Evaluating Methodological Approaches in Student Housing Quality Research in Africa: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This paper presents a systematic review of methodological approaches employed in student housing research in Africa. The review uses the PRISMA framework and relies on 345 empirical studies from 42 African countries. The review finds that the methods applied in this research are skewed towards quantitative and cross-sectional designs, often based on non-validated instruments. The methodologies provided essential insights into infrastructural conditions and overall satisfaction with student housing and quality. However, they fail to capture the complexity and contextual specificity of students' lived experiences. Qualitative and mixed-methods research, though less common, offered deeper insights into adaptation behaviours and socio-cultural dimensions of housing, but are rarely grounded in robust theoretical frameworks. Notably, participatory methods are very limited, and ethical considerations are reported inconsistently. The review underscores significant gaps in longitudinal data, representation of marginalised populations, and cross-institutional comparisons. The study calls for a shift towards more inclusive, participatory, and theoretically anchored research methodologies. Furthermore, there is a need to develop validated instruments, implement longitudinal tracking, and establish collaborative governance structures that engage students in research and policy processes. These will enhance the quality, equity, and responsiveness of student housing in African higher education contexts.

Keywords: Adaptive strategies, off-campus hostels, on-campus hostels, student housing quality, student housing satisfaction

1. Introduction

Student housing is a critical component of higher education infrastructure in Africa. While African governments continue to expand access to higher education to meet their human capital and development needs, investment in other higher education infrastructure far outpaces investment in residential facilities. As a result, universities across Africa face a significant mismatch between the demand for and supply of student housing, leading to overcrowding. Unfortunately, most of the few existing facilities have also been allowed to deteriorate, making living conditions a challenge (Chiwaya & Liwago, 2026). Occupants face challenging conditions, including poor ventilation and sanitation and a lack of essential services such as reliable water and electricity (Kasina et al., 2025; Attakora-Amaniampong et al., 2025; Nwankwo & Nwankwo, 2025). These problems affect structural planning, psychological health, and students' academic performance (Maqbool et al., 2025; Maina et al., 2025; Asare-Baafi et al., 2025).

Academics have sought to address the challenges of student housing in higher education through research. For instance, Zaman and Hosain (2024) developed sophisticated methodological approaches, using validated measurement instruments and advanced statistical techniques, such as structural equation modelling, to investigate the impact of student housing conditions on academic performance. Similarly, Umar et al. (2025) used qualitative and participatory research approaches to assess students' lived experiences and satisfaction in student residences.

Similarly, studies on student housing in Africa largely rely on quantitative cross-sectional surveys assessing perceptions of housing conditions, including ventilation, security, maintenance, and access to utilities (Stemn et al., 2024; Amoah et al., 2025). However, these studies often use survey instruments with limited validation and are conducted at single institutions using convenience sampling (e.g., Attakora-Amaniampong et al., 2025), which presents methodological limitations. These limitations can reduce the reliability and comparability of findings. Qualitative studies on shared living arrangements and satisfaction with living spaces remain limited (Nwankwo & Nwankwo, 2025; Kasina et al., 2025). It appears that few studies of student housing quality and

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satisfaction in the African context have used mixed methods – that is, quantitative and qualitative approaches. As a result, these studies often fail to adequately account for the multifaceted nature of students' lived experiences in student housing and the prospects for inclusive knowledge. Therefore, this study seeks to ascertain the extent to which studies of student housing quality in an African context have used mixed methods. The paper addresses the question: What methodological approaches are used in research on student housing quality and satisfaction in Africa? In addressing this question, the paper first identifies the dominant research methodologies used in housing quality and satisfaction research in Africa. Second, it examines the strengths and weaknesses of these methods; third, it identifies gaps in these studies. In this review, the paper contributes to improving the methodological choices in student housing research in Africa and offers guidance for future research on student housing quality and satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Methodological Approaches to Student Housing Research

