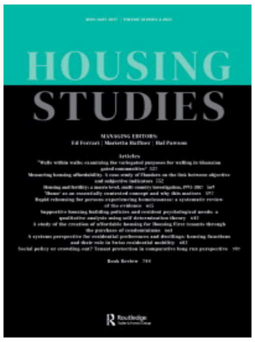


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# Selling city centre flats in uncertain times: findings from two English cities

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**ABSTRACT**
The UK's city centre apartment markets have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic and a building safety crisis in ways not experienced by its suburban and rural housing markets. Sellers and estate agents have encountered falling demand and prices, elevated safety concerns, reluctant lenders and changes in buyers' preferences. Against this backdrop, we investigated the narratives and images used to sell what have sometimes appeared to be 'less sellable' homes. Analysing the textual and visual content of 100 adverts for city centre flats, we explored the possible effects of the pandemic on property advertising, the positioning within adverts of building safety and, noting growing interest in sustainability, the presence of sustainability messages. Findings suggest that the core narratives used to sell city centre flats remain largely unchanged from those deployed to first market the concept of 'city living' to UK buyers in the late 1990s. Messages about building safety and sustainability appear uncommon. The implications of the findings are considered.

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Housing markets; real estate advertising; city centre housing; documentary research; comparative research

## Introduction

The UK's city centre apartment markets have, in recent years, been affected by the global coronavirus pandemic and a building safety crisis in ways not experienced by its suburban and rural housing markets (Gardiner *et al.*, 2021). While the former requires no introduction, the building safety crisis may be less familiar to some readers. The crisis came to prominence in June 2017, although its roots can be traced back far further, when a huge fire at Grenfell Tower, a block of flats in London, claimed the lives of 72 people, injured many more and led to a public inquiry that concluded combustible cladding was the 'principal reason' for its rapid spread (Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2019). Fire safety inspections carried out subsequently at high-rise buildings throughout the UK have uncovered numerous examples of dangerous cladding and other safety and construction defects (Preece, 2021). Critical

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reviews have identified multiple long-run, systemic failings in the operation and oversight of the construction industry as the underlying cause of the UK's building safety crisis (see Hackitt, 2017, 2018). For Oswald *et al.* (2021, p. 950), a raft of physical, technical, policy and practice failings allowed flammable cladding to become just the latest in a long line of construction failures in the UK, and internationally, which also number asbestos, structural failings and leaking buildings. The UK's building safety crisis has prompted an evolving policy response from Government that has included the provision of funding for some remediation work at some buildings. The owners of some residential towers have also funded the cost of some remediation work. However, many leaseholders have been presented with large bills for expensive repair work and mitigation measures (Preece, 2021). As the crisis has unfolded, some leaseholders have been left with properties that are difficult to sell or re-mortgage, potentially until remediation work is completed or a safety inspection confirms that no work is needed (House of Commons Library, 2022; Phillips, 2021). In the first quarter of 2022, data from three mortgage lenders revealed, for instance, that 50% of mortgage valuations for flats in buildings of seven storeys and above required information about the fire safety of the external wall materials as identified and recorded in an External Wall System (EWS) survey and an EWS1 form (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities [DLUHC], 2022).[1]

Sellers and real estate agents in city centre markets contending with the pandemic and the building safety crisis have, at times, encountered falling demand and prices, elevated safety concerns (Corker, 2022), reluctant mortgage lenders (Phillips, 2021) and changes in homebuyers' space requirements (Daher *et al.*, 2021). Similar experiences have been reported in city centre markets elsewhere. For example, property prices fell at the start of the pandemic in densely populated city centres in some of America's largest conurbations (Ramani & Bloom, 2021). In what appear to be challenging market conditions, which at the time of the research also included rising interest rates and inflation, and falling consumer confidence (Bank of England, 2022), we wanted to explore how property advertising, the primary mechanism for informing prospective buyers of homes for sale (Perkins *et al.*, 2008), was being used to market city centre flats. We wished to unpick the messages and images used to sell what have, at times, appeared to be 'less sellable' homes. Ultimately, we wished to answer the question: *how are city centre flats marketed in uncertain times?* To address this question, we analysed the textual and visual content of 100 adverts for 100 city centre flats, located in two northern English cities, Leeds and Sheffield, which were advertised for sale on one of the UK's leading Multiple Listing Services (MLS) in early 2022. We defined city centre flats/apartments as residential units in residential or mixed-use multi-unit buildings, that were purpose-built or created through conversion or redevelopment, and that are located in a city's central urban area. Following Gillon & Gibbs (2017) and Collins & Kearns (2008), the adverts were analysed for their promotional intent, not for their effectiveness as sales tools. Particular attention was paid to the possible effects of the pandemic on real estate advertising, and the positioning of building safety in adverts. Additionally, noting the growing concern for sustainability in public discourse, and in UK built environment policy, we considered the positioning of sustainability within adverts.

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to consider residential property advertising in the context of the pandemic and the UK's building safety crisis.

Further, as data collection occurred just before the introduction of the Building Safety Act 2022, which was devised in response to the building safety crisis and provides (qualifying) leaseholders with certain rights and protections in respect of certain repair costs and building defects, the study provides a unique account of how city centre flats were marketed to buyers at a time when individuals faced potentially large legal and financial responsibilities if they happened to purchase a property in a defective building. Comparing the study's findings with past findings on residential property advertising produced pre-pandemic, and before building safety came to such prominence, might, we believe, facilitate tentative insights into the possible effects of these events on advertising practice. We recognize, though, that in the absence of a pre-post study design firm conclusions on these matters are not possible. Besides these novel aspects, the study expands the limited literature on the advertising and selling of specific urban locations (Perkins *et al.*, 2008), in this case city centres, and the advertising of city centre flats (Cheung & Ma, 2005; Peirce, 2002). It also adds to the small collection of studies that have examined the textual content of property adverts (see Andrew, 2006; Pryce & Oates, 2008; Goodwin *et al.*, 2014) and the small number that have focused on the content of online property adverts (see Allen *et al.*, 2015; Benefield *et al.*, 2011; Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Haag *et al.*, 2000; Yu *et al.*, 2020). Lastly, it contributes to wider debates about the role of property advertising in both the production of place-meaning and the social construction of urban and built environments (Perkins *et al.*, 2008, p. 2075).

The next section considers past findings on the language, narratives and imagery used in real estate advertising, and the role of this advertising in the social construction of space. The study's methodology is then introduced before the findings are presented and discussed. The conclusions reflect on the implications for property advertising and city centre housing.

