



Cultural Coexistence and Institutional Accommodation: A Critical Reflection on Shared Student Residences in South African Post-School Education

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ABSTRACT:

In South African schools, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, and universities that provide on-campus housing, students from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds are often housed together, particularly in their first year. This article offers a critical analysis of the institutional implications of such living arrangements without actually conducting any empirical research. Using cultural theory, spatial anthropology, and higher education policy analysis, the study investigates the interactions between students' beliefs in prayer, muti (traditional medicine), holy water, and secular living in common spaces like bedrooms and restrooms. These interactions are framed by the broader discussion of cultural pluralism and institutional responsibility. The study emphasizes the conflicts and coping strategies created in reaction to cultural dissonance in shared residences by drawing on policy documents, secondary literature, and recorded campus incidents. According to the findings, institutional policies frequently minimize cultural diversity in residential planning, which causes interpersonal disputes, psychological discomfort, and students' informal self-regulation. In its conclusion, the paper suggests a culturally aware approach to residence management that prioritizes proactive cultural literacy, institutional support, and coexistence. Since this work only uses document analysis and theoretical critique, ethical clearance is not needed.

Keywords: cultural coexistence; student residences; higher education; post-school education; institutional accommodation

1. Introduction and Background

South Africa's post-school education landscape is marked by a rich tapestry of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Students from all nine provinces, representing a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, languages, and belief systems, are enrolled in universities and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges throughout the nation. This diversity reflects the country's complex social fabric, shaped by its history, geography, and ongoing social transformations. Township, rural, and peri-urban communities are home to a large number of students, who bring unique cultural identities and customs that influence their social and academic experiences at these schools (Sayed & Motala, 2022). Given the geographic spread and financial realities faced by a significant portion of this student population, many are required to live away from home, often in institutional residences. These living arrangements are meant to support students by providing a structured environment conducive to academic focus and social development. The benefits of residence life are well-documented: residences offer opportunities for peer interaction, community building, and support networks that can positively impact academic success and emotional wellbeing (Walker & Fongwa, 2017). However, despite the clear social and developmental importance of these settings, the cultural dynamics within shared student accommodation have received relatively little scholarly attention in the South African context.

In reality, logistical effectiveness frequently takes precedence over cultural or socioreligious factors when allocating student housing. According to Maposa, Sefalafala, and Mabusela (2023), first-year students in particular are often assigned to shared rooms or living spaces in a largely random manner with little consideration for their lifestyle practices, cultural customs, or religious affiliations. Students with very different daily routines, spiritual beliefs, and cultural expressions may live together as a result of this approach, and occasionally clash. For instance, students who participate in traditional healing practices like muti (herbal medicine), daily prayers, or fasting, or who perform spiritual ceremonies using water, incense, or sacred symbols, may have to live with classmates who do not share or respect these customs. Such close quarters can make shared facilities like bedrooms, bathrooms, and communal spaces sites of misunderstanding, discomfort, and occasionally, conflict.

The fact that institutional policies and higher education transformation agendas typically concentrate primarily on racial equity and language issues exacerbates the difficulties in managing cultural diversity in residence life. Even though these are important facets of social justice in South Africa after apartheid, they run the risk of overshadowing other essential facets of student identity, like rituals, spirituality, and cultural heritage (Booyesen, 2021). When students live together on a daily basis, it has a significant impact on their psychological health, sense of belonging, and identity development. This tendency causes a blind spot in institutional approaches that treat residence life as a neutral or apolitical space. This paper argues that the social and

cultural realities of residence life deserve greater scholarly and policy attention. Living spaces are not merely functional accommodations; they are lived environments where social integration occurs, personal identities are negotiated, and emotional health is shaped. How institutions manage these spaces, whether by accommodating or marginalizing cultural diversity, has significant implications for students' overall university experience and the broader goals of institutional transformation.