A complex methodological tradition has shaped studies of student housing in the Global North. These studies largely employed quantitative research designs, focusing on student accommodation preferences, quality, and the relationship between student residence preferences and academic outcomes (Altinay et al., 2024; Karimi et al., 2025). According to Altinay et al. (2024), a large number of these studies use cross-sectional surveys, usually through both face-to-face and online surveys, and standardised instruments. Other studies confirmed the use of housing quality indicators (Zhang & Zhao, 2024) and the residential environment satisfaction scale (Karimi et al., 2025). These tools are usually pre-tested to ensure reliability and validity. For instance, Zaman and Hosain (2024) used advanced statistical tools such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM) to assess the relationship between a student's residential preference and academic student outcomes, retention, and mental health. Similarly, Karimi et al. (2025) used longitudinal studies to examine students' responses to indoor environmental quality over time, while Wang et al. (2025) used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to examine the spatial patterns and accessibility to campus facilities, as well as their exposure to pollution and crime. Few scholars used qualitative approaches such as focus group discussions, interviews, and participatory mapping (Zhang & Zhao, 2024). These were used to determine the lived experiences of students whose concerns may not be fully captured through standardized surveys. In recent years, studies have adopted mixed-methods approaches, typically through sequential explanatory designs, to comprehensively examine the complex relationships among housing conditions, satisfaction, and student adaptation (Song & Dincer, 2025).

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a systematic literature review to examine the methods used in student housing research in Africa. The method involved several steps. First, relevant literature was sought from academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and African Journals Online (AJOL). The search process began with keywords such as 'student housing preferences', 'student housing', 'university dormitory facilities', 'university hostels', 'student housing quality', 'student housing maintenance', and 'student residential preferences'. These terms were used to search for housing studies in Africa between 2000 and 2025, yielding an initial retrieval of 345 papers (Scopus=212, Web of Science=109, JSTOR=16, and African Journals Online (AJOL)=8). Next, duplicate and unrelated studies were removed, leaving 103 articles. These articles were then sorted into themes. Three thematic areas emerged from the articles, namely: 'student housing quality', 'student housing satisfaction', and 'student preferences'.

The second phase involved screening the 103 records for completeness of reporting, methodological clarity, and relevance to the study's objective (see Figure 1 in Appendix 1). This resulted in the retention of 42 records for screening. Excluded records had unclear sampling processes, inconsistent methodology, and limited depth of findings. The retained studies employed robust methods and provided reliable empirical evidence on student housing preferences, conditions, and satisfaction. The analytical approach involved extracting information, including publication year, country of study, research design, sampling technique, sample size, and data collection methods. The extracted data were then coded and grouped into thematic categories. These categories included the study's focus, the methods used, and the methods' strengths and weaknesses/limitations. A thematic synthesis was then employed to identify recurring patterns, methodological trends, and research gaps across the studies.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive findings

The descriptive evaluation showed that most studies in Africa are geographically concentrated in Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and South Africa. The analysis revealed that scholarly interest in student housing in Africa increased significantly from 2015 onwards. This scholarly interest has contributed to heightened calls for policy attention to student housing in Africa's higher education institutions.

Methodologically, the review showed that 60% of the studies employed cross-sectional survey designs. These studies largely used a structured survey to assess students' satisfaction with housing conditions and services. Also, qualitative research approaches recorded 20% of the reviewed studies, which often relied on interviews, a few case studies, and focus group discussions. Furthermore, 20% of these studies used mixed-methods designs, such as post-occupancy evaluations, interviews, and surveys (e.g. Sanni-Anibire & Hassanain, 2016; Du Plessis et al., 2021).

4.2. Dominant Methodologies in Student Housing Research

The analysis shows that several student housing studies adopted post-occupancy evaluation (POE) frameworks as a methodological tool to examine the quality of student housing. This framework enables researchers to systematically assess student housing quality from the perspective of the students who reside in it. Furthermore, the framework facilitated the identification of recurring shortcomings in infrastructure and service quality across the reviewed studies. For instance, Sanni-Anibire and Hassanain (2016) used this approach to inform student housing design and management practices. Likewise, Adegoke et al. (2021) used this tool to assess student housing performance and maintenance quality among university residences in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the systematic review found that non-probabilistic sampling, such as convenience or purposive sampling, was common among researchers, largely constrained by limited access to institutional datasets. These studies often relied on selected case samples. Qualitative methods were less common in the studies. Omitting qualitative methods may overlook the social and experiential aspects of student housing that can enrich such studies. The few studies that used qualitative approaches, such as case studies and interviews, focused on student housing shortages and infrastructural constraints (for example, Wanie et al., 2017; Shakantu & Simpeh, 2018). Studies that employed mixed-methods – qualitative and survey methods – provided a deeper understanding of students' residential experiences (e.g., Du Plessis et al., 2021). Generally, there is limited use of qualitative methods to capture students' experiences with housing quality.

