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Accessibility over price: tenant preferences, retention and regulatory coverage in Manila's University Belt rental market

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Accessibility over price: tenant preferences, retention and regulatory coverage in Manila's University Belt rental market

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Abstract

Renting has become a durable tenure for young urban Filipinos, yet little is known about how tenants in student-dominated submarkets choose and keep their housing. This study examines tenants in Metro Manila's University Belt (U-Belt) using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design: a stratified survey of 423 tenants across five rental types, followed by 15 in-depth interviews, with host interviews (n = 43) and operator consultations (n = 51) used to contextualize tenant-reported friction. Fifty-four items across eight decision domains were ranked by weighted average. Transportation access ranked first, followed by security, amenities and location, while rental pricing ranked last. Walkability, travel time, high-speed internet, kitchen access and secure entry each drew more than 95% agreement and function as non-negotiables. In-person viewing was near-universal because online listings were considered unreliable, and digital payment was widely preferred alongside persistent demand for cash. The interviews suggest a threshold model of retention: tenants stay while non-negotiable conditions hold and leave when one is violated or a life-stage transition shifts their location needs, often moving within the same building rather than exiting. About half of respondents pay more than the ₱10,000 monthly ceiling of the Philippine Rent Control Act, placing them outside rent regulation. The findings offer a ranked, demand-side account of a Southeast Asian student rental submarket and point to transport, disclosure and regulatory coverage as priorities for operators and policymakers.

Keywords: Rental housing · Student housing · Tenant preferences · Housing choice · Rent control · Philippines

1. Introduction

Renting has become a durable tenure rather than a stopgap for a growing share of urban Filipinos. Property prices have outpaced household incomes, and renting offers the mobility that study and work in the capital demand (Cigaral, 2024; Daily Tribune, 2025). The 2020 Census recorded that

32.6% of households in the National Capital Region rent, the highest share of any region in the country (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2023).

Within Metro Manila, the University Belt (U-Belt) is an unusually concentrated rental submarket. More than 30 higher education institutions sit within a few districts, and the pre-pandemic student population exceeded 360,000 (Manhattan Garden City, n.d.). Demand is cyclical and tied to the academic calendar. Many tenants are renting independently for the first time, often after migrating from the provinces, and they search in a market characterized by informal listings, fragmented information and wide variation in landlord practice (Interaksyon, 2019). Supply ranges from large condominium developments to single-room lessors.

Research on Philippine rental housing has focused mainly on the supply side: valuation, investment returns and regulatory compliance. Much less is known about how tenants weigh competing attributes, how they verify what they are offered, and what makes them stay or leave. International work on student renters (Rugg et al., 2002; Hubbard, 2009) comes largely from high-income housing systems with purpose-built student accommodation and formal letting agents, conditions that do not hold in the U-Belt.

This paper addresses that gap. It asks four questions:

- RQ1. Which housing attributes do U-Belt tenants prioritize, and how do these priorities rank against one another?
- RQ2. How do tenants search for and verify rental options?
- RQ3. How do priorities differ across tenant segments and districts?
- RQ4. What governs tenants' decisions to renew, transfer or exit, and how far does existing rent regulation reach them?

The study makes three contributions. First, it ranks eight decision domains on a common scale, showing that transportation access, not price, dominates choice in this submarket. Second, it proposes a threshold model of tenant retention grounded in interview data, linking residential inertia to satisficing behavior. Third, it shows empirically that roughly half of the sample rents above the coverage ceiling of the Philippine Rent Control Act, a protection gap with direct policy relevance.

2. Literature review

2.1 The Philippine private rental market

Rental housing has become a structurally significant part of Metro Manila's housing system. Beyond the census figures, recent central bank survey evidence reported in the press points to a growing preference for renting over ownership, driven by rising property prices, the need for geographic mobility and the lower upfront cost of renting (Daily Tribune, 2025). Cigaral (2024)

attributes the shift partly to the widening gap between household incomes and residential property values in urban centers where jobs and education are concentrated.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this market sharply but unevenly. The suspension of face-to-face classes and on-site work removed the two main sources of U-Belt demand and sent many students and workers back to their home provinces, leaving dormitories and boarding houses largely vacant through much of 2020 (Thim, 2025). Recovery began in 2021, led by affordable condominiums and units near employment centers, as employers and hybrid workers sought accommodation that reduced commuting (Embudo, 2021). The pandemic therefore did not simply suppress rental demand but redistributed it, strengthening the role of proximity as a location criterion.

