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No children, no DSS, no students: Online adverts and “property guardianship”

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Estate agents suffer from a reputation problem. As argued by Pryce and Oates, with understatement, they are not “impartial information disseminators” (Pryce & Oates, 2008, p.320). Their adverts use language to capture a “dialogue of aspiration”, communicating a lifestyle and key information about the property to the viewer (ibid). “Small” becomes “bijou”. It is not “derelict”, but a “period property”. Although the home ownership sector, with its glossy sales brochures from housebuilders and estate agents’ advertisements, has been a rich terrain for research, adverts in the private rented sector have been subject to far less (if any) scrutiny.

In a market dominated by online property search engines – such as RightMove, Zoopla, and SpareRoom – the text in these adverts is central to the modern process of finding a home to rent. We argue that adverts for properties to rent warrant analysis in their own right, both by lawyers and those analysing the private rented sector. They not only reveal key information about the property and how its advertiser seeks to present it, but are also part of the context in which the agreement to occupy is made and can offer evidence of its likely terms. As landlords, letting agents, student accommodation providers and other players, such as “property guardianship” companies, jostle for the prospective viewers’ attention, the text in these adverts can demonstrate how these sub-sectors seek to differentiate themselves from one another and communicate their proposition to the prospective occupier.

Drawing on a sample of 503 adverts for “property guardianship” rooms on the website SpareRoom.co.uk, we argue that a content analysis of these posts shows four key dynamics: (i) the inclusion/exclusion of classes of prospective occupiers, (ii) the context in which the viewer subsequently agrees to occupy the property, (iii) elements of the legal agreement to occupy, and (iv) how the sector/landlord seeks to differentiate itself from other available properties. In the context of the property guardianship sector, as they are the principal means through which prospective guardians learn about the sector, they can provide an insight into the proposition made by companies to prospective occupiers and evidence of their terms of occupation. We start by providing a *precis* on property guardianship, before turning to each of these in turn.

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We finish by underscoring the broader agenda of this paper that property adverts are a useful source of data in their own right.

Property guardianship: An overview

The basic premise of property guardianship is straightforward: owners of otherwise empty properties (residential or ex-commercial) secure them by contracting with a company who subsequently grant a licence to "property guardians" to live in the building. The proposition is "win-win". The guardians secure the building through their occupation and the owner avoids security costs. The guardians themselves get cheap(er) accommodation compared to elsewhere in the private rented sector, or can live in more central locations/bigger properties in large cities – particularly London – which may otherwise be unaffordable. The property guardian company itself receives license fees from the guardians and in many cases a fee from the building owner as well. Its roots lie in the Netherlands (Hunter & Meers, 2018a; p. 68), with two of largest operators in the UK – Ad-Hoc and Camelot – both deriving from Dutch companies.

This section is not a review of the "property guardianship" literature, in part because academic studies of the phenomenon are still limited in number (for the existing literature, see Ferreri & Dawson, 2018; Hunter & Meers, 2018b). Instead, there are two key areas to outline in order to contextualise the analysis of adverts that follows: (i) the extent of the sector, and (ii) what is known about entry into it. On the first, the largest providers in the industry estimate that there are up to approximately 7,000 individuals living as guardians in the UK (London Assembly Housing Committee, 2018, p.11). The majority of these are in London, with smaller pockets in other large cities – particularly Bristol. The sector appears to be growing. Ferreri et al, in the course of their work typologising property guardian companies, argue that it is a "growing sector", with new companies entering the market continuously (Ferreri et al, 2016, p.250). In its report on the phenomenon in the capital, the London Assembly's housing committee underscores the potential capacity for expansion, looking to property guardianship's homeland in the Netherlands, where over 50,000 individuals live in the sector (London Assembly Housing Committee, 2018, p.11).

Turning to what is known about entry into the sector, our own research, based on a survey with 210 London-based property guardians in late 2017, indicates that most had come to their current property from the private rented sector (45%). A significant number also came from another property guardian property (33%). This indicates both the high levels of internal churn within the sector itself and that these properties are ordinarily occupied by people who would otherwise be renting (Hunter & Meers, 2018b, p.20). Of those moving into the sector 41% did so voluntarily – namely, they left their previous accommodation of their own accord, without a pressing reason to do so (such as a rent increase, a tenancy termination, etc) (ibid, p.21). Importantly, in open-text comments, most of the guardians who discussed their entry into the sector said it was as a result of "word-of-mouth" (61%), with a significant minority (30%) having learnt about the phenomenon from the internet and online property searches (e.g. for "cheap rent London" etc) (ibid, p.50).