## Residential real estate advertising

The language and imagery of real estate advertising attracts international and cross-disciplinary interest. Studies have considered the content of residential property adverts in North America, the UK, China, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand, amongst other locations, and examples are found in diverse literatures, including housing studies (Pryce & Oates, 2008), urban studies (Kriese & Scholz, 2011), planning (Perkins *et al.*, 2008), language and linguistics (Andrew, 2006), anthropology (Cheung & Ma, 2005) and cultural geography (Gillon & Gibbs, 2017). However, despite these examples, research on the content of property adverts still remains relatively rare (Pryce & Oates, 2008). It has also almost always focused on the content of printed advertisements, particularly adverts in newspapers (see Andrew (2006); Choi *et al.* (2020); Collins & Kearns (2008); Peirce (2002); Perkins *et al.* (2008); Pryce & Oates (2008)). A couple of studies have looked at TV advertisements (Cheung & Ma, 2005) and the marketing materials produced by developers, such as billboards and brochures (Gillon & Gibbs, 2017; Peirce, 2002). Of note, despite the transformative effect of the internet on real estate advertising, very few studies have looked at the content of online adverts and seemingly none have done so from a qualitative perspective. Bond *et al.* (2000) provided an early insight into the embryonic use of online property adverts, but rather than analyse the content of online offerings they instead asked estate agents about their use of internet advertising. The few studies which have examined the content of online adverts have tended to adopt quantitative approaches to explore links between the frequency of images, virtual tours and/or particular forms of language and market outcomes, like price and time-on-market (see Allen *et al.* (2015); Benefield *et al.* (2011); Goodwin *et al.* (2014); Haag *et al.* (2000); Xiong *et al.* (2022); Yu *et al.* (2020)). They have also typically focused on adverts taken from North American MLSs, potentially raising questions about the wider applicability of the findings.

Amongst the handful of qualitative studies that have considered property adverts, property location has routinely been identified as a key advertising focus. Whether a study considers adverts for coastal properties (Collins & Kearns, 2008; Gillon & Gibbs, 2017), city centre apartments (Cheung & Ma 2005; Peirce, 2002) or suburban houses (Perkins *et al.*, 2008; Turner *et al.*, 2019), location is consistently revealed as a central issue. Particularly relevant to this study, when analysing adverts for city centre flats, Peirce (2002) found that a convenient location, in terms of access to services, transport, workplaces, and so on, was the *main* highlighted benefit of a city centre property. The celebration of centrality was counterpoised, however, with assurances about a property's peaceful, safe setting. Adverts framed properties as providing 'a complex mixture of urbanity, tranquillity, and safety' (Peirce, 2002, p. 966). Cheung & Ma (2005) found an equally complex mix of benefits emphasised in adverts for city centre flats in Hong Kong with privacy, space and proximity to services highlighted. Kriese & Scholz (2011) found a similar emphasis on proximity to services in their unique investigation into the positioning of sustainability messages within property adverts. They found that proximity to nearby services was the most frequently cited sustainability feature in adverts for homes that were listed for sale or for rent in Basel, Switzerland over a 100-year period. However, this feature was framed in terms of convenience rather than sustainability. Outside built-up areas, adverts are routinely found to emphasize a property's undeveloped, natural, spacious location (Collins & Kearns, 2008; Turner *et al.*, 2019). Sometimes this focus on location can crowd out consideration of the property itself. Gillon & Gibbs (2017), for example, found that adverts for coastal properties in Australia were more likely to include images of empty coastal and outdoor environments near to a property than they were to include images of the property for sale.

The accuracy of the property and neighbourhood descriptions included in property adverts has been challenged by many (see Gillon & Gibbs, 2017; Turner *et al.*, 2019). Peirce (2002), for example, questioned whether a centrally located property could deliver the kind of peaceful, private home that adverts for city centre flats claim, given the need for control over the external environment that this requires but that homeowners lack. A deliberate blending of the authentic and the inauthentic, through the integration of 'abstract or idealized notions of place with tangible forms of real estate', is identified by Perkins *et al.* (2008, p. 2026) as a cornerstone of real estate advertising. Adverts are seen to provide a highly selective representation of material property and land (Collins & Kearns, 2008). This representation affirms, produces or reproduces particular meanings in relation to particular places, influencing how areas are understood and the lifestyles they are assumed to support (Perkins *et al.*, 2008, p. 2026). Collins & Kearns (2008) argue that it is not just prospective buyers who are influenced by the place-meanings fashioned through real estate adverts. Rather, the 'collective imagination' is impacted with advertising helping to legitimize specific forms and understandings of place and property (Collins & Kearns, 2008, p. 2921). For example, while contending with established preferences for suburban living and a largely untested product in 'city living' apartments (Peirce, 2002), property advertising has, over the last couple of decades, been important in helping to legitimize the UK's city centres as attractive, even aspirational, places to live.

The language and phrasing of real estate adverts, investigated in a small number of studies, is integral to the idealized representations of place and property presented. In an extensive study, Pryce & Oates (2008) examined the use of rhetoric, specifically pathos, in almost 50,000 real estate adverts. They found relatively few examples of pathos within an advert, on average pathos words accounted for around 6% of the property description, but most adverts included at least one example. Assigning words and phrases to one of six categories of pathos, they found 'excitement' was the most commonly employed form. This category encompassed words and phrases, like 'amazing' and 'fantastic', which sought to foster excitement for a property. Language that taps into particular lifestyle fantasies, that appeals to a desire for prestige and status, or that emphasizes a property's originality, was also identified, although much less frequently (Pryce & Oates, 2008, p. 328). Others have found that adverts incorporate superlative adjectives that may generate excitement, like 'brilliant' and 'unrivalled', when describing a property's characteristics (Andrew, 2006; Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Haag *et al.*, 2000), and phrases and words (and images) that imply prestige or exclusivity (Cheung & Ma, 2005; Dorignon & Wiesel, 2022; Peirce, 2002). Similar to Pryce & Oates (2008), the few studies which have measured use of this language find that while present it does not abound (Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Haag *et al.*, 2000). Matching Pryce & Oates (2008), various studies report that adverts employ words and phrases (and images) to tap into particular lifestyle fantasies. Turner *et al.* (2019), for example, identified efforts to tap into a fantasy 'suburban lifestyle', which emphasized strong community relations and access to nature, in adverts for housing developments on Auckland's North Shore. The words and phrases employed in adverts have been linked to market outcomes in the few studies which have investigated this issue. Haag *et al.* (2000, p. 208), for example, considered the effect on price and time-on-market of subjective comments and references to 'factually verifiable' property attributes. They found strong evidence of a relationship between language and price but less evidence of a relationship to time-on-market. Further, while negative comments had a consistently negative effect on price the direction of effect for positive comments was variable.

## Methods

To examine the narratives and imagery used to sell city centre properties we purposively sampled online sales adverts for 100 city centre apartments from a leading MLS in the UK between March and April 2022. The sample is described in the

Findings section. We used the various search tools available on the MLS, which allow individuals to tailor their property search according to certain factors, to select the adverts. We searched the MLS by geography, focusing on Leeds and Sheffield city centres, and by dwelling type, focusing on apartments. We defined Leeds and Sheffield city centres according to the geographies employed by the MLS. We ordered the total set of adverts returned through our searches by the date of listing and then sampled the 50 most recently listed adverts in both locations. This equated to almost 20% of all flats listed in Leeds city centre on the MLS at the time of the research and over 30% of all flats listed in Sheffield city centre. Focusing on the most recently listed properties ensured that adverts from the same point in time, produced against the same set of national and local market conditions, were analysed. Following Aune (2012), we focused on the long-form advert associated with a property. This provided often substantial textual and visual material for analysis affording rich insights into how real estate actors use these materials to market properties.