The primary objective of this study is to critically explore how institutional housing practices within South African post-school education systems engage with cultural diversity in shared living environments. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following key questions:

- How do institutional approaches to residence management accommodate or marginalize cultural diversity within shared student spaces?
- What are the consequences of these approaches for students' well-being, their ability to express cultural and spiritual identities, and their overall experience of inclusion?
- In what ways do residence life policies and practices align with or diverge from institutional transformation goals related to diversity and inclusion?

The purpose of this paper is to advocate for more culturally sensitive residence management techniques and to draw attention to the discrepancy between policy rhetoric and lived realities. These methods would acknowledge the multifaceted, intertwined identities that students bring to campus and create living situations that promote both academic achievement and the full range of social and emotional growth.

2. Literature Review

The discussion of higher education in South Africa has long revolved around the themes of inclusion, transformation, and access, especially when it comes to racial integration and socioeconomic equity. Scholars have studied in great detail how historical injustices continue to influence educational policies, structures, and student experiences ever since apartheid ended (Badat, 2015; Soudien, 2020). Curriculum reform, student demographic changes, and reallocating funds to previously underserved groups have been the main topics of this literature. These studies were crucial in exposing the enduring systemic obstacles and the intricate difficulties institutions encounter in attaining real equality and change (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Naidoo & Singh, 2021). However, beyond the dominant racial and linguistic frameworks that have traditionally shaped transformation debates, there is growing recognition that cultural diversity, particularly within residential life, remains an under-explored dimension of institutional transformation (Booyesen, 2021; Nkomo & Pillay, 2022). While policies and institutional strategies often emphasize broad notions of inclusion and diversity, they frequently overlook the intricate, everyday realities of how students from diverse cultural backgrounds coexist and negotiate their identities within shared living spaces on campus.

One important but underappreciated topic in South African student housing literature is the lived cultural experiences of students living in residence halls. The majority of research tends to focus on structural and material issues, including infrastructure quality, affordability, safety concerns, and the physical accessibility of housing facilities (Walker & Fongwa, 2017; Bunting et al., 2021). These factors are unquestionably significant, particularly in light of the historical and current resource disparities that many institutions face. However, concentrating primarily on them runs the risk of ignoring the social and cultural aspects of residence life, which are just as important for the inclusion and well-being of students. Where the literature does engage with residence life, it often does so only superficially. Studies exploring language policy and practice within campuses, such as those by Heugh (2019), tend to analyse language as a medium of instruction or communication but rarely interrogate how language intersects with culture and identity within residential spaces. Similarly, research on social cohesion (Jansen, 2009; Makhanya, 2020) offers useful insights into how students build community and navigate difference but seldom addresses how cultural beliefs, spiritual practices, and rituals are either accommodated or marginalized in these everyday interactions.

Given the wide range of religious and cultural backgrounds represented among South African student populations, it is especially critical to accommodate spirituality and ritual practices (Mokone & Sibanda, 2023). However, there aren't many studies that have looked at how residence management procedures and institutional policies help or hurt students' ability to express their spiritual and cultural identities in shared housing. Since spiritual wellbeing is becoming more widely acknowledged as a crucial element of holistic student development and success, this omission is problematic (Phiri & Mdlalose, 2024). It also represents a larger trend in higher education to give academic and financial considerations precedence over the affective and cultural aspects of student life. In a global context, the anthropological and sociological literature on shared living arrangements offers valuable frameworks for understanding how cultural negotiation occurs in multicultural settings (Goffman, 2021; Zhou & Cole, 2023). These studies suggest that individuals engage in complex, often informal, negotiations around cultural difference that are not always visible in official institutional narratives. Practices such as boundary drawing, selective inclusion, and tacit avoidance serve as coping mechanisms for managing cultural tensions or misunderstandings in cohabitation contexts (Ahmed & Singh, 2022). These dynamics resonate strongly with the South African context, where the legacy of segregation and uneven social integration continues to influence interpersonal relations.

