

Unveiling the experiences of student boarders to privacy breaches among HEIs

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Abstract: This study examines the lived experiences of student boarders in the region, specifically, how vulnerable they are to privacy breaches in boarding facilities and shared accommodation. The study sought to define and understand recurring patterns of privacy breaches, as well as to provide contextualized advice for students in higher education institutions. To capture the lived experiences of student boarders, a qualitative study design including phenomenology and the descriptive technique was employed. Ten individuals were intentionally chosen from various HEIs. Data were acquired through interviews and processed using thematic content analysis to uncover recurring themes. The findings revealed that student boarders are highly vulnerable to privacy risks caused by both the physical structures of boarding houses and the dynamics of social interactions. Broken locks, inadequate lighting, overcrowding, and an absence of enforced house rules were among the most common structural problems. Interpersonal issues such as harassment, gossip, unauthorized access, and theft undermined students' sense of security. Emotional difficulties, notably homesickness and loneliness, were common and aggravated by a lack of effective preventive measures. The study shows that comprehensive safety improvements, the implementation of clear policies, and effective management practices are essential to safeguarding the privacy and overall well-being of student boarders in higher education institutions.

Keywords: student boarders, privacy breaches, shared accommodation, emotional difficulties, interpersonal issues

Introduction

The expansion of higher education has led to a parallel increase in student dormitories and boarding houses, making shared living arrangements an integral part of the student experience. While such accommodations provide accessibility and affordability, they also

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present complex challenges related to personal privacy. In shared spaces, including bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens, and common areas, the distinction between private and public domains becomes blurred, exposing students to frequent and often subtle forms of privacy intrusion. Unlike the structured privacy afforded within family homes, dormitory living places students in environments where their personal belongings may be accessed, conversations overheard, and personal boundaries unintentionally or deliberately crossed. These recurring experiences, though sometimes normalized, constitute meaningful infringements on individual privacy and may have significant implications for students' psychological well-being, autonomy, and sense of security (Jones et al. 2020; Tsai et al. 2020).

Privacy intrusions in shared student accommodations can manifest through various interpersonal behaviors, including unauthorized access to personal belongings, unpermitted borrowing of devices, and unintentional eavesdropping due to architectural limitations such as thin walls or shared rooms. Even seemingly minor actions, such as entering without knocking or disregarding personal space during moments of vulnerability, may undermine trust and contribute to discomfort and interpersonal tension among residents. Although privacy protection laws exist in certain jurisdictions, their application primarily focuses on digital and institutional data protection rather than interpersonal privacy within shared living environments. Moreover, many students remain unaware of their privacy rights or lack the means to assert them effectively in communal residential contexts (Bonta 2020). Consequently, formal legal protections often fail to address the everyday, peer-based privacy violations that students encounter in their immediate living spaces.

Despite growing scholarly attention to privacy in educational and digital contexts, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning the lived privacy experiences of student boarders, particularly within regional and socio-cultural contexts such as the Zamboanga Peninsula. Existing studies largely emphasize institutional surveillance, technological privacy, or general student welfare, while insufficient attention has been given to peer-to-peer privacy intrusions occurring within boarding houses and dormitories. Furthermore, regional boarding arrangements are shaped by unique socio-cultural norms, spatial limitations, and economic conditions that may influence how privacy is perceived, negotiated, and violated. The study addresses this gap by examining the privacy vulnerabilities

experienced by student boarders in higher education institutions in the Zamboanga Peninsula. By centering on students' lived experiences, this research seeks to describe and interpret the patterns, contexts, and implications of privacy intrusions in shared accommodations. Through this regional and student-centered approach, the study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on interpersonal privacy in student housing and provides contextually grounded insights that may inform institutional policies, housing practices, and student support mechanisms.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically phenomenology supported by a descriptive approach, to explore the lived experiences of student boarders regarding privacy breaches in shared accommodations. As cited in the study of Aranjuez (2025), Bacroya and Aranjuez (2025), and Alipoyo (2022) phenomenology was appropriate as it enabled the researcher to capture the meanings participants attributed to their personal experiences of privacy intrusion and how these experiences influenced their emotional well-being, coping responses, and perceptions of safety within communal living environments (Polit & Beck 2021; Finlay 2021). The descriptive qualitative component complemented this approach by allowing a contextualized examination of privacy violations, including peer-related intrusions, unauthorized access to personal belongings, and digital privacy risks. The research was conducted in boarding houses near three higher education institutions in Region IX. These settings were selected because shared housing conditions, often characterized by limited space, overcrowding, and inadequate security, may increase students' vulnerability to privacy violations. Ten purposively selected student boarders participated in the study, with representation from each institution. Participants met the following criteria: (1) currently residing in shared dormitories or boarding houses, (2) having relevant experiences related to privacy vulnerabilities, and (3) residing in their current accommodation for at least one semester to ensure sufficient experiential insight. This sampling approach allowed for rich, in-depth descriptions and meaningful interpretation of privacy-related experiences across diverse boarding contexts.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide consisting of four main questions with corresponding sub-questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about privacy