### Leeds and Sheffield

Leeds is the third largest city in England with a population of 812,000 people, while Sheffield, located approximately 46 km from Leeds, is the fourth largest city with a population of approximately 556,500 people (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022a). Each has an established city centre housing market with flats constituting the majority of sales in 2021 in both centres. The average selling price for a flat in Sheffield city centre in 2022 was £125,867 (Rightmove, 2022a) while in Leeds it was £179,693 (Rightmove, 2022b). Flats are the dominant dwelling type in both centres equating to 94% of properties in Sheffield city centre (Sheffield Hallam University, 2019) and 96% in Leeds (Bullock, 2017). The dominant tenure in both centres is private rented accounting for 73% of households in Leeds city centre (Bullock, 2017) and 55% of households in Sheffield city centre (Sheffield Hallam University, 2019). Social rented is the next most populous tenure in Sheffield city centre (26% of households) followed by owner-occupied (19%) (Sheffield Hallam University, 2019), but in Leeds it is owner-occupied (15% of households) followed by social rented (12%) (Bullock, 2017). Some of the demand for private rented accommodation in both centres derives from each city's large student population. There are approximately 36,600 students in Leeds (Nomis, 2022a) and 19,800 students in Sheffield (Nomis, 2022b). Properties marketed as short-term lets are available in both city centres, reflecting patterns observed in many urban centres (Adamiak, 2018; Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2017). The scale of short-term lets in both locations is, however, unclear and neither city appears to have implemented an explicit strategy to manage these types of properties.

Policy in both cities encourages city centre residential development and there are multiple examples in each of purpose-built residential schemes (single and mixed use) and projects created through change of use and redevelopment. In both cities, development is managed by national planning policy and national building regulations and this national context informs local building and spatial regulation. These national and local frameworks are frequently updated and, consequently, Leeds and Sheffield city centres contain residential schemes that were constructed under a range of different statutory and policy regimes. Moreover, the residential schemes in each city centre are likely to vary in their degree of compliance with the regulatory regimes in place at their time of construction. Post-Grenfell, and following other construction failures, several reviews, including Hackitt's Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety (Hackitt, 2017, 2018), the Report of the Review Panel on Building Standards Compliance and Enforcement (Cole, 2018) and the Independent Inquiry into the Construction of Schools in Edinburgh (Cole, 2017), have concluded that the construction industry's compliance with building standards must be strengthened.

Sustainability has become an increasingly prominent issue in national and local built environment policy, although many argue that current sustainability policies fall short of what is needed to address pressing environmental and climate challenges (Committee on Climate Change, 2019). At the national level, Building Regulations, for instance, have been revised to become progressively more demanding on energy efficiency standards (Pan & Garmston, 2012). At the local level, the strategic land use plans in Leeds and Sheffield both contain policies on sustainability with each city's Core Strategy including policies on issues like sustainable design and development and low carbon and renewable energy (Leeds City Council, 2019; Sheffield City Council, 2009). Further, and especially relevant to this study, since 2008 properties listed for sale in Leeds and Sheffield, and indeed across England, have been required to have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) that rates the energy performance of a dwelling from A (good) to G (poor) (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2017). Moreover, it is a requirement that this rating is 'stated in any advertisement in the commercial media' where it is available (DCLG, 2017, p.8).

The housing markets in Leeds and Sheffield city centres have both been affected by the building safety crisis and the pandemic. Leeds is reported to have at least 70 apartment buildings with unsafe cladding, the highest concentration amongst towns and cities in Yorkshire, the region in which both cities are located, while Sheffield has 36 affected buildings (Dale, 2021). Resident-led action groups developed in response to the building safety crisis are present in both cities and local media has reported on the crisis and its impacts. Local media has also reported on the impact of the pandemic on each city centre's housing market. Choosing these city centres allowed exploration and comparison of property advertising in two largely comparable markets with experience of the building safety crisis and the pandemic. In selecting two cities, similarities and differences in advertising could be explored supporting tentative conclusions about the particularity or generality of the advertising practices observed.

## Analysis

We reviewed the content of each of the 100 long-form adverts included in our sample. Following Collins & Kearns (2008, p. 2922), and orientated by our research interests, such as the positioning of building safety and sustainability in adverts, we collected and collated relevant information from and about each advert in a database. Descriptive data collected about each advert included the number of images presented, the nature of those images (photograph or CGI, exterior or interior image, type of room/space/feature shown), and details of any virtual tours (length, components – photographs, film, music, narration etc.). Information collected directly from each advert included, where available, the listing agent, property location, price, size (number of bedrooms, bathrooms and internal floorspace), tenure (freehold/leasehold), appeals to particular markets (e.g. landlords, first-time buyers), text from any bullet points included at the top of an advert and from the opening sentences of an advert, text that mentioned building safety measures or assurances, and text that referred to any features/factors that might relate to sustainability, with expansive understandings, informed by the literature, employed for both building safety and sustainability when selecting text. We analysed the assembled database in several ways. Descriptive statistics provided insights into possible relationships, such as between property price and the number of images featured in an advert. However, similar to several past studies (Collins & Kearns, 2008; Gillon & Gibbs, 2017), attention focused on producing a thematic interpretation of the visual and textual content of the adverts, with past findings on the content of property adverts informing the analysis.

A small set of interrelated themes, that variously addressed the study's concerns and/or captured common issues within the adverts, were identified from the analysis. A 'linguistic tropes' theme captured evidence of the 'linguistic symptoms' (Andrew, 2006, p. 71) of real estate advertese commonly emphasized within past studies of property advertising. This included examples of language and phrasing that generates excitement, implies prestige, suggests originality, uses conceits and taps into particular lifestyle fantasies. This theme was relevant to practically every advert. In general, only adverts with very little textual material failed to show evidence of this theme. A 'location' theme captured textual and visual content that described a property's neighbourhood or local environmental context. This theme was relevant to all adverts. A 'property features' theme captured textual and visual content that detailed the characteristics and attributes of a property. Again, this theme was relevant to all adverts. Informed by Kriese & Scholz's (2011) analysis of the positioning of sustainability in property advertising, and their multi-dimensional understanding of sustainability, three themes captured textual and visual content relating to environmental, social and economic sustainability. The environmental sustainability theme captured any information provided about a property's pro-environmental attributes like environmentally friendly technology, energy efficiency measures, proximity to services and so forth. Of the three sustainability themes employed, this applied to the largest number of adverts, followed by the economic sustainability and the social sustainability themes. The economic sustainability theme captured information provided about the economic performance or value of a property. The social sustainability theme captured information provided about a property's potential suitability for different groups, or that engaged with the needs of different groups or that contained explicit social or participatory commitments, such as commitments to affordable housing. Finally, a 'building safety' theme captured visual and textual content relating to the safety and security of a property, such as commentary on fire safety, EWS1 forms, crime, security measures and so forth. This theme was applicable to relatively few adverts. The themes were simultaneously separate and interlocking. An advert's account of a property's characteristics (property features theme) and location (location theme) often entailed use of real estate advertese (linguistic tropes theme) while it could involve mention of items associated with sustainability (social, environment and economic sustainability themes) or a building's safety and security (building safety theme).