Despite its scale, the market remains under-characterized in academic research. Most published work engages with supply-side questions, and the decision-making of tenants, especially young and first-time renters, has received little systematic attention.

2.2 Housing choice and its determinants

The housing choice literature converges on a stable set of determinants: location and accessibility, safety, price and affordability, and the quality of the dwelling and its amenities (Onibokun, 1974; Maclennan & Tu, 1996; Elsinga & Hoekstra, 2005). Boehm (1982) models choice as hierarchical, with households first selecting a tenure or submarket and then trading off attributes within it. Life-cycle accounts add that households adjust their housing when their circumstances change, so that mobility reflects both dissatisfaction and transitions such as entering work or forming a household (Clark & Onaka, 1983).

Student renters occupy a distinctive position within this literature. Their choices are shaped disproportionately by proximity to campus, tight budgets and peer networks, and they show high tolerance for shared arrangements as a cost-management strategy (Rugg et al., 2002). Hubbard (2009) documents how concentrated student demand reshapes neighborhoods and the local housing stock. Most of this evidence comes from the United Kingdom and similar systems. Whether the same ordering of priorities holds in a dense, largely informal Southeast Asian submarket is an open question.

Security is especially salient in the Philippine setting. Reporting on the U-Belt has highlighted fears of theft, harassment and unauthorized building access as factors in students' housing choices (Interaksyon, 2019). Where public safety provision is uneven, the burden of security falls on the building, and features such as guards, CCTV and controlled entry become part of the housing product.

Payment practices are also changing. Survey evidence from other markets indicates that more than half of tenants now pay rent online (PYMNTS, 2024), and e-wallet adoption in the Philippines has accelerated since 2020. Yet cash remains common, particularly where receipts and traceability matter to one or both parties.

2.3 Satisfaction, mobility and residential inertia

Galster (1987) distinguishes satisfaction with the dwelling from satisfaction with the neighborhood and argues that retention reflects a composite judgment across both. Housing economics has long recognized residential inertia: households tend to remain in place unless the gains from moving exceed substantial search and transaction costs (Hanushek & Quigley, 1978; Ioannides & Kan, 1996). Simon's (1955) account of bounded rationality offers a behavioral interpretation. Decision-makers facing costly information search accept the first option that meets an aspiration level rather than seeking an optimum. In a rental market with unreliable listings and high moving costs relative to income, satisficing is a plausible description of how tenants decide to stay.

2.4 The customer journey as an analytical frame

Service research conceptualizes the customer experience as a journey across stages and touchpoints rather than a single transaction (Rawson et al., 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This study uses a five-stage rental journey (awareness, consideration, decision, move-in and living environment) to organize the qualitative analysis. The frame is useful here because tenants' judgments at the living-environment stage feed directly into renewal and exit decisions.

2.5 Rent regulation in the Philippines

The Rent Control Act of 2009, Republic Act (RA) No. 9653, limits annual rent increases for residential units, including boarding houses, dormitories, rooms and bedspaces, that fall below a monthly rent threshold. In Metro Manila the threshold is ₱10,000 (Republic of the Philippines, 2009). The National Human Settlements Board sets the permitted increase periodically: 4% for 2024, 2.3% for 2025 and 1% for 2026, applicable where the tenant is unchanged (National Human Settlements Board [NHSB], 2024). The economic literature is divided on the efficiency of rent control (Arnott, 1995; Malpezzi, 1998), but a prior empirical question is simply whom such regulation reaches. A fixed nominal threshold covers a shrinking share of the market as rents rise. This paper examines that question for the U-Belt.

3. Research design

3.1 Setting and design

The study area comprises the U-Belt districts of Sampaloc, Taft Avenue, Intramuros, Quiapo, Santa Cruz, Santa Mesa and San Miguel. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A quantitative survey identified patterns across the tenant population, and a qualitative interview phase then explained those patterns. This sequencing suits a study that seeks both breadth across rental types and an understanding of the reasoning behind observed preferences (Wipulanusat et al., 2020).