intrusions, their impacts, and students' coping strategies. The instrument underwent expert validation to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for capturing participants lived experiences. Before data collection, ethical approval was secured from the Jose Rizal Memorial State University Research Ethics Committee, and institutional permissions were obtained from participating schools. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Interviews were conducted in a respectful and supportive manner, audio-recorded with participant permission, and supplemented by field notes for accuracy. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved familiarization with the data, coding, identification of recurring patterns, and development of themes that reflected participants shared experiences and meanings (Ozden 2024). To ensure ethical integrity, all identifiable information was protected through the use of pseudonyms, and data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. This rigorous methodological process ensured the credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical soundness of the study while providing a comprehensive understanding of privacy vulnerabilities among student boarders in shared living environments.

Results and discussion

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, as cited in Aranjuez (2025) and Bacroya and Aranjuez (2025), to systematically examine the lived experiences of student boarders regarding privacy and security breaches. Consistent with descriptive phenomenology, the analysis applied horizontalization, treating each participant's statement with equal importance to capture the essence of their experiences (Alipoyo 2022). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed *verbatim*, and analyzed using a researcher-developed interview guide, including coding, pattern identification, and theme development. Participants were purposively selected student boarders residing near Jose Rizal Memorial State University–Tampilisan Campus, Sibugay Technical Institute, and Southern Peninsula College, where shared accommodations presented potential privacy vulnerabilities. The resulting themes reflected participants' boarding experiences, emotional and psychological responses, impacts on well-being and academic functioning, and recommendations for improving

privacy and safety in shared living environments. They are the following:

Experiences of student boarders

The responses to the interview established the experiences of the student boarders. Two emerging themes were discovered in the study: intrusion into personal spaces and power imbalances with boarding staff and peers. The following terms were covered comprehensively below:

1. Intrusion into personal spaces.

This theme deals with the unauthorized entry, monitoring, or surveillance in dormitories and boarding houses, causing discomfort, tension, or a feeling of threat. Students feel nervous and exposed when the space lacks privacy and security. According to the statement of Participant 8: I might be the only one being watched... maybe when I'm around, they talk nicely, but once I turn my back, they talk about me differently (SS79 P8). Sexual harassment is any unwanted sexual behaviour that makes the boarding students feel upset, scared, offended or humiliated either personally or digitally. Participant 5 shared how persistent and suggestive text messages from someone disrupted their emotional peace. This kind of boundary intrusion illustrates how even digital harassment within or near boarding contexts can create mental fatigue and discomfort. Participant 5 also emphasized the repeated need to transfer boarding houses due to feeling unsafe, reinforcing how physical and emotional threats affect one's sense of belonging. "He kept texting me and always gave things another meaning. I couldn't relax anymore" (SS37 P5).

When boarding house environments violate their boundaries, student boarders often experience serious emotional distress. These emotional struggles include fear, discomfort, and anxiety, especially when faced with harassment or inappropriate advances. Participant 1 also recounted an instance of sexual harassment involving an individual who persistently catcalled and made physical advances. This incident adds another layer to the danger some boarders face - not just from strangers but even from individuals within close quarters. As experienced by Participant 1, stating: "There was a 'gay' person asking for an allowance. He catcalled me, came close, and even touched me" (SS15 P1). And participant 3 stated: "He suddenly knocks... I thought it was my roommate... He suddenly enters and then starts touching me" (SS32 P3).

2. Power imbalances with boarding staff and peers.

This theme indicates the experiences of privacy violations linked to authority figures or co-boarders. Many student boarders live with ongoing fear, anxiety, and discomfort because of unsafe surroundings as a result of power imbalances. These issues affect the student boarders' peace of mind almost every day and make it hard for them to feel safe, even in their supposed private space. Feeling uncomfortable around men among participants, which may stem from negative experiences in the boarding house. According to Participant 6: "I was really uncomfortable, especially with other men around, not my family" (SS47 P6). Peer pressure bolsters power imbalances, which adversely impact the student boarders. According to Participant 9: "Turns out I'm the only one being watched... maybe when I'm around, they talk nicely, but when I turn my back, they talk behind me" (SS83 P9).