Therefore, this analysis of adverts sits in the context of a small but seemingly growing sector, entered largely by private renters through "word of mouth" or internet-based housing research. With limited empirical evidence on the phenomenon available, our focus now turns to what an analysis of the online advertisements for vacant "property guardianship" rooms and properties can tell us in their own right about this sector.

Analysing the adverts

The content analysis of advertisements is relatively widespread in the field of media, communication, and tourism studies – indeed, there are journals dedicated to the assessment of advertisements and advertising practices.² However, there is relatively little in the way of analysis of property advertisements, and these studies focus almost exclusively on home ownership (see Pryce & Oates, 2008; Kriese & Scholz, 2012; and Robertson & Doig, 2010).

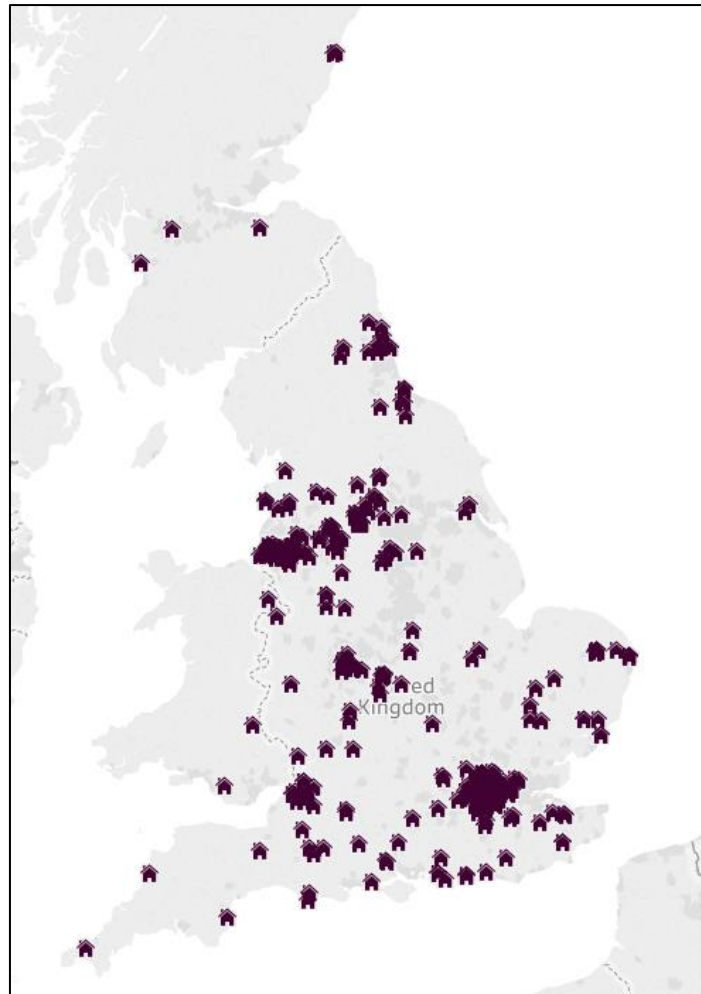
This study is limited to one key property rental website in the UK: SpareRoom.co.uk. Although – as its name implies – the site’s roots lie in the sharing of properties and the seeking of flatmates, the website is used routinely by landlords and lettings agents to post a far broader range of advertisements, including accommodation for single occupancy. As the self-proclaimed “#1 Flatshare site in the UK” (Blandy, 2018, p.32), its users are diverse and increasingly “middle-aged” (Maalsen, S, 2018, pp.4-5). This property search engine forms the basis of this study because it has been identified in previous research as carrying a significant number of advertisements by property guardian companies (Hunter & Meers, 2018b, p.60).

To create the sample, all URLs for posts on SpareRoom.co.uk which used the phrase “property guardian” or variants thereof (e.g. “property guardianship”) on the 1st July 2018 were pulled into a spreadsheet using a macro. This provided a starting sample of 729 links. Duplicate posts and those which did not point to a property advert were then removed manually, leaving a final sample of 503 adverts.