3.2 Survey sample and instrument

The survey targeted tenants currently renting in the U-Belt under long-term private arrangements. Short-term accommodation, government housing, university-managed dormitories and whole-house rentals were excluded. Sampling was stratified by rental type (condominium, dormitory, apartment, condominium-sharing and boarding house) to ensure representation of each segment. The questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms and distributed by email and social media. A pilot with 25 respondents matching the target profile was conducted on 5–6 May 2025, and ambiguous items were revised. Responses were monitored during collection to remove duplicates and incomplete or internally inconsistent entries, yielding 423 valid responses.

The instrument collected demographic and tenancy data (age, occupation, district, origin, rental type, monthly rent and length of stay) and 56 attitudinal items across eight decision domains: rental pricing, payment terms, house rules, amenities, transportation access, security, payment methods and location. Each domain contained seven items. Items were drawn from the housing choice and tenant satisfaction literature reviewed above and checked for content validity before piloting.

Items used a four-point scale without a neutral midpoint. For analysis, responses were reverse-coded (Strongly agree = 1, Agree = 2, Disagree = 3, Strongly disagree = 4), so that **lower weighted averages indicate stronger agreement**. For each item the weighted average is the frequency-weighted mean of these codes; each domain score is the unweighted mean of its item averages. Domains were ranked from lowest (strongest agreement) to highest. Because several items express a preference ("I would prefer…") and others describe the respondent's current unit ("The property has…"), domain scores are interpreted as the strength of endorsement of a domain's attributes rather than as pure importance weights. Percentages in the text report combined agreement (Agree + Strongly agree) unless stated otherwise. Two items (flexibility to modify house rules and desire for more recreational amenities) were excluded because their recorded response totals did not match the sample, leaving 54 items for analysis.

3.3 Qualitative data

Fifteen survey respondents were purposively selected for semi-structured in-depth interviews, prioritizing respondents whose answers reflected notable patterns or outlier behavior and ensuring coverage of rental types (four apartment, three condominium, four condominium-sharing and four dormitory tenants). Interviews explored search behavior, landlord relationships, the move-in experience and renewal intentions. They were conducted in Filipino, English and Taglish, recorded, transcribed and translated by the research team. Participants are identified by codes reflecting rental type (A = apartment, C = condominium, CS = condominium-sharing, D = dormitory).

Transcripts were analyzed thematically through open coding, grouping and interpretive synthesis, with themes organized around the five journey stages. To provide a supply-side check on tenant-reported friction, the study also drew on 43 in-depth interviews with hosts and 51 exploratory

consultations with rental operators, conducted through focus groups and structured calls. Host data were used only to contextualize and corroborate tenant accounts, not as a co-equal sample.

3.4 Validity, reliability and positionality

Several steps strengthened validity and reliability. The instrument underwent content review and piloting, and items that produced inconsistent responses within related clusters were revised. During fieldwork, responses were monitored for duplicates and inconsistent entries. The main validity mechanism was triangulation across three sources: the tenant survey, the tenant interviews and the host-side data. Convergent findings are reported as such, and divergences are noted rather than suppressed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Translations were made by team members fluent in Filipino and prioritized meaning over literal rendering. The research team was familiar with the U-Belt rental market, which informed the study's design. To limit bias, the study used structured instruments, applied the same analytical procedures to all segments and reports the limitations created by the imbalance between segments.

3.5 Ethics

The study followed the principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice set out in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Survey respondents gave consent on the opening page of the questionnaire, and those who declined exited the instrument. Interviewees gave verbal consent and could decline questions or withdraw. No personally identifying data were collected in the survey, and no incentives were offered. All respondents were aged 18 or over.

3.6 Use of generative AI

A generative AI tool (Claude, Anthropic) was used to assist in condensing and restructuring the manuscript, copy-editing, converting references to the journal's style, and recomputing descriptive statistics from the authors' tabulated survey counts. The study design, data collection, interpretation and conclusions are the authors' own. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the manuscript.

4. Findings

4.1 Profile of the sample

Table 1 summarizes the sample. Students account for 361 respondents (85.3%), comprising 337 undergraduates (79.7% of the sample) and 24 postgraduates and board-examination reviewees; 62 respondents (14.7%) are working tenants. Five respondents reported renting as a family household; given their number, they are not analyzed as a separate segment. Most respondents (80.6%) are aged 18–24. Half live in Sampaloc (49.4%) and a quarter on Taft Avenue (24.3%).