As stated by Participant 9, participant revealed feelings of being singled out and closely watched by others, suspecting that peers behave kindly in P9's presence but speak negatively about P9 once they are gone. This interpretation reflects power imbalances as well as a deep sense of distrust and social insecurity. The fear of being gossiped about behind a participant's back creates emotional tension, discourages open communication, and fosters isolation. Such perceptions of betrayal or hypocrisy contribute to a hostile social environment, where the students feel unsafe and emotionally vulnerable, further weakening their sense of belonging within the boarding community. And finally, Participant 10 stated: "Sometimes I just pretend everything's okay and stay quiet. I'm the only one here. I'm afraid to speak up" (SS91 P10).

Altman (2021) said people need to manage their privacy to stay mentally healthy. But if a student lives in a place with no proper walls, lighting, or locks, that control is lost. This study supports that idea, as seen in the discomfort and worry of the participants. These long-term effects of fear, worry, and discomfort show how badly a broken environment can affect students emotionally and mentally. Sometimes, the owners are overprotective of boarders while ignoring safety issues in the boarding house itself. The student boarders feel exposed, especially when boarding rooms are overcrowded, the walls are thin, or the lights are missing. This implies that the social environment in some boarding houses not only promotes unsafe behavior but also cultivates anxiety (Maher & Passmore 2022).

Effects of privacy breaches on their security and safety

1. Fear and anxiety.

This involves the constant worry about being monitored, stalked, or harassed as experienced by the student. It negatively affects the students' quality of life and may potentially lead to anxiety, stress, and reduced well-being when their privacy has been breached. When boarding house environments violate their boundaries, student boarders often experience serious emotional distress. These emotional struggles include fear, shame, discomfort, and anxiety, especially when faced with harassment, inappropriate advances, or exposure to illegal behavior such as drug use. As stated by one participant: "It is difficult...especially when you're alone because you have to think about everything by yourself" (SS85 P10). Adjusting becomes more difficult without familiar faces or support. As stated by Participant 10. Participant 7 chooses a private way of coping, showing that students adapt differently based on their emotional needs and available resources. As the participant emphasized: "Sometimes I just cry. I have no one to talk to. I'm all alone" (SS88 P10).

According to Mendoza and Sales (2024), the burden of always being the one to adjust, even in shared spaces, can lead to emotional withdrawal and lowered self-worth. This aligns with prior accounts, suggesting that unsafe or emotionally neglectful boarding environments amplify stress and inhibit social harmony.

2. Loss of trust.

This theme deals with the declining confidence in dormitory management, peers, or even institutions. As stated by participant 7: "Only my close friend is the one I talk to. Even if we don't talk, it feels like she understands me" (SS62 P7). As pointed out by Participant 7, emotional support in boarding life often comes from selective, trusted friendships. The reliance on a close friend, even in silence, reflects how students navigate emotional safety by limiting their social interactions to those who offer non-verbal understanding and comfort. This mirrors the coping mechanisms mentioned by Participants, who also emphasized the importance of emotional trust in environments where openness is risky. One participant also mentioned that: "I kept transferring boarding houses because of drugs; my boardmates were using drugs" (SS5 P1).

According to Worsley et al. (2021), students who feel socially or emotionally disconnected are more prone to loneliness and isolation.

Similarly, Gao et al. (2020) found that experiences of alienation can worsen if students feel that their vulnerability is not understood or respected by others. Clemente (2020) also noted that the psychosocial adaptation of boarders heavily depends on their ability to trust and relate to others in their new environment.

As mentioned by Indresh (2024), emotional distress in boarding houses often arises from repeated exposure to illegal behavior and personal harassment. This aligns with the student's experience of transferring multiple times due to peers' drug use, showing how environmental insecurity leads to chronic instability and emotional exhaustion. Such conditions are not only disruptive but also psychologically damaging, creating a constant state of fear and anxiety that detracts from academic focus and mental well-being.

3. Behavioral adjustments.

In addressing the privacy breach by the student boarders, they adopted measures to address it. This includes coping mechanisms and social support. In the face of the problem of privacy breach, Participant 7 stated: "I just put it in my journal to express my feelings" (SS56 P7). As stated by Participant 7, journaling serves as a silent outlet to release emotional burdens in the absence of open communication or supportive spaces. Participant 7 adopted a different approach, stating: "Sometimes I just drink to forget" (SS53 P7). Due to ongoing discomfort and fear from privacy breaches, many student boarders strongly prefer to live alone. Participant 7 opted to: "I moved to a farther boarding house because it was more private" (SS76 P7). Many student boarders began adopting protective behaviors in response to their experiences with privacy violations. These behaviors are their way of protecting their personal space, emotions, and routines. Whether through withdrawing socially or engaging in sports, these actions reflect how students try to manage the emotional impact of past experiences. Participant 7 stated: "I just play basketball when I feel heavy" (SS71 P7).