## Findings

Our sample included property adverts produced by 40 different real estate actors. The Sheffield sample included adverts from 23 actors and the Leeds sample adverts from 21. Just four actors had listings in both city centre samples. Most advertisers were estate agents providing traditional residential sales and lettings services. These were a mix of local agents covering Leeds, Sheffield or the wider region, agents with a national presence, usually framed as local agents within a national chain, and online estate agents. Other advertisers included two online auctioneers, a developer, an international property consultancy and five property investment agents. The latter promoted 'build-to-rent' schemes (Nethercote, 2020), including Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA), and/or buy-to-let properties to private investors. These investment agents were responsible for 20% of the adverts in our sample. Advertisers had, on average, 2.5 listings each within our sample, although 50% had only one listing while 15% had five or more listings.

Across the whole sample, the average listed property price was £196,268 (SD = £127,280). In the Leeds sample, the average price was £247,516 (SD = £144,948) and in Sheffield it was £145,020 (SD = £78,344). Almost 35% of properties in the Sheffield sample were priced at less than £100,000, in Leeds it was just 8%. Information on properties' internal floorspace was limited, however, using that which was available indicated that the average price per square metre in Leeds was £3,606 and in Sheffield it was £2,877. Adverts for one-bedroom/studio flats were the most common accounting for 48% of all adverts in the sample, followed by adverts for two-bedroom flats (40%) and three-bedroom flats (12%). This pattern was magnified in our Sheffield sample, where 60% of adverts were for one-bedroom/studio apartments, but it was not evident in our Leeds sample where the most common property was a two-bedroom flat (44% of adverts). These differences in sample characteristics help to explain some of the variation in pricing observed between the two city samples.

The following discussion presents findings from our analysis of all 100 property adverts. We first explore the language, imagery and narratives employed within adverts to sell city centre flats to prospective buyers by integrating material primarily from the linguistic tropes, location, and property features themes. We then consider the positioning of building safety in adverts, which foregrounds material from the building safety theme. Finally, we explore the positioning of sustainability, principally by presenting material from the social, economic and environmental sustainability themes. Throughout, we incorporate words and phrases from the adverts to both illustrate points and to give a tangible sense of the content of the adverts.

## *Language, imagery and narratives in property advertising*

Every advert in our sample included a written property description. Although the length of this description varied usually it contained multiple sentences and often spanned a couple of paragraphs. Many adverts followed a similar template with a set of bullet points towards the top picking out a series of property and locational features and underneath a property description in continuous prose. There was some variation in the property and locational features highlighted, and the wider topics covered, but overall common patterns were evident in the broad messages used, and the images conjured through discussion, to market city centre flats to prospective buyers. Diverse actors in two housing markets shared, then, similar approaches to advertising and marketing assorted city centre properties.

The most commonly employed narrative focused on emphasising 'central location' as a property's primary appeal. Adverts highlighted a property's proximity to places of entertainment, study, work and transport, sometimes also to independent shops, bars, and restaurants: 'a variety of artisan restaurants and bars', 'a host of local amenities ranging from stylish boutiques to delicious dining'. There were references to facilities being 'close', 'nearby' or within walking distance and to properties being in a 'central' or 'city centre' location: 'you have everything the city centre can offer you right at your fingertips', 'in the heart of the city', 'enviable city centre location' and 'short stroll to train station, shopping district 10-minutes' walk'. Various positive adjectives, and often several within a single advert, were used to foster excitement about a city centre location. Central locations were 'superb', 'prime', 'exciting', 'perfect', 'convenient', 'enviable', 'vibrant' and 'hot'. Centrally located properties were identified as the ideal home for professionals, students and first-time buyers, 'superb spot for local professionals', 'perfect location for both students and young professionals' and 'would be the perfect first home'. Adverts were largely silent on the possibility that these properties could appeal to other groups, aside from investors. The only (indirect) reference to families, for example, was when commenting on a property's sanitary facilities, 'there are two double bedrooms, one with en-suite and a family bathroom'.

Various property features and attributes were mentioned in adverts. Usually these items were discussed in terms that emphasized an apartment's originality and/or prestige, and/or that tapped into certain lifestyle fantasies. Properties were 'high spec.', 'luxurious', 'beautifully finished', 'stylish', 'sought after', 'up-market', intended for 'high-end users looking to live and rent high quality accommodation', and offered 'boutique luxury residential' accommodation. Adverts picked out high status features, fixtures and fittings such as 'rainfall showers', 'Neff appliances', 'extraordinary architecture', 'listed building' status, 'floor-to-ceiling windows' and 'stunning deep red Merbau [hardwood] flooring'. Many adverts emphasized a property's modernity, properties were 'modern', offered a 'modern layout' and/or 'modern appliances'. There was no obvious association between the use of phrases and words that suggested modernity and prestige and a property's price. Adverts were often similarly baroque in their descriptions whether the advertised flat was priced at the top or bottom of the market. Adverts that described properties in plainer terms were rare. The plainest accounts said that a property was in 'good order'. Adverts could highlight points of originality, such as 'quirky' design, 'larger than average' rooms, and/or they could describe features in ways that suggested originality, a feature was 'rare', 'unique', 'unrivalled' and 'bespoke'. A number of adverts channelled the lifestyle fantasy of the home as a relaxing refuge from the city and the demands of a busy, apparently child-free, working life. Properties were a 'retreat from the concrete jungle', 'a tranquil place to put your feet up on a hot summer's day whilst enjoying the views out towards the city centre over a cocktail or three'. Adverts that utilized the concept of the home as a refuge balanced this alongside the image of the home as a 'base of operations' in 'the heart of the city'.

Property as an investment asset, rather than a home, was a common conceit used across many adverts. Positive phrases and adjectives were used to generate excitement about a property's investment potential: 'excellent buy-to-let opportunity', 'perfect for investors', 'would make a great investment' and 'fantastic purpose-built investment opportunity'. Potential returns were quantified and specialist finance terminology employed: 'currently achieving £6,300pa', 'NET yield 5%', '£37,125 guaranteed returns', 'yields of up to 7%', and '3% interest on deposit from exchange of contracts'. Attributes suited to realising a prompt return on an investment were noted: 'tenanted investment', 'sold furnished' and 'no upward chain'. The ease and convenience of property investment was emphasized: 'hassle free', 'grab yourself a great ready-made investment', 'instantly earning', 'tenanted and bringing in income', 'immediate return on investment and low hassle'. The scale and potential sources of rental demand were outlined: 'great track record of letting', 'always lets well', 'close to the universities' and 'popular location'.