Most of these adverts detailed English properties, with a handful of Welsh and Scottish postings, and there is bunching in-and-around London and in other English cities. **Figure One** maps the properties advertised in the sample using Geocoding data provided on the SpareRoom.co.uk postings. Although the geographical spread appears sporadic, it is broadly commensurate with previous research conducted by the authors, with the majority of postings in London (ibid, p.60).

Figure One: Map of adverts in the sample (interactive version available at: <https://tabsoft.co/2vafzv1>)

² See, in particular, the International Journal of Advertising.



Having compiled the sample for analysis, these adverts were then processed manually by a group of students at York Law School with reference to a data entry form detailing a series of questions. These were designed to capture key descriptors (such as the specified “rent” and type of the property) and information that had been identified as being of theoretical interest in previous research (such as additional fees charged and any differentials in rent between bedrooms) (Hunter & Meers, 2018b). This data entry process was not, therefore, designed with the four dynamics outlined above and analysed below in mind. Instead, there arose from our subsequent analysis of the data. The bulk of this data entry form is detailed in **Table One**.

Table One: Input form used for capturing the advert data.

| Question | Input Options |
|--|--|
| About the property itself | |
| What type of property is it? | Residential (e.g. house/flat) Ex-commercial (e.g. office block, gym, pub, etc) Care sector (e.g. care home or similar) School Other |
| Is the property offered furnished? | Yes No Not specified/unclear from photos |
| Cost and licence | |
| How much is the 'rent'? | |
| How many bedrooms are in the property? | More than one One Unknown |
| IF "More than one" | |
| Are all of the rooms advertised at the same 'rent'? | Yes No |
| IF "No" | |
| What is the cost per month difference (£) between the lowest and highest priced rooms? | [Open text box] |
| Are couples allowed? | Yes No Unspecified |
| Is a minimum term specified? | [Open text box] |
| Is a maximum term specified? | [Open text box] |
| Are bills included in the 'rent'? | Yes – all Yes – some (please specify) No Unspecified |
| Are there any conditions specified in the advert text? (e.g. no overnight guests etc) | [Open text box] |
| Are any additional 'fees' specified in the advertisement? | Administration fee Referencing fee Fire safety fee Other (please specify) |
| If specified, what is the combined cost of these fees (£)? | [Open text box] |
| Does the advert specify any conditions for applying to be a property guardian? | Yes - it specifies that a reference is required Yes - it specifies that bank statements will be required Yes - it specifies that proof of earnings/pay slips will be required Yes - it specifies that (other please specify) is required No conditions are specified |

The research team processing the adverts were then asked a broader, open-ended question about the text in the advertisement:

The advert

We are particularly interested in any sentences within the advertisement which:

1. Explain what 'property guardianship' is.
2. Indicate terms of occupation (e.g. that suggest there are some 'limitations' to the use of the space, etc).
3. Refer to the occupation being 'short term' or similar.

If you see something in the advert that relates to these three things, or something which you think is important, please paste it below.

This was intended to capture sentences within the advert text which may be difficult to pre-determine in closed data entry parameters, but could nevertheless help to investigate whether – and if so, how – the property guardianship sector presents itself, and the terms of occupation it passports, to those viewing these adverts.

What can adverts tell us?

An analysis of rental advertisements can help to enrich the legal understanding of the sub-sector at play. What is the likely legal nature of occupation? How does the context of the advertisement effect the agreement to occupy? They also offer a broader insight into how the sub-sector, market, or even individual landlord, is trying to distinguish and position themselves against the rest of the private rented sector. What potential occupiers are they trying to exclude? What lifestyle are they trying to project through their adverts?

We analyse each of these questions within our sample of property guardian adverts in four sections. The first two look at legal understanding, dealing with the context the advertisement provides for eventual occupation (the “process of construction”) and any indications they provide of legal elements of occupation (“diagnostics”). The final two deal with the broader positioning of the sector, analysing the practice of excluding prospective occupiers, such as the widespread inclusion of “No DSS” seen elsewhere in the private rented sector, and how the adverts project a certain lifestyle to their viewer.

1. Process of construction

These adverts go beyond simply communicating information to prospective occupiers -they form part of the context for the eventual agreement reached between the occupier and the landlord/licensor. Put another way, these adverts are not simply an exercise in persuasion, they also contain information that can colour the agreement to occupy the property. This has been described as a “process of construction” by the courts (see *Arnold v Britton and others* [2013] EWCA Civ 902 [76]): the means by which background knowledge known to the parties at the time of an agreement may colour the interpretation of its terms.