4. Perceived vulnerability.

Student boarders often face physical and emotional insecurities due to many factors. These factors include mixed sex boarding houses, ignorance, and sleep disruptions. The presence of mixed sex boarding houses increases the vulnerability to privacy violations. As experienced by Participant 2, stating: "My previous boarding house was kind of creepy since male and female boarders were mixed, and outsiders would hang out; the house was not strict" (SS25 P2). The

abuse of privileges by other boarders or the violation of the house rules is also one factor that contributes to the vulnerability to privacy violations.

Many students' boarders struggle to adjust socially in the boarding environment due to past negative experiences, uncertainty, and the absence of a supportive network. The transition into independent living often leads to feelings of confusion, distrust, and emotional isolation. Students become hesitant to connect deeply with others, guarding their trust and withdrawing socially. Despite the presence of peers, communication is limited, and emotional bonds are sometimes formed silently or with a select few they feel safe with. As stated by a participant: "During my first year... I didn't really know what to do as a boarder" (SS42 P6). The following responses illustrate how sleep disruptions and the surrounding factors added to vulnerability to privacy violations as experienced by the participants. Participant 10 stated: "I can't sleep well. Especially when noises are loud outside or if I feel someone else is in the room. I keep waking up" (SS89 P10). According to Participant 10, the felt fear triggered by surrounding noise or imagined presence in the room leads to hyper-alertness and sleep disturbance.

Impacts of privacy breaches on students' quality of life

1. Emotional and psychological strain.

This shows the impact of privacy breaches by limiting interactions to avoid further risks. This study delves into the ongoing emotional distress that student boarders endure following privacy breaches or unsafe living conditions. Their stories show how they carry sadness, fear, and changes in behavior long after the events. Some avoid others, move out, or change their daily habits just to feel safe. These responses show how deep the emotional wounds go and how challenging it is for boarders to feel secure and at peace again. Participant 2 stated: "Before, we used to eat together, but not anymore. So, the adjustment I made was to avoid them; I transferred to a boarding house" (SS29 P1).

Participant 2 decided to leave the boarding house and live somewhere else just to avoid certain people. The same participant turned off the lights while sleeping to avoid being seen, showing how fear changed even simple things like sleeping, stating: "I used to sleep with the lights on, but now I turned them off so if they try to peek, they won't see me" (SS96 P2). The aftermath of distressing experiences in the boarding house triggered contrasting coping mechanisms.

Participant 6 stated: “Because of what happened, we became more open with each other” (SS52 P6). One participant chose to withdraw from social settings like group meals due to fear, signalling heightened anxiety and emotional vulnerability. Participant 7 stated: “I no longer join group meals because I’m afraid” (SS69 P7).

Lingering emotional trauma can deeply affect students’ behavior and mental health. When students feel unsafe or embarrassed, they start changing how they act. Cherry (2023) noted that emotional stress among college students often leads to isolation and sadness. In the same way, Tang et al. (2020) found that students living away from home often struggle emotionally because they feel alone and unsafe. In the responses, we see students choosing to leave boarding houses or avoid social settings to protect their feelings.

2. Academic disruptions.

This theme indicates the impact of privacy breaches through difficulty concentrating, decreased productivity, and a negative impact on learning outcomes. Privacy breaches of the students significantly harm their academic performance due to stress. Boarding house experiences filled with stress, fear, and noise have made it challenging for student boarders to concentrate and do well in school. Many students shared how their emotional strain, triggered by feeling watched, unsafe housing, or noisy surroundings, affected their focus, sleep, and mental health. These ongoing emotional struggles led to poor sleeping patterns, fear, and even drinking to cope. All these made it harder for them to perform well in their studies. As one participant stated: “I get suddenly triggered when someone knocks at the door (SS64 P7). One participant recalled: If there’s a slight bump or a loud noise, I get bothered. It’s like a flashback” (SS90 P10).

As stated by Participant 10, even minor sounds or bumps can be disturbing and feel like flashbacks. This points to the presence of emotional responses that remain active even in less intense moments, indicating how past experiences continue to affect current mental states. This finding shows that their academic performance is affected not because they lack interest but because their environment is disturbing. Tomas reported that boarders often struggle more than commuters due to poor living conditions. Salindo and Ubat (2018) also found that when boarding houses are unsafe or uncomfortable, students may lack energy and focus for school. Their emotional condition becomes a barrier that lowers their learning performance and motivation.