Students frequently use self-imposed segregation or unofficial peer mediation to manage tensions when there are no official institutional mechanisms in place to handle intercultural conflicts or promote discussion about cultural diversity within residences (Maposa, Sefalafala & Mabusela, 2023). These tactics might provide temporary respite, but they run the risk of widening social gaps and undermining the more general objectives of inclusion and change that universities promote. This emphasizes how urgently more proactive and sophisticated approaches to managing residence life are needed, ones that view cultural plurality as a lived reality rather than a side issue. The recent student housing policy framework from the Department of Higher Education and Training highlights the importance of creating "safe and supportive living environments" for both academic success and well-being (DHET, 2021). Despite this, the policies frequently don't specify how to put these principles into practice when living with people from different cultural

backgrounds or when resolving conflicts brought on by cultural differences. Many responsibilities are left to individual institutions and residence managers, who might not have the means or know-how to handle these complexities, as there is little guidance on how to accommodate different spiritual and cultural practices (Maree & Nkosi, 2024).

Commitments to inclusion, diversity, and transformation are commonly expressed in institutional mission statements and strategic plans. Maringe, Ojo, and Mncube (2021) point out a recurring discrepancy between these policies' progressive rhetoric and their practical application. Inadequate support for cultural and spiritual expressions is one way that this disconnect shows up in student housing, which can make minority groups feel excluded or invisible. The authors contend that institutional transformation runs the risk of remaining merely symbolic and surface-level rather than deep and immersive in the absence of deliberate, culturally sensitive programming and policy enforcement. Taken together, the literature reveals a significant gap in understanding the micro-level, everyday realities of cultural plurality within student accommodation. While macro-level transformation initiatives address broad structural inequities and policy reform, they insufficiently engage with how residence life policies affect students' personal identities, spiritual practices, and cultural expressions. This gap is particularly critical because residence life is not merely a backdrop for academic activity; it is a formative space where social identities are negotiated, cultural boundaries are tested, and belonging is constructed or contested (Smith & Naicker, 2022).

A multidisciplinary strategy that incorporates ideas from organizational management, education, anthropology, and cultural studies is needed to close this gap. Additionally, it calls for empirical research that prioritizes the experiences and voices of students, especially those from underrepresented cultural groups whose viewpoints are frequently disregarded. Residence life policies that are responsive and courteous in practice, as well as inclusive in rhetoric, can be developed with the help of such research. Rethinking student living arrangements has become even more urgent as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inequalities in access to safe housing have been brought to light by the move to remote and hybrid learning models, as well as worries about health safety and communal living (Nkambule & Mashile, 2023). This context underscores the need for flexible, culturally sensitive approaches to residence management that consider both the material and psychosocial dimensions of student life.

The literature and institutional practice still do not adequately address the cultural realities of student life in residential settings, despite the fact that South African higher education has made great progress in addressing historical inequalities through structural and policy reforms. More focus needs to be placed on the complex cultural, spiritual, and social factors that influence students' experiences living in shared housing in order to create truly inclusive and transformative campus environments. The goal of future studies and policy creation should be to close the gap between the general transformation objectives and the day-to-day experiences of cultural diversity on campus.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study examines how student accommodation policies in South African post-school educational institutions mediate, ignore, or conflict with cultural diversity in shared spaces using two intersecting theoretical stances: cultural pluralism and spatial anthropology. Cultural pluralism runs counter to the idea that organizations should aim for cultural neutrality, claims Parekh (2006). Instead, it implies that cultural differences need to be actively recognized, validated, and structurally accommodated in order for public institutions to be truly inclusive. This implies that instead of passively accepting differences, policies for student housing should actively anticipate spiritual practices, ritual behaviour, and belief systems as commonplace elements of everyday life (Adebayo, 2021). Beyond merely promoting coexistence, cultural pluralism promotes institutional accountability for cultural equity. A framework like this encourages educational institutions to consider how they can support diversity in the areas where students eat, sleep, bathe, and pray in addition to the classroom.