In the context of “property guardianship” this is particularly acute. Billed by some of its proponents as an “alternative to renting” (Hunter & Meers, 2018a, p.65), the accommodation is (almost always) not intended to be provided on a tenancy – as is common elsewhere in the private rented sector – but instead via a less-secure licence agreement. The fault line between

the two rests, in part, on the extent of “exclusive occupation” of a property; namely, whether the occupier has sole control over their own private space, such as an individual locked bedroom (Meers, 2019). How the property guardian proposition was communicated to the occupier is important context here. Put another way: did they know what they were letting themselves in for?

The courts have cast their net widely in this “process of construction”. In *Camelot Guardian Management Limited v Heiko Khoo* [2018] EWHC 2296 (QB), the communication of the “nature of the Property Guardian Scheme” (para.28) was considered important context in determining whether the agreement had given rise to a tenancy. In doing-so, the court considered both Camelot’s website – describing the practice as an “alternative, and a more social one, to private rental” (para.26) – and the initial viewing of the property – where Mr Khoo had been “shown a particular room and was asked to occupy it” (para. 27). The court was not convinced on the facts that this “contextual approach” (para.29) to reading the agreement added anything in this particular case. Exclusive possession had not been conferred by Camelot and Mr Khoo was occupying the property under a licence agreement.

Online property advertisements, in addition to viewings of the property or company websites, also provide useful context in this “process of construction”. Most advertisements in the sample contained some explanation of “property guardianship”, or directed the viewer elsewhere to seek further information. A typical approach is reflected in **Advert 422**:

This property is available on a Property Guardian basis and this scheme would be ideal for someone looking for a flexible living arrangement... Guardians sign-up as licensees, not tenants; Guardians live in low cost accommodation, with shorter notices to leave and have non-exclusive occupation of the accommodation.'

A minority provided more information, communicating the limitations of living in a property guardian scheme more directly, as in **Advert 179**:

Property guardian scheme is not the same as renting. You will sign a licence to occupy instead of a tenancy agreement. You will pay a monthly licence fee instead of rent. You will not have the same rights as a tenant. You will be given 2 weeks' notice to vacate the property. The condition of the property varies. You will be known as a guardian not a tenant. There are a few other rules you must adhere to (nothing major). Hence this is the reason why the monthly payments are low.

Adverts which did not provide some explanation of property guardianship directed their viewers to the companies’ websites to learn more, as in **Advert 281**:

If you wish to know more about what it means to be a VPS guardian please search VPS guardians on Google to find us!

Three adverts in the sample went as far as to specify knowledge of property guardianship as a criterion for application, as in **Advert 350**:

Please only apply if you are ready to move immediately, have full DSP (Damage Security Payment) of £300, first months fee, [and] understand the guardian scheme.

This is more than just managing expectations. These adverts are communicating the property guardianship proposition to the viewer, distinguishing it from renting elsewhere in the private rented sector. This is especially important for property search engines like SpareRoom.co.uk (and other large market players, like RightMove.co.uk and Zoopla.co.uk), as they adopt the language associated with tenancies. You search for properties to “rent”, the “monthly rent” is outlined, the “term” of stay specified, and so on. SpareRoom.co.uk provides guides for “renting tips” and “ending your tenancy early” (SpareRoom, 2019). Those accessing these websites are very unlikely to be searching for a property guardian scheme, they will instead be looking for somewhere to rent in the private rented sector. Whether, and if so how, these adverts disavow them of that perception is an important part of their function for both the company and the viewer.

2. Diagnostics

Having looked at this “process of construction”, these property advertisements often contain information that is more than just context for the agreement to occupy the property. They can also provide indicators – or more colloquially, “clues” – of what form any subsequent occupation will take. For instance, rented adverts will often include minimum or maximum terms, providing information about the likely length of a fixed term in any tenancy offered. Likewise, if an advert details four separate rooms for rent and describes a shared kitchen, this is likely to be a House in Multiple Occupation to be licensed by the relevant local authority.

Within the advert sample, these diagnostics help to identify key features of living as a property guardian. First, as outlined above, there is a fault-line within the sector between letting properties on licence and via tenancy. Adverts can often provide information that helps to identify whether the occupation is likely to be “exclusive” – namely, whether the guardian will have “exclusionary power” (Whayman, 2019, p.49) over their own space in the property, particularly a bedroom – and consequently is more likely to give rise to a tenancy.

