

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Identity

An International Journal of Theory and Research

ISSN: 1528-3488 (Print) 1532-706X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/hidn20

"Knowing My Way around" – The Role of Urban Spaces for Migrant Identity Content and Sense of Belonging in Germany

Gesa Solveig Duden, Julia Reiter, Christina Bauer, Constanze Haslinger, Melanie Mroz & Anette Rohmann

To cite this article: Gesa Solveig Duden, Julia Reiter, Christina Bauer, Constanze Haslinger, Melanie Mroz & Anette Rohmann (2025) "Knowing My Way around" – The Role of Urban Spaces for Migrant Identity Content and Sense of Belonging in Germany, Identity, 25:1, 75-96, DOI: 10.1080/15283488.2024.2330909

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2330909

© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

View supplementary material

Published online: 22 Mar 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 2835

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=hidn20

IDENTITY
2025, VOL. 25, NO. 1, 75–96
https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2330909

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REGISTERED REPORT

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

"Knowing My Way around" – The Role of Urban Spaces for Migrant Identity Content and Sense of Belonging in Germany

Gesa Solveig Duden[a], Julia Reiter[b], Christina Bauer[b], Constanze Haslinger[b], Melanie Mroz[a], and Anette Rohmann[a]

[a]Department of Community Psychology, FernUniversität in Hagen, Hagen, Germany; [b]Department of Occupational, Economic, and Social Psychology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Sense of belonging (SoB) and identity content have been studied focusing on social relations, but, as we suggest, might also involve a spatial dimension. The present project set out to better understand the relationship between space, SoB and identity content in the context of relocation. The research consisted of qualitative semi-structured and go-along interviews with 36 external migrants who live in four different German cities: Berlin, Bremen, Leipzig or Stuttgart. Using Thematic Analysis four themes were developed: Spaces to stand out and fit in, spaces of being oneself, spaces of well-being and spaces of familiarity. Results indicate that certain spaces, such as all-white or discriminatory spaces stimulate "foreigner"-identity content and evoke feelings of non-belonging. Other spaces, such as blue-green, aesthetic, familiar concept or multicultural spaces allow participants to experience identity continuity and develop SoB. Furthermore, results show two sides of being perceived in public spaces, and the importance not only of positive daily interactions, but of immersing oneself passively into social life, of blending in and of celebrating one's culture. Results are discussed with a special focus on the role of "nodding encounters" and urban blue green spaces.

KEYWORDS

Sense of belonging; social identity; urban spaces; feeling at home

Urban local spaces are relevant objects of attachment for people (Lewicka, 2011), as well as settings for social cohesion between ethnically, culturally and socially diverse groups (Kohlbacher et al., 2015). However, little is known about how identities are negotiated in these increasingly diverse local spaces. In 2020, out of a global population of roughly 8 billion, approximately 281 million individuals were international migrants (IOM, 2022), with a significant majority relocating to urban centers (OECD, 2020). Research has identified interdependencies between urban life and mental health for which the reasons are not yet fully understood (Adli et al., 2017). As the population of urban centers is expected to continue to increase (OECD, 2020) there is an emergent need to identify the driving factors that impact peoples' mental well-being in cities. One such candidate factor, namely lack of sense of belonging (SoB), is particularly strong in migrants (Allen et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2017; Duden et al., 2021) and has intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic (Rothman et al., 2020).

SoB is defined as the subjective feeling of a deep connection with social groups, physical places, individual and collective experiences (Allen et al., 2021). There are multiple levels of SoB, from the home (Walsh, 2011) and the neighborhood (Young et al., 2004) to the nation state (Westwood & Phizacklea, 2000). SoB has been studied focusing on social relations but might also involve a spatial

CONTACT Gesa Solveig Duden gesa.duden@fernuni-hagen.de LG Community Psychology, FernUniversität in Hagen, Universitätsstraße 47, Hagen 58097, Germany

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2330909

© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

dimension (Allen et al., 2021). Numerous factors can significantly influence an individual's SoB, encompassing people, experiences, objects, and their intricate interplay with culture, personality, perceptions, and identity (Allen et al., 2021).