By considering residential settings as culturally encoded spaces rather than neutral backdrops, but rather as active sites of social reproduction, negotiation, and occasionally conflict, Spatial Anthropology broadens the critique, building on Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the production of space. By demonstrating how spatial arrangements can either support or challenge preexisting power hierarchies, Massey (2005) expands on this concept. Unseen cultural boundaries are either respected or crossed in shared kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms in dorms for students (Osei-Kofi, 2022). Depending on how the space is socially constructed by its occupants and institutional policies, rituals involving incense, water, or sacred symbols may be scrutinized or rejected. Combining these frameworks, this article criticizes how institutional accommodation policies frequently overlook the social-symbolic aspect of living arrangements and reduce residential space to a logistical issue of bed space allocation. More than administrative effectiveness is needed when different cultural worldviews are interacting in close proximity; cultural literacy, sensitivity, and deliberate planning are also necessary (Mukherjee & Govender, 2023). These theoretical instruments aid in exposing the conflicts, silences, and opportunities present in institutional cohabitation models.

4. Methodology

The qualitative, conceptual research design used in this study is appropriate for studies that focus on policy reflection and institutional discourse. Its foundations are theoretical interpretation and document analysis. A robust analytical contribution to the field of higher education and cultural accommodation is still produced, and ethical clearance is not needed because the non-empirical methodology eliminates direct contact with human participants.

Primary data sources include:

- Institutional residence policy documents from three South African public institutions (one traditional university, one comprehensive university, and one TVET college),

- Strategic plans and transformation frameworks from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) published between 2020 and 2024, and
- Publicly available newsletters, communiqués, and media reports documenting incidents of student conflict or discomfort linked to cultural or spiritual practices within shared residences.

These documents were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account institutional type, geographic diversity, and public availability. The policy texts and media outputs underwent thematic content analysis in order to identify dominant narratives, silences, and patterns related to the management of cultural diversity in residence life. With a focus on inductive coding to let themes naturally emerge from the data, the analysis adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase model of thematic analysis. Codes were categorised around three focal areas:

1. Institutional recognition of cultural practices in policy language,
2. Mechanisms for conflict prevention or resolution, and
3. Evidence of lived student experiences, as reflected in secondary reporting.

Instead of encouraging generalizable findings, this methodological approach promotes a critical-interpretive reflection on institutional practices by situating the study within broader theoretical discussions on cultural pluralism and spatial politics. Furthermore, it aligns with recent advancements in higher education research that advocate for non-intrusive, policy-focused strategies when assisting vulnerable student populations (Mahabeer & Chikoko, 2023; Bawa, 2021).

5. Results

A number of recurrent themes emerged from the document analysis regarding how public communications and institutional policies either address or overlook cultural diversity in student housing. These trends were found in secondary student experience reports, DHET policy documents, and residence guidelines. Four main themes surfaced:

5.1 Operational Efficiency over Cultural Sensitivity

Rather than considerations like cultural or spiritual compatibility, the distribution of residences in South African post-school educational institutions is mostly dictated by administrative and logistical needs. The institution's primary goal is typically to match students with housing based on practical considerations such as enrolment status, academic year level, financial aid eligibility, and room availability (DHET, 2021). While these factors are important for managing large student populations and ensuring equitable access to scarce housing resources, they often mask more nuanced facets of student identities, especially those related to spirituality, religion, or traditions. Allocation procedures usually employ alphabetical or randomized systems, which overlook the potential consequences of cultural dissonance in shared living situations. For example, first-year students might be paired together just because they are new to the school, with no effort made to account for cultural differences that could influence daily routines or comfort levels in shared spaces. Similarly, senior students may decide not to live together for private reasons, but even at this level, culturally sensitive matching is rarely supported by institutional policies (Mukherjee & Govender, 2023).