One such diagnostic is the advertising of rooms at different rents. If each individual room is let at its own price (for instance, larger rooms carrying a higher fee), this suggests that any future agreement with the guardian would confer exclusive possession of this space. This practice was widespread within the advert sample. Out of the 503 total, 370 adverts were looking to fill more than one room. Of these, 163 – nearly half – advertised rooms at different rents. These were not insignificant differences. Between the highest and lowest priced rooms, the average differential was £92 per month, stretching to as much as a £375 a month in some central London properties, and as little as £5 per month outside of London.

The adverts here suggest that these properties, especially those with particularly high differential rents, are likely to confer exclusive possession of those bedrooms to their guardians, and as a result, they would be occupying that property via a tenancy. Importantly, this is not guardians organising among themselves to divide the space; it is instead a division of control of the bedrooms identified within the advert text itself. We can draw a parallel here with guardians in *Camelot v Roydon*, where individual rooms were even labelled by the property guardian company with the guardian’s own name (ibid, p.48).

Second, there was a high prevalence of adverts detailing fees for a “fire safety kit” within the sample. 94 adverts listed a charge for a “fire safety pack” or “fire safety kit”, with £65 and £70 being the most common fee. These packs – which can include smoke alarms, carbon-monoxide

detectors, fire extinguishers and fire blankets – are a familiar feature of property guardianship (Ferreri et al, 2016, p.251). A minority of adverts even go as far as suggesting the prospective occupiers will need to be “more vigilant in terms of adhering to fire, safety, and security regulations” (**Advert 393**).

This fee itself is not unlawful at the time of writing (though, property guardian companies do fall under the Tenant Fees Act 2019 which will soon prohibit the charging of such additional fees). Whether the property guardians pays or not, the building still needs to be fire-safe. However, it is a useful diagnostic for the extent to which the property has been rendered fire safe by the property guardian company itself. The legal duties on the owners of buildings for any form of accommodation are clear. The ambit of the Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (England) Regulations 2015/1693 place the onus on property guardian companies (acting as “landlords” under the regulations) to ensure that smoke alarms are equipped on “each storey of the premises in which a room is occupied” (s.1(a)(i)). Further protections apply to Houses in Multiple Occupation – as the majority of these adverts with multiple rooms are likely to be – in the Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation (England) Regulations 2006/372, which require that “fire fighting equipment and fire alarms are maintained in good working order” (Reg. 2).

The prevalence of “fire safety packs” being specified in the adverts themselves indicates that that these fire safety obligations may be at risk of being neglected within these properties. What happens if the guardian does not fit a smoke alarm or carbon monoxide detector correctly, or at all? If the fire extinguisher is damaged and is not in “good working order” (Reg.2 Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation (England) Regulations 2006/372) who is responsible for its replacement?

3. Excluding prospective occupiers

Property adverts of all kinds contain information designed to filter the pool of potential occupiers. Specific requirements (such as detailing minimum earnings) or bright-line exclusions where whole classes are barred (such as “no students”) communicate to the viewer their own desirability, or lack thereof, to the advertising landlord. Perhaps the best-known example of such exclusion practices in the UK are the widely employed words “NO DSS”. Referring to the long defunct “Department for Social Security”, the practice is designed to indicate to those on housing benefit that they will not be considered as occupiers for the advertised property. McKee and Soaita’s research underscores the frequency with which the practice arises in studies of “generation rent”, causing despondency and feelings of discrimination by those on housing benefit in search of accommodation (McKee & Soaita, 2018, p.20). In the wake of real-term reductions to Local Housing Allowance, Rugg and Rhodes suggest that the adoption of a “blanket NO DSS policy” is more widespread than ever before (Rugg & Rhodes, 2018, p.57).

Exclusionary advertising practices have moved on somewhat from putting “No DSS signs in windows” (Layard, 2018, p.446), with these exclusions now being communicated by landlords on property advertisement websites. This is important when considering the exclusion of potential occupiers, as these platforms often utilise classes of persons as search parameters, allowing users – both the landlords posting the advertisements and those searching for a home

– to navigate postings with reference to exclusion criteria and/or requires those posting adverts to engage with them. Power’s work on the difficulty of renting with pets in Sydney, Australia demonstrates this problem aptly. Her participants outlined how, when searching on a popular property advertisement site, “lists of advertised available properties ‘disappear into the void’ when the pet-friendly filter is activated” – indeed, only just over 2% of properties advertised tagged themselves as being available to those with pets (Power, 2017, p.348).