Every advert in our sample included images. On average, adverts included 9.8 images (SD = 5.1), and these were almost always photographs. Computer generated images were used infrequently, typically for properties being sold off-plan or for schemes currently under construction. Images of a flat's interior were far more common than were images of a property's exterior. Indeed, some adverts included no images of the building in which a flat was located. Images of the view from an apartment were included in fewer than half the analysed adverts while images of the local neighbourhood were uncommon. Textual descriptions might highlight a '180-degree', 'fantastic' or 'breath-taking' view, but the accompanying imagery often failed to show this view. The visual imagery was, quite literally, inward-looking. Across the sample, the most common internal image was of a living room, or the living area in an open plan/studio flat, with almost 70% of adverts featuring two or more images of this space. In four cases, all in Sheffield, rather than showing a living area, adverts showed a desk space. The properties in these adverts were all small, studio apartments in PBSA schemes that featured a bedroom/kitchen but no clearly delineated living area. Bedrooms and kitchens were the next most commonly featured rooms. Shared interior spaces like lobbies, corridors and lifts were rarely shown, nor were shared outdoor areas, although shared outdoor spaces appeared to be an uncommon feature for the properties in our sample. There seemed to be a slight, although inconsistent, association between a property's listed price and the number of images featured. Lower priced properties featured, on average, fewer images. Advertisements for properties priced at less than £100,000 featured, on average, approximately 8.9 images (SD = 0.6), those listed at £100,000–£199,999 approximately 9.3 images (SD = 4), those at £200,000-£299,999 approximately 11.9 images (SD = 4.4), those at £300,000-£399,999 approximately 11.8 images (SD = 10.5), those at £400,000–£499,000 approximately 6.4 images (SD = 3.4) and those at £500,000 or more approximately 11.5 images (SD = 8.6).

Virtual tours were included in around a quarter of adverts ($n = 25$). The virtual tours were usually short but they varied in style. The average tour length was 72 s (SD = 59 s). Approaches ranged from a simple compilation of photographs with no audio, to more complex audio-visual pieces featuring filmed walk-throughs, music, narration and/or on-screen text describing a property. Virtual tours were employed differently in Leeds and in Sheffield, which was no doubt partly a reflection of the previously noted differences between the two city centre samples. In Sheffield, which made less use of the tool, with only 10 adverts including a tour, it was typically lower priced, smaller properties which benefitted from the tool. Across our sample's virtual tour sub-set, the average property price was £214,812 (SD = £138,272) while amongst just the Sheffield sub-set it was £108,200 (SD = £38,590). In Leeds, where tours featured in 15 adverts, it was larger, more expensive properties that tended to benefit from a virtual tour (average price £285,887; SD = £135,069). In Sheffield almost, all virtual tours were produced by one agent while in Leeds multiple agents included virtual tours in their adverts.

### *Building safety messages in property advertising*

Building safety was addressed to some degree within the analysed adverts. For example, 14 adverts mentioned EWS1 forms. Adverts referencing EWS1 forms noted that a form was available, that a property was 'EWS1 compliant' and very occasionally (only twice) gave the EWS1 rating that a property had achieved. One advert noted that a property had a B1 rating and one advert noted that a property had a B2 rating. A B1 rating means that combustible materials are present but an inspection has determined the fire risk is low and no remedial work is required (House of Commons Library, 2022). A B2 rating indicates that combustible materials are present, there is not an adequate standard of fire safety and remedial work and/or interim measures are required (House of Commons Library, 2022). The advert identifying a property's B2 rating invited cash buyers, which is perhaps unsurprising given the probable attitude of lenders towards the apartment. One advert advised prospective buyers that only cash offers were possible 'due to no EWS1 in place'. Adverts did not explain what an EWS1 form was or what a given rating signifies. EWS1 forms were mentioned more frequently in our Leeds sample, mentioned in nine adverts, than in our Sheffield sample, mentioned in five adverts. There did not appear to be any obvious association between property price and mention of EWS1 forms. Illustrating this, the property without an EWS1 form inviting cash offers was one of the lower priced properties (priced at £89,995) while the property with a B2 rating was one of the most expensive (priced at £425,000). In tandem with mentioning EWS1 forms four adverts explicitly noted a property's compliance with 'all' or 'new' fire regulations. While not explicitly mentioning EWS1 forms, one advert explained there were 'no cladding costs' associated with the property, presumably meaning that no cladding remediation work was required. Linked to building safety and quality, a handful of adverts mentioned that a property came with a 10-year building warranty, with a couple of these adverts mentioning the warranty in conjunction with reference to an EWS1 form. Besides noting its existence, adverts provided no details about what the warranty covered.

There was no relationship between the broad category of buyer targeted by an advert – investor or owner-occupier – and the discussion of building safety. Purely from an economic perspective, building safety is arguably of equal importance to occupiers and investors, given the possible financial implications of, for instance, any necessary mitigation or remediation work. However, only the health and safety of occupiers would be directly affected by issues arising from poor building safety. One might have expected, therefore, that properties pitched at owner-occupiers would have been more likely to incorporate assurances about a building's safety in order to provide reassurance, but this was not the case. Features associated with building security were also not mentioned any more frequently in adverts pitched at owner-occupiers compared with those pitched at investors. Secure building access, for example, was not mentioned any more frequently in adverts targeted at owner-occupiers. Building access would again, though, seem to be an area where the health and safety of owner-occupiers is more directly affected. Other than building access, discussion of a building's security measures consisted of occasional references to secure parking, 'secure underground parking space' and 'covered, secure parking space', plus very occasional references to onsite staff, 'on site concierge service', 'on site caretaker' and '24/7 security'.

## *Sustainability messages in property advertising*

Adverts rarely included explicit commentary on sustainability. Rather, adverts discussed property and neighbourhood features linked to sustainability. The most common references were to neighbourhood features associated with environmental sustainability. Specifically, and fitting with the previously noted focus on a property's central location, the most common of these were references to a flat's proximity to amenities, places of study and work, and public transport. Over 60% of adverts mentioned a property's proximity to facilities, workplaces and places of study and over 40% mentioned a property's proximity to public transport. The advantage of proximity was discussed in terms of convenience and desirability, and benefits accruing to the homeowner, not in terms of environmental sustainability, and benefits accruing to wider society and the planet.

There was limited discussion of sustainability features at or within a property. The most frequently mentioned item was electric heating. Electric heating can be a more sustainable form of heating if it is powered by renewable sources of energy. Two adverts, both advertising new build properties at a scheme under construction in Leeds, in fact highlighted that the scheme was 'powered by 100% renewable energy'. At this scheme, and one further scheme onsite in Sheffield, environmental sustainability was positioned as an important selling point. A Leeds-based developer, which reports a keen interest in 'the transition to zero carbon cities', was responsible for both schemes. Out of the whole sample, adverts for properties at these two schemes contained the most explicit and prominent messages about sustainability. The messages were always about environmental sustainability, not social or economic sustainability. Pro-environmental features like triple-glazing, nearby amenities, and modern construction methods producing a thermally efficient home were highlighted. Looking beyond this small, atypical sub-set of adverts, a handful of other pro-environmental building features were sometimes noted in adverts, with the most common examples including bike storage and double glazing. Green space or views over green areas were mentioned in around 16% of adverts, but it was unclear sometimes if these spaces were included at a development or were located nearby. For example, an advert might report that a property was 'surrounded by green space' or that it 'looks out onto green space'. Adverts often reported a property's energy performance rating, which is unsurprising given the requirement to provide this information when available. The rating was often captured in the standard graphic used in an EPC. An individual usually had to click on a link in the advert to open and view the graphic. In a few cases, approximately seven, however, the rating was highlighted in the property description. In two cases, adverts highlighted a property's rather poor rating, demonstrated in ratings of D and E. Since April 2020 landlords in England have generally been unable to let properties with a rating below E (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy [DBEIS], 2020). Foregrounding a rating of E or above in an advert readily indicates to investors a property's rental possibilities. This may be the reasoning behind the identification of comparatively low energy ratings as selling points in these two adverts.