4.3. Conceptual and Thematic Findings

The study identified several recurring themes, including the student residence experience, the nature and quality of student housing, and students' overall satisfaction. Regarding housing quality, the study found that persistent infrastructure challenges affect university accommodation systems. These were largely driven by inadequate maintenance, overcrowding, and limited sanitation services. Earlier studies observed that insufficient maintenance practices and limited tenant awareness negatively affect student housing quality (e.g., Oladapo, 2006). In terms of students' experiences, the study found that housing preferences were closely linked to maintenance responsiveness and the availability of building services. For instance, Toyin Sawyerr and Yusof (2013) found that housing quality and service provision were critical factors in students' residential experiences in Africa. Inadequate study spaces and sanitation conditions were also found to influence students' residential preferences (e.g., Aigbavboa et al., 2014; Oke et al., 2017).

There were also themes related to environmental quality and health. Indoor environmental quality issues, such as poor ventilation, thermal comfort, visual, and acoustic challenges, contributed to health risks, including sick building syndrome (e.g. Nduka et al., 2021). The effects of this sick building syndrome included reduced concentration, academic performance, and study habits (e.g., Mbazor, 2021; Mngutyo & Mngutyo, 2016).

The review shows that the conceptual scope of student housing research has expanded to include challenges related to physical accessibility, inclusivity, and market dynamics. For instance, Attakora-Amaniampong et al. (2022) and Appau et al. (2024) focused on housing access for students with disabilities, highlighting a gap in the inclusivity of student housing design and support services. Also, the review has further shown that market forces, such as location and digital platforms, tend to influence student housing choices across higher education institutions in Africa (e.g., Avogo et al., 2022; Aziabah et al., 2022).

4.4. Methodological Gaps

The study identified gaps in research methods used in student housing research in Africa (see Figure 2). First, the study found that research on student housing largely relies on standardised and validated measurement instruments. This pattern was observed in most quantitative studies, which focused on student housing satisfaction and quality. Although most of these studies used questionnaires, many relied on self-developed instruments and did not report on reliability testing (e.g. Oke et al., 2017; Toyin Sawyerr & Yusof, 2013). This undermines the comparability of findings across studies and contexts.

Second, there is the issue of the geographical and institutional concentration of research. The review found that a substantial proportion of the studies focused on single institutions and specific campuses in Ghana and Nigeria. Despite their contributions, these studies are limited in their ability to generalise findings across higher education institutions in Africa. There is a need to broaden the scope to multi-institutional and cross-national contexts, where this form of study is scarce, particularly in Central, North, and East Africa.

Third, the review found a lack of longitudinal research designs in student housing research. Most studies used cross-sectional survey methods, making it impossible to examine the pattern of student housing satisfaction in response to infrastructure and policy interventions. This absence of longitudinal designs may be explained by the limited duration of students' programmes (usually four years for undergraduate programmes). Typically, no study used quasi-experimental approaches to assess housing quality.

Fourth, the review found that very few studies used mixed methods – that is, quantitative and qualitative methods in their research. In particular, there was an absence of participatory approaches in the research. However, participatory approaches are useful because they make respondents partners in knowledge production and exchange rather than passive actors responding to closed-ended questions. This has implications for policy formulation and acceptance.

Fifth, there is limited evidence of the all-inclusiveness of student housing study designs. None of the studies reported involving vulnerable student populations. Given the special needs of vulnerable groups, such as the blind and physically challenged, in housing design, their representation in housing studies is imperative. However, scholarly studies in student housing have only recently begun to recognise this group of students (see, for example, Attakora-Amaniampong et al., 2024; Appau et al., 2024).