The website used in this study – Sparerroom.co.uk – requires prospective landlords to engage with a “housemate preferences” box, which provides a series of inclusion/exclusion criteria. These are detailed in **Figure Two**.

Figure Two: Question posed on ‘housemate preferences’ when creating a property advertisement on SpareRoom.co.uk.

| Housemate preferences | Options | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Housing benefit considered? | Yes | No | |
| Smoking | No preference | No | |
| Gender | No preference | Male | Female |
| Occupation | No preference | Student | Professional |
| Pets considered? | No | | Yes |
| Minimum age | Numerical value (18-99) | | |
| Maximum age | Numerical value (18-99) | | |
| Language | Drop-down box of 98 languages | | |
| Couples welcome? | No | | Yes |
| Vegetarian preferred? | No preference | Yes | |

All adverts in the sample detailed a “no” response to “housing benefit considered?” The breakdown of the other responses was more fragmented. Couples were allowed in 53% of the adverts, with 35% prohibiting couples and 12% not specifying any requirements.

Notwithstanding these, the actual descriptive text in the advertisement itself often included additional requirements over-and-above – or in contradiction to – those implied in the SpareRoom housemate preferences. Phrases like “no children or pets” and “no DSS” were widespread in the sample.

Figure Three: Exclusion criteria in the open text of adverts.

| Characteristic | Instances in the advert text |
|--------------------|------------------------------|
| No smokers | 37 |
| 21 and over | 81 |
| No DSS | 80 |
| No students | 99 |
| No children | 109 |
| No pets | 143 |
| No disabled access | 11 |

The exclusion of two categories – those on “DSS” and “students” – was often seen alongside the inverse category of the “working professional”, a status defined by what the viewer is *not* (namely a student or unemployed), rather than what they are. Indeed, as detailed in **Figure Two**, SpareRoom.co.uk only has two categories of occupation: “student” or “professional”. Any unemployed viewer of the advert, or those in receipt of social security payments (the “DSS”), only reside in the residual “no preference” box.

This emphasis on the “professional” tells us two things about property guardianship. First, that for all of the emphasis on its value and relative low-cost in comparison to the private rented sector, significant categories of those who are excluded from the private rented sector are also excluded from property guardianship. For instance, those on Local Housing Allowance – who face great difficulty renting in many of the same areas in which property guardian companies operate (Sanderson & Wilson, 2017) – are *also* excluded from this sector, despite its greater self-proclaimed affordability. Second, that the sector does not position itself as a form of accommodation for those who are unable to live elsewhere, but instead as a choice for those

who can. It is, therefore, with an appeal to a lifestyle or the capacity to “save for the important things in life” (see below) with which they seek to motivate potential occupiers, not through the lack of affordability elsewhere.

The widespread exclusion of children in these adverts also provides an insight into property guardianship. It demonstrates that there is something about the occupation of the property or the target lifestyle that makes the sector unsuitable for children. Though it could be argued that this is a useful proxy for the age of the potential occupier, perhaps reflecting “ageist and cultural stereotypes of mobile and ‘creative’ urban dwellers” (Ferreri & Dawson, 2018, p.431), previous research has indicated that the sector is not significantly younger than the private-rented sector more generally (Hunter & Meers, 2018b, p.14). We would instead suggest that it is a tacit recognition by these companies that the precarious environment within these properties and the short periods of occupation can be acceptable for some adults (such as in Ferreri and Dawson’s work on “self-precarization” in the sector (2018)), but are not appropriate to impose on children. In a private rented sector that is currently housing around 3 million children (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2018, p.5), these adverts distinguish property guardianship as somewhere unsuitable.

4. Rhetoric and lifestyle

Property adverts are imbued with rhetoric about lifestyle. The creation of glossy brochures created by house builders and developers serve to construct a “lifestyle” within their advertising materials and “capture the subtle dialogue of aspiration” (Pryce, & Oates, 2008, p.321). Analysis points to shifts in the language used to communicate to prospective buyers indicating changing attitudes by these advertisers to gender roles (Kriese & Scholz, 2012) and the appeal of sustainability (Kriese & Scholz, 2011). How those posting these adverts tie their property to a particular “lifestyle” and communicate this to the viewer is an important part of their persuasive effect. This use of language also serves to demonstrate how the advertiser, be it an estate agent, student accommodation business, or in our case, property guardianship company, seeks to present life in their properties to prospective occupiers.