We define "identity" adopting Galliher et al. (2017) multilevel model, which describes identity as a contextualized and integrated sense of self, encompassing various facets. This model explores different levels of identity content, including culture, social roles, domains, and everyday experiences. Unlike the focus of Umaña-Taylor and the Racial Identity in the 21st Century Study Group (2014) on attitudes and beliefs related to ethnic-racial group membership during adolescence and young adulthood, Galliher et al.'s framework provides a comprehensive view that encompasses diverse identity domains. Both models acknowledge identity's dynamic, context-dependent nature, but differ in scope. We choose Galliher et al.'s model due to our interest in exploring identity content beyond ethnicity and race. "Identity content" is the "what of identity" – what topics do individuals contemplate when they reflect on who they are (McLean et al., 2016). Identity content is strongly connected to circumstances, situations, and domains (McLean et al., 2016), but also to the spaces people frequent. For example, specific spaces might activate specific facets of our identity content – in a football stadium, the topic of supporting a specific team might be the most prominent "what" of our identity, while sitting in a library, we might be more concerned with our academic identity content (Quassoli & Dimitriadis, 2019). Our study focuses on everyday experiences within specific urban spaces, offering insights into the intersections of identity levels within individuals at the micro-level content (Galliher et al., 2017).

The interconnectedness between SoB, identity and space becomes apparent in the definition of psychological home as *SoB in which self-identity is bound to aparticular place* (Sigmon et al., 2002). Home can be considered a space to which people are attached and attach emotional meanings that link to their personal continuity (Sigmon et al., 2002). However, home is not a static object; it is built through alterations in an ongoing *making* process (Bilecen, 2017). This engagement with a home happens through *homemaking practices*, which include a wide array of mundane activities in everyday life (Bilecen, 2017) from the meaningful positioning of material objects to the building of community-based institutions (e.g., around faith; Walsh, 2011). In this way, spaces are influenced by people's identities, by their particular way of personalizing and using spaces in order to communicate who they are (Hauge, 2007). An individual's interaction with the material space might thus be a manifestation of their identity (Sigmon et al., 2002). In turn, active engagement in the surroundings might shape one's perception of both the self and the space (Speller et al., 2002).

While there is this clear evidence for a contextual nature of identity development (McLean et al., 2016), to date, we have only limited understanding of how local spaces and our engagement with these spaces relate to identity content. Social identity theory has traditionally considered place a neutral context, a social marker, or a symbol of an ideology (Hauge, 2007). However, many social identities actually incorporate a spatial dimension (Hopkins & Dixon, 2006). Certainly, national identities are inherently spatial, bounded by political borders. Religious identities can also exhibit spatial dimensions, as seen in pilgrimages to specific locations as integral aspects of religious rituals (Hopkins & Dixon, 2006). There have been attempts to create space for "place" in identity models (Speller et al., 2002), resulting in concepts such as place identity (Proshansky, 1978) or place attachment (Altman & Low, 1992). However, "studies on people-place-relationships seem to be stuck in definitional questions and attempts to fit together various place-related concepts" (Lewicka, 2011, p. 208).

The present study proposes that space is a vital component of an individual's identity content, as locations can be grounds for activating certain identity content and provide a sense of security and belonging or be challenging by testing one's physical and psychological boundaries. We are not interested in how strongly people identify with specific spaces, but rather in how specific spaces begin to form part of identity content and provide means for SoB. Thus, we do not perceive space as a category of identity next to social class, family or gender (Hauge, 2007). We rather align with the view of Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) that the different dimensions of identity will interact with place-related implications.