5. Discussions

The study reviewed research methods for student housing in Africa. It identified significant methodological gaps that could shape the future of student housing research in Africa. The findings show that student housing quality and satisfaction are critical determinants of academic performance and well-being (Mbazor, 2021; Toyin Sawyerr & Yusof, 2013; Oke et al., 2017; Aigbavboa et al., 2014). Nonetheless, challenges such as overcrowding and inadequate maintenance, which result in health problems, persist in higher-education student housing (Nduka et al., 2021; Nwankwo & Nwankwo, 2025; Oladapo, 2006). Furthermore, the review found that student housing safety and service quality shaped students' preferences and satisfaction (see, for example, Sanni-Anibire & Hassanain, 2016; Simpeh & Shakantu, 2020; Adegoke et al., 2021; Adisa et al., 2019). These findings indicate that building performance is important for holistic academic success. Moreover, the study observed growing concern about student housing market dynamics, and the use of digital platforms in rental decisions was supported by Aziabah et al. (2022) and Avogo et al. (2022). The study noted a few methodological gaps in these studies. While the studies show the deployment of advanced research techniques such as longitudinal design, spatial analysis, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) (Zaman & Hosain, 2024; Karimi et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025), there is less combination of qualitative methods that allow the experiences of student respondents to be shared to enhance knowledge production and sharing.

6. Conclusions

This systematic review highlights relevant methodological gaps in student housing research in Africa. Addressing these gaps through more qualitative and participatory research designs will enhance research output and yield more impactful outcomes through policy and management reforms. Thus, the paper encourages expanding the conceptual understanding and focus of student housing research to include the needs of vulnerable groups. Further, it proposes a more integrated, interdisciplinary, inclusive, and mixed-methods approach to research on student housing in Africa. This will lead to evidence-based, client-centred student housing design and to a more qualitative, participatory research design that captures residents' sentiments and contributes to reforms to improve student housing conditions.