3. Social withdrawal and isolation.

This shows the impact of privacy breaches by limiting interactions to avoid further risks. Living in a boarding house, especially after experiencing privacy breaches or emotional stress, affects how students interact with others. Many student boarders start to feel distant, untrusting, or isolated. These feelings make it challenging for them to form close friendships or feel like they belong. This theme shows how the students' social ties slowly weaken, causing them to withdraw or avoid group activities due to fear, judgment, or mistrust. Participants' experience illustrates the emotional toll of a boarding environment that becomes too difficult to endure, prompting a desire to escape. However, this is contrasted by the same participant's attempt to maintain social connection through immediate disclosure to a board member. This contrast suggests that even in moments of emotional burnout, student boarders still seek interpersonal outlets to cope. It reveals how emotional resilience is sometimes sustained not by the environment itself but by the presence of even minimal social support. As mentioned by participant 6: "We have monthly meetings... we decided to report. We had shared rooms, ma'am... no boys allowed" (SS50 P6).

As stated by Participant 6, regular meetings among boarders suggest a collective attempt to maintain order, share concerns, and build a sense of solidarity in managing shared living conditions. This reflects proactive behavior in addressing ongoing issues, such as safety or privacy concerns. Meanwhile, the mention of shared rooms without male presence indicates a rule meant to promote safety, yet it also implies a proximity that can either foster stronger social ties or create discomfort depending on individual experiences and past incidents. Together, these statements reveal how student boarders navigate community-building and personal boundaries in tightly shared spaces. Participant 7 stated: "I don't like being around them anymore; it's hard to trust people now" (SS67 P7).

As stated by Participant 7, the emotional toll of negative experiences in the boarding environment has led to a strong sense of withdrawal and isolation. The decision to avoid others and the difficulty in trusting people highlight how deeply breaches of privacy or betrayal can affect a student's capacity to form or maintain relationships. This distancing is not merely a preference but a protective response, illustrating how emotional wounds shape future interactions. The shift from openness to guardedness reflects a

significant impact on the border's overall social adjustment and emotional health. And further stated: "They're acting differently, like we're strangers, and I don't want to talk to anyone anymore" (SS68 P7).

As stated by Participant 7, the respondent expressed that their peers are acting differently and that they no longer feel connected, as if they have become strangers. They also shared that they no longer want to talk to anyone. This reflects a growing sense of alienation and emotional detachment. Despite being surrounded by people, the student feels isolated and alone. The changes in peer behavior and communication have contributed to feelings of disconnection and loneliness. This emotional withdrawal suggests a breakdown in trust and comfort within the boarding environment, which significantly affects the student's social and psychological well-being.

After experiencing stress, fear, or privacy breaches, many students begin to feel isolated, distrustful, and emotionally distant from their peers. Harrowdev (2020) asserts that emotional trauma in shared living spaces often disrupts social ties among students. These disruptions diminish their inclination to participate, voice their opinions, or establish new relationships, ultimately impacting their daily emotional well-being. Many experience judgment or discussion, leading them to withdraw and cease involvement in group activities or conversations.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that privacy violations in student boarding houses are frequent and multifaceted, arising from both structural deficiencies and interpersonal dynamics within shared living environments. Inadequate physical safeguards, such as broken locks, overcrowding, and insufficient lighting, alongside peer-related intrusions, significantly compromise students' ability to regulate personal boundaries, consistent with Altman's Privacy Regulation Theory. These violations produce adverse psychological effects, including anxiety, emotional distress, hypervigilance, and diminished trust, while also negatively affecting academic functioning through poor concentration, sleep disturbances, and reduced engagement, reflecting the importance of safety and psychological security emphasized in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Despite individual coping efforts, the absence of institutional oversight and formal support systems exacerbates students' vulnerability, highlighting a critical gap in safeguarding student welfare in off-campus housing

contexts. These findings underscore the urgent need for coordinated institutional and regulatory interventions to ensure safe, secure, and privacy-respecting boarding environments.

Thus, it is recommended that Local Government Units, in collaboration with Higher Education Institutions, establish and enforce regulatory standards for boarding houses, including secure physical infrastructure, adequate safety measures, and regular compliance monitoring. Institutions should also strengthen student support services through confidential counseling, reporting mechanisms, and privacy awareness programs to address the psychological and academic impacts of privacy violations. Furthermore, the implementation of orientation programs, peer support initiatives, and housing accreditation systems can promote accountability and empower students to protect their privacy and well-being. These measures are essential to safeguarding students' dignity, enhancing their sense of security, and fostering boarding environments conducive to academic success and holistic development.

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