Since there have been few attempts to explore the relationship between SoB, identity and spatial features or aesthetics (Lewicka, 2011), it is not clear in which ways a concrete physical context forms part of the identity content. Research in the area of place attachment and identity has focused on the differences between groups of individuals rather than investigating the specific physical features of spaces relevant to the attachment (Lewicka, 2011). Lewicka (2011, p. 222) states: "we know relatively much about who are the attached people, [...] but relatively little about which places have the highest 'attachment potential'." However, specific physical elements might be relevant for SoB – for instance, SoB might develop in spaces that facilitate interactions (Hankela, 2020). Additionally, certain spaces might decrease SoB by being connected to social exclusion, discrimination, or processes of "Othering" (Hankela, 2020), i.e., the processes of marking and naming people who are perceived as different from ourselves (Canales, 2000). Independently of the social dimension, there also seems to be a relation between feeling connected to a space and its material features (Kohlbacher et al., 2015), such as its architectural environment (Mazumdar et al., 2000) or familiar physical elements (Cheng & Kuo, 2015). Since we might overlook important aspects of the function of space if we only see it as a social category (Speller et al., 2002), the present study aims to integrate a spatial dimension that goes beyond the social aspects into the study of SoB.

When looking at SoB and identity content as they relate to specific urban spaces, it seems particularly relevant and insightful to research migrants' experiences in urbanity. Migration is a disruptive life event making it likely for autobiographical reasoning to occur, i.e., reflecting on past experiences to make sense of the current self (e.g., Thorne et al., 2004). Migration holds the potential to severely impact the continuity in people's identities (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000), as well as their SoB (Allen et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2017; Duden et al., 2021). If someone leaves their origin by means of relocation in the physical sense (on the outside), the familiar sense of identity (on the inside) can be lost or changed (Goulahsen, 2017). Furthermore, recently arrived migrants often do not have local networks yet and begin to create connections to specific spaces ("discovered place attachment" Lewicka, 2011, 2013). Furthermore, moving to a new country often makes the cultural, national or ethnic contents of identity more prominent (Quassoli & Dimitriadis, 2019). If both physical settings and individuals change, then it might be assumed that the identity content related to space is changing as well. These processes provide a unique opportunity to look at the specificities of local urban spaces sought out by individuals in order to create SoB.

Focusing on migrants in urban SoB research is also important due to their heightened vulnerability to mental health issues (Bhugra, 2004); migrants' documented high rates of mental disorders (Patel et al., 2017) are often linked to increased social isolation (Chen et al., 2017; Duden et al., 2021). Additionally, migrants' SoB in a host city serves as a significant mediator in relationships between social integration and life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2017) and directly impacts their psychological well-being (Young et al., 2004). To support migrants' well-being in urban settings, it thus seems essential to examine their SoB in specific urban spaces.

In sum, while the role of space for SoB and identity content has been highlighted, so far there has been little research on how specific local urban spaces and their particularities relate to these aspects of human lives (Allen et al., 2021; Lewicka, 2011). The present research project sets out to close this gap, by aiming to better understand how local urban spaces shape belonging and identity content in the context of relocation. In doing so, we ask the following research questions (RQ):

(1) How do migrants experience their identities and SoB in specific local urban spaces?
   (a) In which ways does specific identity content, i.e., specific topics related to their identity, become prominent in specific spaces?
   (b) How are certain spaces experienced to evoke or diminish SoB?
(2) How are specific local urban spaces and social interactions in these spaces connected to identities and SoB?

Methods

The project uses qualitative methods of inquiry, as we aim to provide a deep understanding of the meanings that participants place on spaces, practices, and relationships in the context of migration, recognizing the value of participants' unique viewpoints. Thus, we approached our study from a contextualist perspective, assuming a truth that can, at least partially, be accessed through language (Madill et al., 2000). Ethical approval was obtained for this study by the ethics committee of the University of Hagen [FernUniversitaet in Hagen]. Informed signed consent was obtained from participants.