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Appendix 1

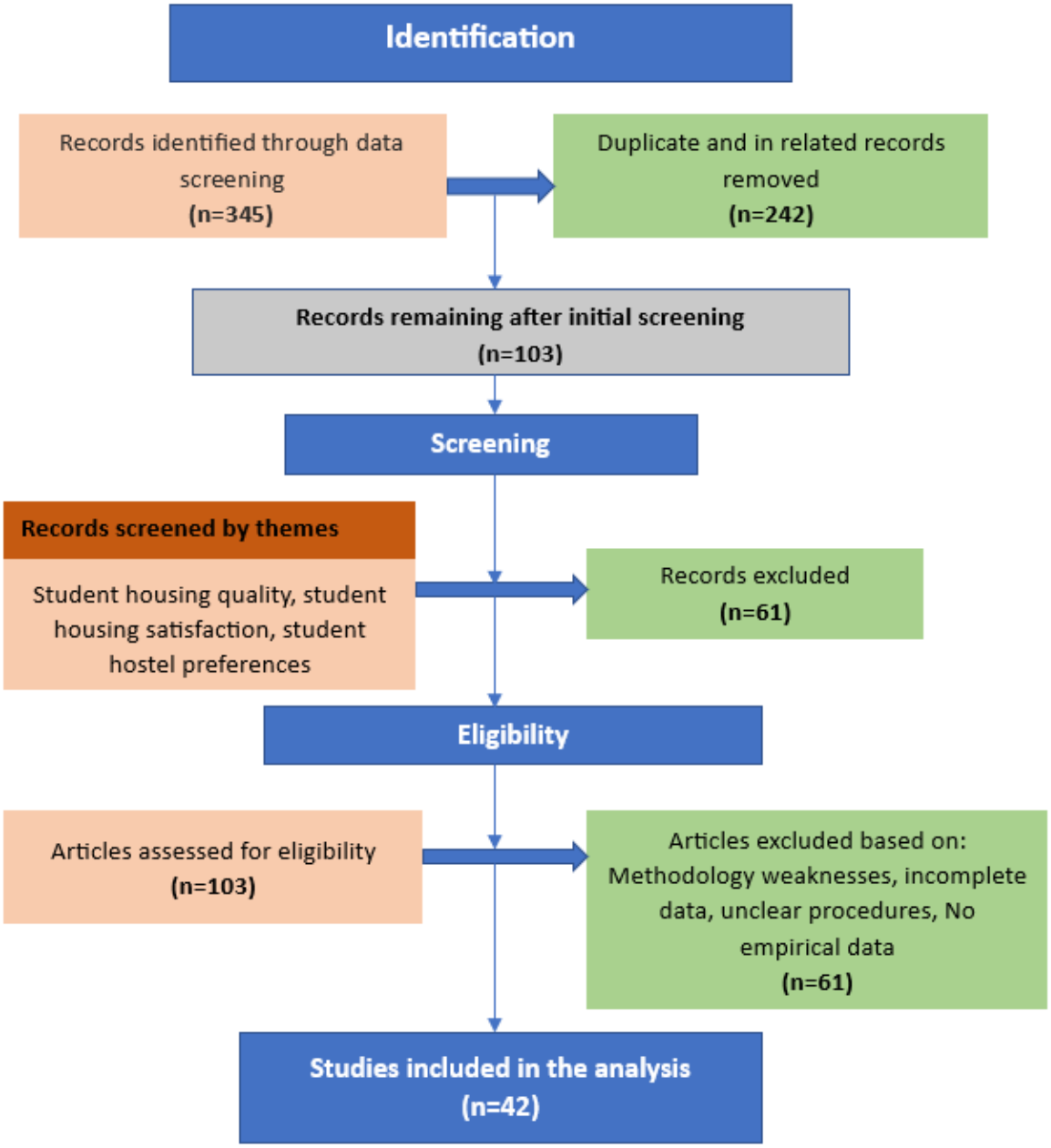


Figure 1: PRISMA process
Source: Authors' construct (2026)

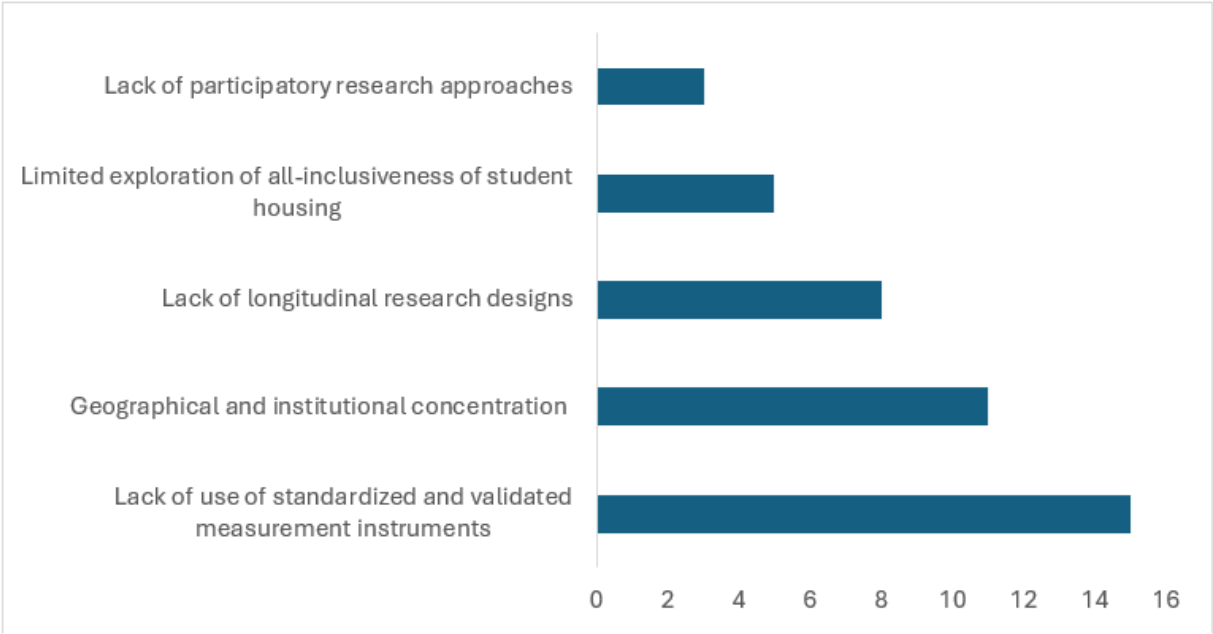


Figure 2: Methodological gaps in student housing research in Africa
Source: Authors' construct (2026)