Matters pertinent to economic sustainability were prominent in adverts targeted at investors. As discussed, these adverts used words and phrases to foster excitement about a property's investment potential with the scale and ease of returns on an investment quantified and emphasized. Matters related to social sustainability were addressed in adverts less frequently than were those related to environmental sustainability or economic sustainability. As discussed, adverts targeted properties at a narrow demographic, childless working age adults (plus investors). Property features and local amenities of potentially greater interest to this group were discussed while those which might be of potentially greater interest to others, such as families, were not mentioned. There was, for example, no commentary on a property's proximity to schools and playgrounds. Only a handful, approximately five adverts, identified if there was lift access at a building, a particularly useful feature for people with pushchairs, small children and/or with mobility limitations. The scope for a home to accommodate different life stages, such as later life, via measures like a flexible floorplan, was not mentioned. There were, however, frequent references to properties having an 'open plan' layout. No explicit social or participatory commitments, such as commitments to affordable housing, were evident in adverts.

## Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that the main sales narrative used to sell city centre flats to today's prospective buyers is largely unchanged from the narrative devised to sell the first 'city living' schemes to UK buyers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As Peirce (2002) and Hamnett & Whitelegg (2007) found, a city centre flat's central location and proximity to amenities was emphasized as the key advantage. Matching various past studies (Choi *et al*., 2020; Collins & Kearns, 2008; Perkins *et al*., 2008; Turner *et al*., 2019), location was a prominent issue in adverts. There was divergence, however, between an advert's textual and visual content in the attention paid to location. Location was a common topic in property descriptions but the images included in adverts focused on a property's interior. This differs from the findings of some past studies which identified greater use of exterior images (Choi *et al*., 2020; Collins & Kearns, 2008). Adverts continued the now well-worn narrative that city centre flats are located in vibrant, mixed use locations, offering plentiful public transport and diverse businesses. Attributed by some to the often enthusiastic adoption, by urban leaders, of Richard Florida's (2003) influential (and contested) 'creative class' thesis (Rousseau, 2009; Zimmerman, 2008), this image of urban centres has been observed in property advertising, place-marketing campaigns and urban policy across and outside the UK, including in America (Berglund *et al*., 2022; Gregory, 2019; Zimmerman, 2008), France (Rousseau, 2009), and Canada (Graham, 2023). The degree to which urban centres in the UK and elsewhere universally and readily provide this setting seems, though, debateable (Zukin, 2009). National and international events, such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (Wrigley & Dolega, 2011), the growth in online shopping, the pandemic (Centre for Cities, 2022), decades of de-industrialization (Rousseau, 2009), gentrification (Davidson & Lees, 2005; Hamnett & Whitelegg, 2007), 'upscale growth' (Zukin, 2009), urban restructuring (Boddy, 2007) and exurban development (Hubbard, 2002), the privatization of public space and public space production (Leclercq *et al*., 2020), and in the UK at least a decade of austerity measures (Hastings *et al*., 2017; Pendlebury *et al*., 2020), have profoundly altered many town and city centres. The image of a thriving 24-hour centre, which balances urbanity and tranquillity with a hint of (contrived) counter-culture offering 'riskless risk' (Hannigan, 1998), that continues to pervade adverts for city centre flats in the UK and elsewhere (Berglund *et al*., 2022), seems to be an increasingly slippery blend of the authentic and the inauthentic (Collins & Kearns, 2008; Perkins *et al*., 2008).

The limited commentary on building safety in adverts suggests that there are few serious attempts within property advertising to reduce the amount of information asymmetry (Goodwin *et al*., 2014) between sellers and buyers on this much publicized issue. The usual purchasers of city centre flats – professionals and investors – may, however, be more attune to the building safety crisis than other groups and so might be keen to receive information about a property's safety. An investor is likely to be interested in the safety of a prospective investment. Professionals, being the most populous group in town and city centres (Thomas *et al*., 2015) where the crisis was, at least initially, concentrated, have possibly been more exposed to its effects than others. Some may have personal experience of the crisis or may have heard from friends and colleagues about remediation work at buildings, rejected mortgage applications and so forth. Further, as a generally well-educated group, professionals are more likely than some to follow the news (Edgerly, 2022) where there has been extensive coverage of the crisis. There may be various reasons for the limited mention of building safety in property adverts. Few properties in our sample may have had safety issues to report and/or few may have had an EWS1 form to mention. One might have expected, though, confirmation of the absence of any safety issues in order to provide reassurance to potentially anxious buyers. Possibly the owners of properties with known or suspected safety defects in Leeds and Sheffield city centres are delaying selling their homes until remediation work is completed (Phillips, 2021). Or perhaps estate agents and other advertisers in these markets have concluded that an advert is not the best forum in which to address the subject of building safety with prospective buyers.

Building security, like building safety, was mentioned infrequently in adverts. It did not seem to be the point of concern it was when Peirce (2002) studied adverts for city centre flats in the early 2000s. He found that marketing materials 'generally stressed the degree of security protection' at a building (Peirce, 2002, p. 967). Since the early 2000s, town and city centres in the UK have become normalized as routine, well-populated, residential settings, which has perhaps made advertisers reject, as unnecessary, the need for assurances about town and city centre safety. Today's town and city centre residents are unlikely to view themselves as the 'locational pioneers' that the loft-dwellers of Clerkenwell, London considered themselves to be in the late 1990s, as found by Hamnett & Whitelegg (2007). If an individual does, though, consider themselves to be experimenting with an untested city living location, heightened safety concerns perhaps become understandable. If safety worries were common amongst those demonstrating an early interest in city living it is unsurprising that Peirce (2002) found frequent references to security features in property adverts in the early noughties. To help shore up an embryonic market, estate agents, developers and other property actors would, one assumes, have sought to allay such concerns by including security measures at buildings where viable, and providing assurances about security in property adverts. Signs of an apparently proactive approach to addressing safety concerns in the past again prompts questions about the general absence of a more proactive approach to addressing possible worries about building safety in contemporary property advertising. A further, or alternative, reason for the more limited commentary on security measures observed in this study, compared with Pierce's (2002) study, might be his focus on largely high-end schemes in central London. At such developments, buyer expectations, combined with high property prices and service charges, may require, and make financially viable, more security measures, and greater discussion of these measures in adverts. Providing some support for this assessment, Dorignon & Wiesel (2022, p. 2112) found that the developers of luxury apartment schemes in central Melbourne incorporated, and promoted to prospective buyers, hotel-like features and conveniences including 'high security'.