The market is migration-driven. Of the 423 respondents, 293 (69.3%) did not originally live in Metro Manila: 249 moved for school and 42 for work. Condominiums are the most common rental type (31.7%), followed by dormitories (22.9%), apartments (18.4%), condominium-sharing (15.8%) and boarding houses (11.1%). Students concentrate in condominiums and dormitories, whereas workers concentrate in apartments and boarding houses. Tenure is relatively stable: 58.7% had lived in their current unit for more than a year.

Table 1. Profile of survey respondents (n = 423)

Variable	Category	n	%
Occupation			
	Students (all)	361	85.3
	of which undergraduate	337	79.7
	Working tenants	62	14.7
Rental type (students/workers)			
	Condominium (123/11)	134	31.7
	Dormitory (94/3)	97	22.9
	Apartment (51/27)	78	18.4
	Condominium-sharing (60/7)	67	15.8
	Boarding house (33/14)	47	11.1
Age			
	18–24	–	80.6
	25–34	–	11.8
	35 and over	–	7.6
District			
	Sampaloc	209	49.4
	Taft Avenue	103	24.3
	Other districts	111	26.2
Origin			
	Outside Metro Manila (moved for school: 249; for work: 42)	293	69.3
	Metro Manila	130	30.7
Total monthly rent			
	₱10,000 or less	205	48.5
	₱10,001–₱20,000	147	34.8
	Above ₱20,000	71	16.8
Length of stay in current unit			
	More than one year	–	58.7
	7–12 months	–	23.6

Variable	Category	n	%
	6 months or less	–	17.7

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. "–" indicates that only percentages were recorded.
Source: Authors' survey

4.2 Tenant archetypes by rental type

Combining survey and interview data, five archetypes summarize how priorities cluster by rental type. *Proximity-driven boarding-house students* are typically first-time renters from low- to middle-income households who share rooms to reduce costs; stable internet, basic kitchen access and closeness to public transport are their non-negotiables, and they value flexibility over guests and curfews. *Convenience-seeking dormitory students* choose furnished, all-inclusive units near campus, search on social media but always verify in person, and weight guards, CCTV and biometric entry highly. *Goal-oriented condominium students*, often provincial migrants who stay two years or more, scrutinize ventilation, utility billing and unit condition during viewings and object to undisclosed fees and inaccurate listings. *Cost-splitting condominium-sharing students* divide rent among two to four occupants to obtain condominium-level amenities near campus at a lower cost per head; for them, the key question is whether the price justifies the shared arrangement. *Budget-conscious working adults*, mostly in apartments, rent near the workplace and prioritize short commutes, low-friction payment and minimal management effort over recreational amenities.

4.3 Ranking of decision domains

Table 2 ranks the eight domains. Transportation access ranks first (1.47), followed by security (1.57), amenities (1.60) and location (1.64). House rules (1.69) and payment terms (1.71) follow, and payment methods (1.77) and rental pricing (1.78) rank last. The spread between domains is narrow, and no significance tests were applied, so adjacent ranks, particularly amenities and location, should not be over-interpreted. The overall ordering is nonetheless clear. Attributes that determine daily access and safety outrank those that determine cost and contractual terms. Interviewees repeatedly named location first when explaining their choice: "For me, it is really the location, because it is right across from the school" (C3). Another had moved after finding a walk of more than 15 minutes to her building a daily burden (C2). A dormitory tenant said that if location became difficult, she would "rather choose walking distance" over other features (D4).

Table 2. Ranking of decision domains by mean weighted average

Rank	Domain	Mean WA	Strongest item (WA)	Weakest item (WA)
1	Transportation access	1.466	Walkability of the area (1.36)	Near a bus or rail station (1.58)
2	Security	1.574	Adequate lighting (1.47)	Low neighborhood crime (1.79)
3	Amenities	1.595	High-speed internet (1.37)	Parking (1.88)
4	Location	1.635	Close to workplace or school	Access to recreational spots

Rank	Domain	Mean WA	Strongest item (WA)	Weakest item (WA)
			(1.44)	(2.05)
5	House rules	1.688	Guests can be accommodated (1.48)	Pets can be accommodated (2.07)
6	Payment terms	1.709	Reminders before due date (1.49)	Quarterly or annual payment option (2.25)
7	Payment methods	1.771	Online payment option (1.50)	Cash payment option (1.98)
8	Rental pricing	1.783	Rent is reasonable for the area (1.47)	Lower rent with fewer amenities (2.15)