This focus on efficiency reflects an institutional tendency to prioritize operational manageability over the lived realities of cultural diversity. The deep cultural and spiritual significance of common areas, sleeping quarters, and restrooms is often overlooked in favour of viewing them as purely functional spaces. Students who perform ritual cleansing or use sacred objects, for instance, might experience discomfort or resistance when paired with peers who are unfamiliar with or do not understand these practices. A lack of systematic consideration for cultural compatibility also demonstrates a lack of institutional commitment to providing culturally sensitive student support, which increases the likelihood of interpersonal conflicts. Institutions essentially put the onus of tolerance and negotiation on students themselves when they lack formal procedures to evaluate and account for different belief systems during room assignments, frequently leaving them to handle possible conflicts without assistance or mediation.

This operational approach aligns with broader critiques of South Africa's post-school education system, which highlight how administrative needs typically trump students' overall growth (Booyesen, 2021). To rectify this imbalance, institutions would have to include cultural sensitivity in their residence allocation processes. Intercultural mediation frameworks, staff training, and optional cultural preference surveys could all be used to achieve this. In addition to enhancing students' wellbeing, such changes would further institutional transformation agendas that truly embrace cultural pluralism.

5.2 Behaviour-Centric Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Most of the conflict resolution frameworks that are currently in use in South African student housing concentrate on behavioural issues that are generally thought to interfere with living in a community. Policies and procedures primarily address complaints regarding curfew observance, noise disturbances, cleanliness and hygiene standards, and general interpersonal conflicts resulting from antisocial behaviour (Booyesen, 2021; DHET, 2021). The traditional perspective of residence management, which emphasizes maintaining safety, order, and a minimal standard of living, is consistent with these systems. However, there is a serious omission of cultural and spiritual sources of tension as a result of this behavioural focus. Conflicts that emerge from divergent religious rituals, prayer schedules, or the use of culturally significant substances, such as incense, holy water, or traditional medicines like *muti*, are

seldom explicitly recognised or addressed in institutional policies. This omission leaves students who practise distinct cultural or spiritual customs vulnerable to misunderstanding, stigma, or exclusion.

The data reveal that when such culturally rooted disputes arise, they are often relegated to the status of 'private matters' or considered outside the formal purview of residence management. For example, the use of traditional medicines in shared spaces has sometimes provoked fear or discomfort among peers unfamiliar with these practices, yet institutional response mechanisms are either absent or informal and ad hoc (Maposa, Sefalafala & Mabusela, 2023). This laissez-faire approach effectively delegates the responsibility for conflict resolution to students themselves, who may lack the tools or authority to navigate such complex intercultural tensions. The limited institutional engagement with cultural conflict reflects a broader lack of cultural literacy and sensitivity training among residence management staff. Without specialized training, staff members may interpret spiritual or ritual practices as nonconformist or deviant, which would perpetuate power imbalances and fail to foster an inclusive and respectful environment, claim Mahabeer and Chikoko (2023). Additionally, when there are unclear protocols in place, culturally based conflicts are less likely to be reported or escalated, which results in unresolved interpersonal tension and unofficial exclusionary practices.

Modern conceptions of campus diversity, which support comprehensive strategies that incorporate cultural and spiritual aspects into student support services, stand in stark contrast to this behaviour-centric model (Mukherjee & Govender, 2023). Institutions can better support the values of cultural pluralism and establish safer, more welcoming residential environments by extending conflict resolution frameworks to incorporate intercultural dialogue and culturally sensitive mediation.

5.3 Rhetorical Commitment to Diversity without Operational Clarity

In their strategic and policy documents, a large number of South African post-school educational institutions formally support diversity and inclusion as core values. The necessity of "respecting all cultures" and fostering a "inclusive environment," as well as a dedication to multiculturalism and change, are frequently mentioned in institutional literature (Maposa, Sefalafala & Mabusela, 2023; DHET, 2021). Both national policy requirements and international discussions on social justice and equity in higher education are consistent with these rhetorical claims. However, this official endorsement frequently contrasts sharply with the lack of workable operational measures meant to transform such ideals into lived realities for students, particularly in the context of residence halls. Theoretically, diversity is lauded, but there aren't many practical, tangible strategies that could support genuine cultural integration. For example, there is scant evidence of the use of culturally sensitive room-allocation tools that take into account the spiritual or cultural preferences of students, which could improve cohabitation harmony and reduce the likelihood of conflicts.