Similar to Kriese & Scholz (2011), adverts were found to rarely mention sustainability matters explicitly (see Brookfield *et al.*, (2023) for further findings on this issue). As they identified, proximity to amenities was the most commonly cited sustainability feature but, also as they noted, this attribute was framed in terms of convenience rather than sustainability. Information about a property's energy performance rating was often included in adverts, but it was not usually highlighted in the main property description. This might be a missed opportunity for higher rated properties. Although findings are a little mixed, some studies point to a relationship between transaction price and energy performance rating (Fuerst *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Hyland *et al.*, 2013). Factors related to social sustainability were not discussed to any degree in the analysed adverts. There appeared to be even less mention of a property's suitability for different social groups than Kriese & Scholz (2011) found. While they observed relatively regular mention of children's needs in adverts, this study found an exclusive focus on the assumed needs and preferences of working age adults. This difference is likely due to Kriese & Scholz's (2011) focus on adverts from across an entire city, including adverts for suburban houses. Given the traditional popularity of suburban housing with families in many societies (Karsten, 2007), agents might expect strong interest from prospective buyers in the child-friendly credentials of a suburban home and so they construct adverts for these homes that address this issue. Focusing on the assumed interests of only one narrow social group may mean that adverts for city centre flats are less successful than they might otherwise be in capturing the interest of the range of people who look for homes in town and city centres (Allen, 2007). Older adults (Dorignon & Wiesel, 2022) and families (Nethercote & Horne, 2016), for example, have been found to actively seek homes in city centres.

Findings from this study suggest that real estate adverts incorporate more content – both textual and visual – than they have previously. Pryce & Oates (2008) studied adverts from 1999 to 2006 and found that they were, on average, just 32-words long. Goodwin *et al.* (2014) examined adverts on a MLS between 2000 and 2009 and found they were, on average, 44-words long. The adverts examined in this study usually included multiple sentences and often spanned a couple of paragraphs. With few restrictions on advert length on an MLS, and longer descriptions appearing to be common, future research could usefully investigate if there is an 'ideal' advert length. Such research could adopt a more descriptive, quantitative approach than we employed in our study with the number of words, images, specific forms of language and so forth, across a large sample of adverts, analysed. Presently, the research on advert length is limited and inconclusive. Goodwin *et al.* (2014), for instance, found that longer property descriptions had a positive effect on price but a negative effect on time-on-market for single-family houses, but there was no effect on the outcomes for apartments. This study found it was common for adverts to include multiple images. In fact, it recorded a more extensive use of images than have past studies. Benefield *et al.* (2011) found that adverts on an MLS averaged around 6.8 images when the MLS allowed up to 24 images per advert. Allen *et al.* (2015) found that for houses which sold, adverts on an MLS averaged 6.6 images, while for houses that did not sell in the time period they studied, the average was 2.8 images per advert. Evidence suggests that the regular use of images in adverts can support higher prices (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Benefield *et al.*, 2011), but a concentration on interior images, as observed within this study, can increase a property's time-on-market (Benefield *et al.*, 2011). Virtual tours were employed relatively infrequently amongst the adverts we studied and, differing from Benefield *et al.* (2011), there was no obvious relationship between use of this tool and property price. Past research indicates that virtual tours are related to higher selling prices (Yu *et al.*, 2020), a shorter time-on-market and an increase in physical viewings (Xiong *et al.*, 2022). Failure to widely adopt this tool, as observed within this study, could perhaps be disadvantaging sellers.

Compared with past studies which have measured the use of superlatives and hyperbole in property adverts (see Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Haag *et al.*, 2000; Pryce & Oates, 2008), this study identified greater use of such language. This might be partly a function of the increased length of adverts, as previously noted. The 'linguistic symptoms' of real estate advertese highlighted in past studies were widely evident (Andrew, 2006, p. 71). Language designed to generate excitement, to indicate originality, to suggest prestige and to tap into lifestyle fantasies was apparent (Andrew, 2006; Cheung & Ma, 2005; Dorignon & Wiesel, 2022; Pryce & Oates, 2008). Conceits (Andrew, 2006) were employed, especially the conceit of housing as an investment asset. This focus on the investment potential of a property has not been reported in previous studies on the content of residential real estate advertising. This may be partly because past studies have usually attended to places that are dominated by owner occupiers (see Collins & Kearns, 2008; Gillon & Gibbs, 2017; Turner *et al.*, 2019), and partly because many past studies are increasingly dated (see Peirce, 2002). Older studies may not fully capture the impact of the buy-to-let phenomenon on the housing markets of some homeowner societies (Aalbers *et al.*, 2021; Gibb & Nygaard, 2005). Language related to positive market outcomes in previous studies, like the use of positive adjectives to describe a property's condition (Haag *et al.*, 2000), was identified. However, language related to more negative outcomes in past studies, like the use of positive adjectives to describe a property's location (Haag *et al.*, 2000), was also identified. Past research on connections between language and price has typically focused on the United States (see Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Haag *et al.*, 2000). Future research could consider language-price relationships in the UK and in other locations. A territory's particular social, cultural and property market traditions, and the significance of these items in shaping real estate advertising and the responses it elicits (Cheung & Ma, 2005; Collins & Kearns, 2008), could produce different relationships in different places.

A few larger lessons about property advertising, and using property adverts in research, stem from this study. First, the findings raise questions about the overall effectiveness of estate agents, and other property advertisers, in both generating interest in properties and recognising and responding to buyers' concerns. Adverts said little about some items that seem to appeal to buyers, as indicated by the price premium they command. Higher energy performance ratings, for instance, have been linked to higher prices (Fuerst *et al.*, 2015, 2016) but adverts rarely highlighted a property's energy rating. Further, adverts sometimes employed images and language in ways, such as the emphasis on interior images (Benefield *et al.*, 2011), which have been associated with lower prices and/or a longer time on market. Second, the findings trouble the notion that property advertising necessarily reflects social attitudes and collective understandings of place. Adverts appeared to reflect some social attitudes and perceptions of place (Perkins *et al.*, 2008; Shields, 1991), for example, the view that urban centres are primarily suitable for younger, child-free residents (Berglund *et al.*, 2022), but not others, such as the growing concern for sustainability. Finally, and somewhat obviously, using property adverts in research restricts insights to the material presented within an advert. Within England, property adverts are covered by the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 and so there are some rules around what can and cannot be said in an advert (National Trading Standards, 2020). However, property adverts do not provide an exhaustive, objectively verified, account of a property. The Regulations require that information materially important to an average consumer's transactional decision cannot be suppressed, if known to the advertiser, but the advertiser might choose to supply such information in a setting other than a property advert (National Trading Standards, 2020). It was suggested before that one reason for the limited commentary on building safety observed in adverts within this study might have been advertisers deciding that an advert is not the best forum in which to broach this subject. Linking back to the previous point, uncertainty about the accuracy and completeness of the information provided in property adverts cautions against positioning these documents, as some researchers do, as clear windows onto social attitudes and common understandings of place. The under-reporting or limited discussion of a particular property feature in an advert might, for instance, imply that wider society values the feature less, or values it more negatively, than an assessment of property adverts could ever reveal, since a researcher would not know that any under-reporting, or truncation of discussion, had occurred. Knowing what has been excluded may be as important as knowing what has been included if one seeks to use property adverts to acquire tentative insights into social attitudes and collective understandings of place.