Note: Four-point scale reverse-coded (Strongly agree = 1 … Strongly disagree = 4); lower values indicate stronger agreement. Domain score is the unweighted mean of its item averages (seven per domain; six for amenities and house rules). WA = weighted average.
Source: Authors' survey

4.4 The non-negotiable tier

Item-level results (Table 3) show which attributes function as minimum conditions. Walkability (98.1%), acceptable travel time (97.4%), proximity to schools and hospitals (97.2%), travel time as a decision factor (96.7%), high-speed internet (96.7%), secure entry systems (96.0%), adequate lighting (96.0%) and kitchen access (95.7%) all exceed 95% agreement. High-speed internet drew the strongest single endorsement among amenities (66.7% strongly agree) and the lowest dissent (3.3%). Interviewees described connectivity as a precondition for study rather than a convenience. One dormitory tenant described the most basic requirement as "having your own dedicated WiFi connection" (D3). A condominium-sharing tenant identified repeated outages as the one failure that would push her to leave: "if every semester we continue to experience WiFi disconnections" (CS2).

Security was described in layered terms. Interviewees cited guards at building and unit entrances, CCTV on every floor, RFID or card access and biometric entry as decisive features. As one put it, these features exist "at least as a deterrent" (A2). Self-sufficiency within the unit also mattered. A condominium-sharing tenant valued being able to cook "real" meals with induction cookers and an oven, unlike buildings that permit only small appliances.

By contrast, lifestyle features attract weaker endorsement. Easy access to recreational spots (70.0%), pet accommodation (69.3%) and parking (76.1%) have the lowest agreement in their domains. Tenants want value rather than luxury: 90.5% agree that their rent reflects the quality of the property, and 77.1% would pay more for better-quality housing. However, 68.8% would also accept a lower rent with fewer amenities, which suggests a price-sensitive segment willing to trade features for cost.

Table 3. Agreement with selected items

Domain	Item	Agree + SA (%)	SA (%)	WA
Transportation	Walkability of the area is important	98.1	67.4	1.36

Domain	Item	Agree + SA (%)	SA (%)	WA
	Travel time to school or work is acceptable	97.4	64.8	1.39
	Travel time is a major factor in my decision	96.7	64.8	1.41
	Property is near public transportation	95.3	59.8	1.46
Location	Close to important amenities (schools, hospitals)	97.2	57.7	1.46
	Close to my workplace or school	94.6	62.9	1.44
	Easy access to recreational spots	70.0	33.3	2.05
Security	Adequate lighting enhances my sense of security	96.0	57.9	1.47
	Prefer secure entry systems (keycard, intercom)	96.0	57.0	1.49
	Property provides adequate security measures	95.0	50.1	1.56
	Low neighborhood crime rates are important	84.9	39.0	1.79
Amenities	Value high-speed internet	96.7	66.7	1.37
	Kitchen amenities are important	95.7	57.4	1.48
	Laundry facilities are important	90.3	56.0	1.57
	Parking is important	76.1	42.6	1.88
Pricing	Rent reflects the quality of the property	90.5	36.4	1.75
	Willing to pay more for better-quality housing	77.1	27.9	1.99
	Would accept a lower rent with fewer amenities	68.8	24.1	2.15
Payment	Prefer to pay rent monthly	95.0	50.6	1.56
	Prefer an online payment option	94.8	58.6	1.50
	Prefer e-wallets or mobile payment apps	86.8	50.6	1.68
	Comfortable with automated recurring payment	80.4	34.5	1.90
	Prefer a cash payment option	76.1	34.5	1.98
House rules	Ability to accommodate guests is important	94.6	58.9	1.48
	Ability to accommodate pets is important	69.3	33.6	2.07

Note: n = 423. SA = strongly agree; WA = weighted average (lower = stronger agreement).
Source: Authors' survey

4.5 Search and verification

Search is digital, but verification is physical. Online reviews and ratings influence 94.1% of respondents (48.9% strongly agree). Yet 98.4% consider an in-person viewing before deciding (77.8% strongly agree), the highest strong-agreement share of any search behavior. Interviewees explained that photographs are unreliable: "the actual unit looks different from the photos" (CS3). Viewings were used to check utilities, outlets and water, and to judge "whether it feels like home" (C2). Referral networks also substituted for search. One tenant joined a sibling already living in the building, reasoning that "since my family already trusted the building, it felt safer to stay here than to look elsewhere" (CS2).