Similar to this, modules or sessions centred on cultural literacy, intercultural communication, or the accommodation of various spiritual practices are rarely included in residence orientation programs, which are crucial for establishing expectations and promoting understanding among residents (Mukherjee & Govender, 2023). Due to this omission, both students and residence staff frequently arrive at shared living spaces unprepared to deal with cultural differences in a polite and useful manner. Instead of institutional support structures, student-led, informal systems of managing cultural difference continue to exist because of the disconnect between rhetoric and operationalization. Additionally, it upholds a type of symbolic inclusion that has no tangible effects, undermining the transformative objectives that these institutions claim to pursue (Booyesen, 2021). This disparity is a prime example of what Nkomo and Pillay (2022) refer to as the "performance of diversity," which is used more to demonstrate institutional virtue than to bring about real change. To bridge this gap, institutions must develop robust frameworks that integrate cultural inclusivity into all aspects of residence management, rather than relying solely on declarative statements. Establishing official procedures to support and mediate cultural and spiritual practices in residence settings, training residence staff in intercultural competency, and investing in culturally sensitive policy design are all examples of this.

5.4 Minimal Cultural Literacy Training for Residence Staff

The absence of formalized, structured training programs for residence staff that emphasize cultural literacy, sensitivity, and intercultural mediation is a crucial finding in all South African post-school educational institutions. The task of managing diverse student populations is often taken on by residence managers, assistants, and support staff without proper training or professional development that takes into account the complexities of cultural and religious diversity (Mahabeer & Chikoko, 2023; Booyesen, 2021). Due to a lack of specific training, staff members are not equipped to manage the cultural and spiritual conflicts that can arise in shared living situations. For example, disagreements over religious rituals, the use of sacred substances, or spiritual practices result in ad hoc, informal, or inconsistent responses to tensions that primarily rely on personal judgment rather than official institutional guidelines (Mukherjee & Govender, 2023). This could further solidify unofficial power imbalances in living communities by making students feel even more excluded if their cultural practices are misunderstood or ignored.

Beyond merely settling disputes, residence staff members are essential in creating a welcoming and courteous atmosphere in student housing on a daily basis. If staff members lack adequate intercultural competency, they may unintentionally perpetuate cultural misconceptions or fail to foster an environment that promotes intercultural communication and respect (Mahabeer & Chikoko, 2023). This flaw hinders efforts to create truly inclusive campus environments. Recent research suggests that training in cultural literacy should be included in the development of residence staff. Training modules should cover subjects like recognizing different cultural and spiritual practices, encouraging intercultural empathy, and resolving disputes based on cultural awareness (Maposa, Sefalafala, & Mabusela, 2023). The residence environment must be transformed from a place of possible cultural conflict to one of meaningful intercultural engagement by providing residence staff with these competencies. In conclusion, it is critical that institutions fund thorough cultural literacy and mediation training for their resident staff. In addition to enhancing conflict resolution, these capacity-building programs foster welcoming, encouraging residential communities that support the larger objectives of equity and change in South African higher education.

A particularly illuminating example of the challenges institutions face in addressing deeply rooted cultural conflicts in dorms is cited in a 2022 university newsletter. In this instance, a group of students voiced their displeasure with a roommate who regularly used muti, or traditional medicines, in their shared home. The complainants' spiritual unease and belief that the use of these drugs endangered their personal safety and well-being caused them to suffer severe emotional distress. Despite the seriousness of these concerns, the matter was neither formally escalated to residence management nor settled through official institutional channels. Instead, the dispute was arbitrated by the students themselves, primarily through peer pressure and relocating the student who was using muti to a different room. There was no structured procedure to address the underlying cultural misunderstanding or to promote intercultural communication, and the university administration did not provide any documented follow-up or support.