### *Limitations of the study*

The study explored the content of adverts for city centre flats listed for sale in two English cities. The findings might not apply to other housing markets in other locations, or to adverts for rental properties. The property adverts included objective and much subjective information. The interpretation of this material is a subjective exercise. Different researchers may draw different conclusions about the meaning or import of a particular adjective, the configuration of a particular phrase, the mention of a particular property feature and so forth. Lastly, we do not know the specific context within which each advert was created. Differences between sellers in the amount of property information supplied to an advertiser might, for instance, have shaped the content of an advert. Without knowledge of all such factors and their effects, it is possible that meaning may have been 'misapplied' to the absence, presence and/or organization of material within an advert.

## Conclusion

Analysis of the visual and textual content of 100 adverts for 100 city centre flats listed for sale in Leeds and Sheffield in early 2022 revealed several consistent patterns that echo past findings on the language, narratives and imagery employed to sell city centre flats. Approaches found in past studies, namely the focus on location (Collins & Kearns, 2008), and the emphasis on proximity to amenities, transport and places of work (Cheung & Ma, 2005; Hamnett & Whitelegg, 2007; Peirce, 2002), was evident. Consistencies between assorted agents, selling assorted properties, in two markets, perhaps suggests that the identified sales narrative is the default narrative used to sell city centre flats. Reaching a similar conclusion, Choi *et al.* (2020, p. 3274) argued that across Hong Kong, property actors used 'similar advertising strategies on properties at different prices in different areas', invariably emphasising a property's luxury and exclusivity. Similarities between the approaches observed in this study, and those observed in past studies (see Hamnett & Whitelegg, 2007; Peirce, 2002), might imply that high-profile events like the pandemic and the building safety crisis, plus the simple passage of time, have not materially altered the central crux of the advertising strategy for city centre properties. The only significant departure from the past that we observed is the focus on investors. Properties are now commonly framed as investment opportunities, although even in these situations adverts continue to identify working-age adults (professionals and students) as the ultimate end-occupiers. The expanding role of investors in city centre housing markets has, of course, been discussed by others (see Gibb & Nygaard, 2005; Lambert & Boddy, 2010), but the effect on real estate advertising has not been considered. Linguistic techniques identified in past research, such as the use of conceits (Andrew, 2006), language to generate excitement (Pryce & Oates, 2008) and to suggest prestige (Peirce, 2002), were identified. Building safety was rarely discussed and, matching past findings, there was little explicit commentary on sustainability (Kriese & Scholz, 2011). Kriese & Scholz (2011, p. 1508) have suggested that there is a 'remarkable delay' in the reflection of social and cultural change in real estate advertising. This study may provide further evidence of delay. The attention paid to sustainability and building safety in public discourse in recent years appears yet to be reflected in the content of contemporary adverts for city centre flats.

Developing the core narrative used to sell city centre flats, so that it contains appeals to a wider range of potential buyers, might help to increase the resilience of a market which has seemed particularly vulnerable to external forces (Lambert & Boddy, 2010). Older adults could represent one source of latent demand for city centre flats. This age group may find much to like, and to support active and independent lifestyles, in a modern, open plan, centrally located flat, close to public transport and amenities (Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012). Many older people already live in city centres (Allen, 2007), around 5% to 10% of city centre residents in the UK were estimated to be aged over 65 in 2011 (Thomas *et al.*, 2015). Some older adults may have previously lived in a city centre flat, being part of the city living movement in their 20s and 30s before perhaps moving to a suburban or exurban area as lifestyles and household structures changed. For these older adults, a city centre flat could represent a return to formative, independent housing experiences, a prospect which may appeal to some. Increasing numbers of older adults are remaining in, or are (re)joining, the labour market (Evans, 2022), a pattern that may continue as the State Pension Age rises in the UK and elsewhere (Pilipiec *et al.*, 2021). A growing segment of the older population could be interested in the possibility of living close to their place of work, which might be in a city centre. Despite this combination of factors, the adverts considered in this study did not contain obvious appeals to an older demographic. Berglund *et al.* (2022) found that promotional materials for downtown redevelopment projects in Detroit also lacked representation of, or appeals to, older adults. Fincher (2007), however, found that developers in central Melbourne regarded themselves as perceptive innovators in recognising and targeting a 'new' market segment for luxury city centre flats consisting of older, wealthy, owner-occupiers. Real estate advertising helps to stabilize and incrementally alter our understandings of place (Shields, 1991, p. 7). Concerted efforts to frame city centres as an attractive place for later life, as developers in Melbourne appear to be doing (Fincher, 2007), could help to modify attitudes towards these settings. In the UK, the United States (Berglund *et al.*, 2022) and other locations, partly through the efforts of property advertising and the 'youthification' policies of municipal governments (Murtagh et al., 2022), city centres have generally become associated with younger age groups. New messages, emphasising different local amenities and property features, might be needed to effect change. For example, there could be more commentary on circulation space within a building, including information about lift and step-free access – a missing topic that Berglund *et al.* (2022), similar to this study, identified in property advertising. In areas with some tradition of city living there could be efforts to appeal to older adults' memories of living in the city with individuals encouraged to 'return home' to the city centre. Longer-term, greater consideration of the needs of different groups could be incorporated into the design of city centre flats, producing properties that more readily 'sell themselves' to different markets. Informed by items like the Lifetime Homes Standard (Imrie, 2006), buildings could be designed with, for instance, wider doors and corridors to accommodate wheelchairs, walkers and so forth (Brookfield *et al.*, 2015). The wider organization of space across town and city centres would also need to be addressed with access considered more carefully to avoid common issues that exacerbate exclusion, like a lack of benches, dropped kerbs and public toilets (Brookfield *et al.*, 2017). Providing sufficient and appropriate facilities and services within urban centres to address the needs of a larger older population would also be important (van Hoof *et al.*, 2021).

Addressing sustainability more explicitly in the advertising and design of city centre properties might be a further way to enhance the resilience of city centre markets. A greater focus on sustainability could tap into changing social and cultural attitudes towards the environment. Moreover, information about energy efficiency, and the associated cost savings, could connect to wider worries about the cost of living, which partly stem from years of stalling and falling wages in the UK and elsewhere (Lavery, 2018; Wisman, 2013). Typical features of city centre flats, such as being developed at high densities, may readily support energy efficiency and other sustainability objectives. In light of changes to city centre economies, the growth in home-working (ONS, 2022b), the expansion of online shopping (ONS, 2022c) and so forth, city centre flats may become less able to trade on their traditional advantage of a convenient location. Qualities like sustainability, or the adaptability of a property to different lifestyles and life stages, might come to assume new importance. Ultimately, property advertising and building design may need to innovate further in order to ensure that town and city centre properties in the UK and other locations match buyers' evolving needs and preferences.

## Note

1. For an overview of EWS inspections, and the impacts of this industry-initiated approach to assessing building safety, see Phillips (2021).

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