Operator consultations explain why. Smaller operators, who make up most of the U-Belt supply, reported no standardized photography, unit descriptions or availability checks. Under these conditions online information is structurally unreliable, and the viewing is the only dependable verification mechanism. Operators also identified the time from enquiry to booking confirmation as a major pain point, so search friction is borne by both sides of the market.

4.6 Payment preferences

Tenants value predictability. Monthly payment is preferred by 95.0%, clear due dates by 97.2% and advance reminders by 96.7%, and 88.9% describe their current terms as flexible and convenient. Digital options are widely wanted: 94.8% want an online payment option, 88.7% bank transfer and 86.8% e-wallets. Yet 76.1% also want a cash option, and automated recurring billing drew the most resistance of any payment mode (19.6% disagree). Interviews show that this is a practical rather than an ideological divide. Some preferred bank transfer because "even while lying down on my bed, I can pay my rent with just a few clicks" (A1). Others preferred cash "so that there is a physical receipt" (CS3) or distrusted recurring billing because of missed or failed payments (A2). Operators reported retaining cash primarily for traceability and dispute prevention, which points to the absence of hybrid systems that satisfy both parties rather than to landlord resistance to technology.

4.7 Differences across segments and districts

Segment differences are directional, given the small worker sample. Workers concentrate in apartments (27 of 62) and boarding houses (14 of 62), whereas students concentrate in condominiums (123 of 361) and dormitories (94 of 361). Interviews and open responses suggest that students trade privacy for shared costs, typically sharing with one to three others, and value study spaces and flexible curfews. Workers placed more weight on transport links (64.5% strongly agree that being near public transport matters, against 59.0% of students), on salary-aligned due dates and on cash as a trusted fallback. Students, many of whose rent is paid by parents, were more inclined to value reminders and digital payment. The five family respondents described unit size, noise, proximity to schools and groceries, and security personnel as their main concerns. These observations are offered only as hypotheses for further study.

District differences are clearer (Table 4). Sampaloc tenants (n = 209) were more likely than Taft tenants (n = 103) to feel secure in their neighborhood (93.3% vs 89.3%). They were also more likely to agree that their neighborhood has low crime rates (86.6% vs 77.7%). These are perceptions rather than measured crime rates; Taft's exposure to a major arterial road and heavy foot traffic may explain the difference. Taft tenants were more likely to report that their property had the amenities they needed (99.0% vs 89.5%) and that they were near public transport (100.0% vs 91.9%). Sampaloc tenants showed a stronger preference for outdoor recreational space (93.8% vs 86.4%).

Table 4. Agreement with selected items by district (%)

Item	Taft Avenue (n = 103)	Sampaloc (n = 209)
Security		
I feel secure living in this neighborhood	89.3	93.3
Property provides adequate security measures	97.1	95.7
Would feel safer with more security staff or 24/7 surveillance	98.1	94.3
Neighborhood has low crime rates	77.7	86.6
Prefer secure entry systems	99.0	96.7
Amenities and price		
Property has the amenities I need	99.0	89.5
Would prefer a lower rent with fewer amenities	74.8	65.1
Prefer outdoor recreational space	86.4	93.8
Location provides easy access to recreational amenities	76.7	63.6
Transportation		
Property is near public transportation	100.0	91.9
Transportation time to school or work matters	98.1	96.2
Prefer a central area with access to transport and services	94.2	90.9

Note: Values are Agree + Strongly agree as a percentage of respondents in each district. Crime and safety items measure perceptions, not recorded crime.
Source: Authors' survey

4.8 Rent levels, increases and regulatory coverage

Monthly rents cluster in the middle of the distribution: 16.3% pay ₱7,001–₱10,000, 15.4% pay ₱10,001–₱15,000 and 19.4% pay ₱15,001–₱20,000, the single largest band. In total, 51.5% pay more than ₱10,000 per month. Because RA 9653 applies in Metro Manila only to units renting at ₱10,000 or less, roughly half of the sample falls outside rent regulation altogether. The share may be smaller for tenants in shared units if rent is set per bedspace rather than per unit, but the pattern is clear for condominium and apartment tenants.