This case illustrates the institution's reliance on informal, student-led resolutions in the absence of clear frameworks or policies for managing culturally sensitive disputes in shared residences. It highlights the need for proactive, culturally aware mediation strategies and calls attention to a severe lack of institutional accountability. Without these frameworks, students are left to manage complex cultural conflicts on their own, which can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and marginalization and threaten efforts at genuine inclusion and change in the educational environment after school (Maposa, Sefalafala & Mabusela, 2023; Mahabeer & Chikoko, 2023).

6. Discussion

The results of this study show a clear discrepancy between the practical realities of managing residence life and the institutional commitments to diversity. The embodied, spatial, and spiritual aspects of student identity are not given enough attention in South African post-school education institutions' residence allocation and conflict resolution frameworks, despite the fact that these institutions regularly affirm the importance of cultural diversity in policy documents. This gap leads to tensions and informal marginalization as culturally grounded practices, such as the ceremonial use of traditional medicines, prayer routines, or sacred cleansing rituals, are either misunderstood or silently excluded. This institutional oversight reflects a broader systemic tendency to treat residence life as incidental or secondary to academic concerns. However, prior research indicates that the quality of the residential experience directly affects students' emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and ultimately their tenacity and academic achievement (Soudien, 2020; Bunting et al., 2021). More than just a place for students to live, the shared living space is a melting pot where identity negotiation, cultural expression, and social integration take place (Mukherjee & Govender, 2023). Ignoring cultural customs in this private setting could drive students away and jeopardize the objectives of institutional change.

The findings, which are based on the framework of cultural pluralism (Parekh, 2006), emphasize the need for institutions to adopt concrete policies and practices that actively embrace cultural complexity rather than merely acknowledging diversity symbolically. The importance of residence managers recognizing the cultural significance of shared amenities and spatial arrangements is further highlighted by the understanding of the social production of space offered by spatial anthropology (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). Institutional inaction or disdain in this area not only perpetuates power imbalances but also limits opportunities for intercultural respect and communication.

To address these challenges, institutions should consider practical interventions such as:

- Offering optional cultural compatibility surveys during room allocations to better match students with compatible beliefs and practices;
- Providing dedicated intercultural training for residence advisors and support staff to equip them with cultural literacy and conflict mediation skills;
- Developing clear, actionable guidelines that respect diverse spiritual and cultural rituals while maintaining communal harmony.

Such measures would operationalize the ideal of cultural pluralism in the residential setting by proving that educational institutions see culture as a legitimate and necessary part of student life rather than as a secondary issue. Without this shift, the broader goals of inclusion, equity, and transformation in South African higher education cannot be furthered.

7. Conclusion

The relationship between managing shared student residences in South African post-school educational institutions and cultural and spiritual diversity has been critically examined in this article. According to the analysis, the complex realities of cultural coexistence in shared living spaces are largely ignored by current residence allocation and conflict resolution procedures. Because of this, students frequently have to resolve conflicts brought on by different rituals and belief systems without the proper institutional acknowledgement or assistance.

Applying the dual perspectives of spatial anthropology and cultural pluralism, the study emphasizes that living spaces are symbolic spaces where identities are contested, expressed, and reshaped rather than merely being functional requirements. Ignoring these spaces' cultural and spiritual significance runs the risk of sustaining informal exclusion and undermining the goals of institutional transformation.

The results support a more proactive institutional strategy that specifically incorporates inclusivity, cultural literacy, and responsiveness into residence management procedures and policies. This entails creating explicit policies that honour various spiritual practices, improving intercultural training for residence staff, and putting into practice culturally sensitive room allocation techniques.

Finally, this study acknowledges its conceptual scope and encourages future empirical research that directly captures the lived experiences of students across varied institutional contexts. Such research would provide the evidence base needed to design tailored interventions that foster genuine intercultural understanding and cohesion within campus residences, thereby advancing both student well-being and broader institutional transformation goals.

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