions to deepen/extend explorations of their students' emotio-spatial experiences is thus that this research acts as a methodological resource for future research to further illuminate *authentic* spatial facets of university SMHWB.

As indicated at this article's outset, the neoliberal individualising, pathologizing and associated quantitative research emphases of the current UKHE space/context (Bourke and MacDonald 2018; Foster and Francis 2019; Macaskill 2013; Priestley 2019) have contributed to a questionable shaping/construction of 'student voice' (Young and Jerome 2020). Diversity, complexity and dynamism in and of (the meaning of) student experiences are underacknowledged; thus reinforced has been (is) an illusion of authenticity. Whilst statistical gathering and reporting may be seen as equating to and representing 'student voice' (Carey 2013), it may not always be the case that the *full* meaning underpinning gleaned data is understood or, importantly, listened to (Bourke and MacDonald 2018). Essentially, continuing to prioritise institutional logics and dominant health paradigms means that 'authentic student voice' will remain not just a methodological issue but one also entangled with how SMHWB itself continues to be understood and researched (Macaskill 2013; Priestley 2019), leading to continued invisibility of crucial student perspectives (Briggs 2011; Vos, Roberts, and Davies 2019). Beyond a simple stating that qualitative student perspectives are crucial in developing deeper knowledge about SMHWB, there is much needed reconsideration of both the modes and epistemologies through which authentic student voice*s* are elicited.

That this project spoke to a sample from a single UKHE institution could be viewed as limiting of its value; however, this research was not conducted with a view to making truthfulness claims of a representative or universal character. Focusing on lived/ing experiences, exploration and illumination of *detail* within *varied* experiences (Butina, 2015) from students' own perspectives was the principal aim of the work. In adopting a guiding research lens drawing on the PTMF and conceptual outlines from the sociology of emotions and emotional geographies (all of which foreground the importance of context, relationality, narrative and meaning-making in understanding experience(s)), principles resonating strongly with concerns about the authenticity of student voice were forefront in this research. Moreover, the methodological approach

adopted allowed isolated experiences to be situated, interconnected and made meaningful within larger life stories, ultimately facilitating a possible *different* reading of student (distress) experiences.

Altogether facilitated has been the production of research entirely emphasising of the need for increased 'spatial *emotion, narrative and framing* awareness' to comprehensively address SMHWB (in UKHE). Via the open narrative asking and telling, vital underpinning orientations to SMHWB have been made visible, as such confirming the assertion that in understanding mental health and wellbeing, narratives are key to "conveying the inter-relatedness of the individual and culture" (Harper 2022, 68-9; Boyle and Johnstone 2020)—in reference to SMHWB specifically, the *inter*dependence, rather than *in*dependence, involved came to the fore via the methodological approach and tools adopted for this research. Challenged here overall were the reductive, individualised (and neoliberal-driven, often decontextualised/compartmentalising) approaches usually discernible in this area of research; instead attended to were students' self-determined/expressed, holistic and over-time-developed experiences. This qualitative attentiveness helped generate authentic and deep student-voiced data augmenting of the existing 'boundaried' SMHWB knowledge base, reinforcing (in particular reference to understanding space and place in relation to SMHWB) that "Storytelling counts" (Gardiner 1988, 120).

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