Within the sample, adverts underscored property guardianship as not just a form of accommodation, but as a lifestyle choice where occupiers can meet similar people and benefit from the money saved on rent:

This would be a great chance to live with like-minded people in an affordable, homely property. Don’t miss out on saving for the more important things in life, rather than spending all your paycheck on housing costs.

The word “flexible” abounds in the sample. It is used in 60 of the adverts, often tied to the “quirky” buildings or “generous” spaces offered under property guardianship schemes:

Would you like to enjoy generous living spaces on flexible terms? Become a Property Guardian and enjoy these great benefits.

This Large Farmhouse has lots of character and is offered as part of the Property Guardian scheme. In need of protection, we are looking for responsible professional

individuals that are looking for something quirky & flexible to keep the building in use.

We would suggest that “flexible” is to “insecure” what “bijou” is to “tiny”. The language in the adverts is framing the weaker protections afforded to the occupier under a licence as a desirable quality of the guardian lifestyle.

Adverts also underscore the social good served by occupying otherwise empty properties. This is particularly notable given the tension between property guardianship and squatting – indeed, in the Netherlands, where the roots of property guardianship lie, it is known as *Anti-Kraak*, which translates as “anti-squatting” (Ferreri et al, 2016, p.251). Occupation of the property was framed as a benefit for the wider community in of itself:

As a live-in Guardian, you not only get affordable, flexible accommodation - your [sic] also doing your bit for the community by protecting this property (simply by living in it).

Robertson and Doig have already underscored how information contained in property listings changes in response to market conditions, with adverts posted in slower periods using more emotive language and referring more to the cheapness or “value” of accommodation, and those in more buoyant markets referring to “lifestyle features” (Robertson & Doig, 2010, 185). Here, the property guardianship sector is not just responding to market competition, but appears to be actively defining itself through differentiation with the private rented sector. Adjectives such as “flexible” and “affordable” are relative to the private rented sector at large. These property guardianship properties are “affordable” as the private rented sector at large is so *unaffordable*. They are “flexible” relative to the already heavily insecure private rented sector.

It also appears that these adverts, in their references to “like-minded people” and “quirky” properties, are communicating many of those same property guardian tropes of the “mobile and ‘creative’ urban dwellers” identified by Ferreri and Dawson (2018). The adverts are constructing a property guardian “lifestyle” which projects a lifestyle to the advert viewer, even if evidence on the sector itself indicates that it is far from a young, homogenous group (Hunter & Meers, 2018b, p. 14). In encouraging applications from this projected occupier, this projection of lifestyle can operate like a soft form of exclusion: encouraging some to apply and excluding others.

Conclusion

We have argued that the analysis of property adverts can reveal information about how the advertisers – the landlord, lettings agent, company, or whoever else – communicates their proposition to the prospective occupier. These work to exclude prospective occupiers (e.g. “no DSS”, “no children” etc), form part of the “process of construction” of the agreement to occupy, can provide key diagnostics of what form occupation of the property is likely to take, and can demonstrate how sub-sectors within the private rented sector seek to differentiate or promote themselves through allusions to particular “lifestyles”.

We have demonstrated how these apply to a sample of adverts on SpareRoom.co.uk for “property guardianship” properties. Those on housing benefit, with children, and students are generally excluded from applying, and the sector presents its offer – both in terms of providing context for the eventual legal agreement to occupy the property and by associating it with a

particular “lifestyle” – by distinguishing it from the private rented sector at large. Property owners or their agents can differentiate their offering to target those sub-markets that Rugg and Rhodes identify in their review of the private rented sector (2018, p. 49-67). Analysing how these “lifestyles” are projected can help us to understand how property providers are seeking to differentiate themselves from each other.

Our broader agenda has been to argue for the benefits of analysing property adverts in their own right. The windows of lettings agents or small-ads in the local newspaper are not the chief medium for finding a home in which to live – websites, and particularly property search engines, provide the starting point for many, particularly renters. It is important to see what potential occupiers do. To neglect the study of these advertisements is not only to omit a fundamental part of finding accommodation, but also to neglect a rich source of data about those properties and their owners.

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