Interviewees described rent increases during their tenancy. One reported an increase from ₱7,250 to ₱7,500 (3.4%), and another from ₱4,525 to ₱6,175 (36.5%). Both units fall below the ₱10,000 threshold, and both tenants stayed, so both increases should have been subject to the statutory cap. The larger increase far exceeds any cap set for recent years (4% for 2024, 2.3% for 2025 and 1% for 2026). Whether the smaller one complied depends on when it took effect. In both cases tenants accepted the increase because the unit still offered acceptable value. One explained that "even with the rent increase, I think it is still worth it because everything I need in a dorm is already there" (D1). Tenants also reported undisclosed charges, such as being charged "per hole" for wall fixtures (A1), which fall outside the Act's provisions but erode perceived value.

4.9 External pressures: the pandemic and transit development

Two external influences shape this demand. The first is the legacy of the pandemic. With most respondents originating outside Metro Manila, the shift to remote learning during 2020–2021

emptied much of the U-Belt stock, and the subsequent recovery reinforced the role of proximity as the dominant location criterion (Embudo, 2021; Thim, 2025). Hybrid study and work arrangements also explain why connectivity has become a non-negotiable. The second is transit development. One interviewee planned to relocate once a rail extension to her home province was completed, explaining that "the main reason I moved is the commute". A single account cannot support a projection, but because so many tenants rent in the U-Belt to solve a commuting problem, improvements in interprovincial and intra-city transit could reduce the need for city-based accommodation. This is a medium-term demand-side risk that existing market analyzes have not addressed.

4.10 Post-rental behavior: a threshold model of retention

The interviews suggest that renewal reflects sufficiency rather than delight. Tenants described staying because the unit met their requirements, existing problems were tolerable, and the disruption of moving outweighed the likely gain from searching. One interviewee noted two problems with her unit, neither severe enough to override the fact that her non-negotiables were met. Another renewed despite dissatisfaction and a higher rent because no comparable alternative was available at the time. She transferred immediately once a cheaper unit opened in the same building, even though the unit's characteristics were unchanged.

Two exit conditions recurred. The first is the violation of a non-negotiable: a shared bathroom, cooking restrictions and a long walk to campus combined to make one unit untenable, and an operator's two-occupant cap forced another tenant to move when a third roommate joined. The second is life-stage transition, especially the shift to on-the-job training in the final year of study, which moves a tenant's anchor point from campus to workplace. Several tenants planned to leave after graduation despite being satisfied.

The 15 interviewees fall into four groups: stable renters who plan to renew (5); intra-property movers who transferred, or plan to transfer, to another unit in the same building (6); inter-property movers who left, or plan to leave, the building because of unresolved problems, including location (3); and one outlier. The intra-property group is notable. When dissatisfaction is specific to a unit rather than to the building, tenants retain loyalty to the building's location, management and environment and move within it.

5. Discussion

The ranking in Table 2 places transportation access above every other domain and rental pricing last. This does not mean price is unimportant. Respondents are budget-constrained, and most pay within a narrow band. It means that within the set of units a tenant can afford, access determines which one is chosen. The pattern is consistent with a hierarchical choice process (Boehm, 1982) in which budget defines the feasible set and accessibility then drives selection. It also fits the migrant character of the sample. For the 69.3% who came from outside Metro Manila, a U-Belt

rental is primarily a commute solution, and its value depends on time saved and reliability of access.

The near-universal agreement on internet access, kitchen facilities, secure entry and walkability suggests a two-tier structure of attributes. A non-negotiable tier sets the minimum conditions under which a unit is considered at all. A discretionary tier of lifestyle amenities, such as recreational facilities, parking and pet policies, differentiates units only once the first tier is satisfied. The reclassification of broadband from amenity to non-negotiable is particularly clear: it attracted the lowest dissent of any amenity and was the one failure interviewees named as sufficient to trigger a move.

The search findings point to an information problem. Tenants consult online reviews but do not trust listings, so the in-person viewing remains essential. The 90.5% agreement that rent reflects quality is consistent with price serving as a quality signal where unit characteristics cannot be verified remotely. Standardized disclosure would reduce search costs for tenants and vacancy periods for operators, both of which the host data identify as significant.

The threshold model extends the residential inertia literature (Hanushek & Quigley, 1978; Ioannides & Kan, 1996) to a young, mobile rental population. U-Belt tenants do not appear to optimize continuously. They satisfice (Simon, 1955), staying until a non-negotiable is violated or a life-stage transition changes their location needs (Clark & Onaka, 1983). Satisfaction in this setting is better understood as the absence of a sufficient reason to leave than as a positive state. Intra-property mobility suggests that building-level and unit-level satisfaction are separable, consistent with Galster's (1987) distinction between dwelling and neighborhood satisfaction. Operators with a varied inventory can retain tenants who would otherwise exit.

The segment and district results qualify these general patterns without overturning them. Workers' concentration in apartments and their stronger emphasis on transport links are consistent with a location anchor that shifts from campus to workplace over the life course. The same shift drives the life-stage exits observed in the interviews. District differences show that perceived safety and amenity provision vary within a small area. Sampaloc's residential streets around its universities are associated with higher perceived safety, whereas tenants on Taft Avenue report better amenities and transport access but lower perceived safety. For operators and planners, the U-Belt should therefore be treated as a set of micro-markets rather than a single submarket.

Finally, the rent distribution reveals a structural protection gap. RA 9653's ₱10,000 ceiling for Metro Manila excludes the modal U-Belt rent band. The population most exposed to rent volatility — young, largely migrant and with limited bargaining power — is therefore largely outside the reach of the principal rent regulation instrument. The 36.5% increase reported for a covered unit indicates that compliance cannot be assumed even within coverage. Debates on whether rent control is efficient (Arnott, 1995; Malpezzi, 1998) should thus be complemented by attention to whom it actually covers.

6. Implications

For operators, the results suggest that retention depends more on reliably maintaining the non-negotiable tier than on adding lifestyle amenities. Reliable internet, functional kitchens, layered security and transparent fees protect occupancy more effectively than gyms or pools. Operators with several units should offer in-building transfers, since tenants dissatisfied with a unit often remain loyal to the building. Hybrid payment systems that combine digital convenience with a traceable receipt would meet the needs of both cash-preferring and digital-preferring tenants.

For listing platforms, standardized listing fields covering rent, deposit, advance, utility billing basis, internet provision and house rules, together with verified photographs, would address the information gap that makes viewings indispensable.

For policymakers, three implications follow. First, the RA 9653 coverage threshold should be reviewed and, ideally, indexed to rents or prices; the U-Belt data indicate that the current ceiling excludes a large share of student tenants. Second, minimum written disclosure should be required in student-dense corridors regardless of rent level, including internet provision and the basis for utility charges. Third, local government units and higher education institutions could support a student housing registry and an off-campus housing advisory function, using the ranked attributes as a planning input. Transport investment also matters. The dominance of accessibility implies that improved transit, including interprovincial links, may reduce demand for U-Belt rentals over the medium term, a demand-side risk for operators and a planning consideration for local authorities.

7. Limitations and future research

The sample is dominated by students (85.3%), so findings for workers are directional and families are not analyzed separately. Recruitment through online channels may under-represent tenants who search and pay offline. Domain scores are descriptive weighted averages without inferential testing, and some domains mix preference items with assessments of the current unit. District comparisons rely on perceptions, not recorded crime or service data. The rent distribution records total monthly rent, which may overstate the share above the regulatory ceiling for tenants who pay per bedspace. The qualitative typology rests on 15 interviews.

Future research should validate the instrument psychometrically, test whether domain rankings differ significantly, and examine the non-negotiable tier using discrete choice methods. Larger samples of working and family tenants, linkage of perceived safety to official crime statistics, and a quantitative test of the retention typology would strengthen the evidence. The effect of new transit links on U-Belt rental demand also merits longitudinal study.

8. Conclusion

Rental choice in Manila's University Belt is governed by accessibility and minimum conditions rather than by price or luxury. Tenants select, within their budget, the unit that minimizes the

friction of daily life: the shortest commute, reliable connectivity, a functional kitchen and credible security. They verify in person because listings cannot be trusted. They stay until something non-negotiable breaks or their life changes. Many of them also rent above the threshold at which the country's principal rent regulation applies. Addressing transport, disclosure and regulatory coverage, rather than housing supply alone, offers the clearest route to improving outcomes in this submarket.

Declarations

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Data availability. The survey and interview data are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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