Procedure

The research consists of semi-structured go-along interviews (i.e., interviews conducted while the researcher accompanies a participant walking through their familiar environments; Carpiano, 2009), complemented with on-site one-setting and virtual interviews and ethnographic field observation to identify and describe relevant urban spaces, activities and interactions. Interviews lasted 38 to 125 minutes, with an average of 72 minutes (see Table 1). We asked participants to determine a location in the city that they make use of frequently and, starting from there, to lead the way during the interview (see Figure 1). Questions included the reasons for choosing the locations as well as personal significance of and feelings about them. The aim was to obtain contextually rich data about how participants experience their local urban worlds (Carpiano, 2009) and the effects these experiences have on their identity content and SoB.

Setting

Interviews were conducted from September 2022 to April 2023 in four German cities (Berlin, Bremen, Leipzig, Stuttgart) chosen as specific examples of the various German regions that have diverse migrant patterns and population compositions (Koopmans, 2004). For instance, the experience of being a migrant might be considerably different in Leipzig with 16% of the population having a migration background[1] (Stadt Leipzig, 2020), compared to 38% in Bremen (BPB [Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung], 2022). Bremen (Northwest), Leipzig (East), and Stuttgart (Southwest) were selected as medium-sized cities from different regions with comparable population sizes. The German capital Berlin was chosen as a specific case to also include a large-sized city that has been classified as multicultural (Kratke, 2001). By choosing these different research settings, the project aimed to cover a range of potential different contexts and experiences.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants and interview characteristics.

Variable	Category	Frequency ($N = 36$)	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Age (yrs.)			35.17	7.26	25	63
Gender	Women	19				
	Men	17				
Duration of Stay	Time in Germany (yrs.)		8.51	7.52	0.4	37
	Time in city (yrs.)		6.57	5.49	0.4	23
Interview Duration (min.)			71.83	17.77	38	125
Place of Residence	Leipzig	13				
	Berlin	9				
	Bremen	6				
	Stuttgart	8				
Interview Type	Go Along	20				
	Face-to-face	5				
	Online	11				
Interview Language	English	21				
	German	11				
	Portuguese	4				

Table 2. Comprehensive overview of socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

Codename	Age (yrs.)	Gender	City	Education	Country of Origin	Residence Status	Time in Germany (yrs.)	Time in City (yrs.)
Tanupa	37	M	Leipzig	A-Levels	Bolivia	Citizenship	10	10
Timothy	32	M	Leipzig	MA	Nigeria	Citizenship	10	4
Hana	38	W	Leipzig	Ph.D.	Korea	PR	20	4
Emma	28	W	Leipzig	MA	France	EU	5	5
Maria	30	W	Leipzig	MA	Portugal	EU	7	6
Carlos	34	M	Leipzig	MA	Mexico	Work Visa	7	6
Michael	30	M	Leipzig	BA	USA	Work Visa	8	8
Rafael	51	M	Leipzig	BA	Venezuela	RP	3	3
Nate	40	M	Leipzig	BA	Nigeria	PR	11	11
Onyx	25	M	Leipzig	OT	Togo	PR	8	2.5
Flower	28	W	Leipzig	MA	Greece	EU	3	3
Lemon	28	W	Leipzig	MA	Syria	Nationality	9	9
Oumar	26	M	Leipzig	Elementary	Guinea	TV	8	8
Klara	36	W	Berlin	BA	Ukraine	Citizenship	18	16
Sherin	41	W	Berlin	A-Levels	Iran	Citizenship	37	23
Sonia	35	W	Berlin	Ph.D.	Belgium	EU	12	12
Cathy	37	W	Berlin	MA	China	PR	7	7
André	42	M	Berlin	BA	Brazil	EU	5	5
Eliel	30	M	Berlin	MA	Argentina	Citizenship	4	4
Alex	30	M	Berlin	A-Levels	USA	RP	5	5
Tiger	31	M	Berlin	MA	Colombia	Work Visa	7	6
Liloco	38	W	Berlin	BA	Colombia	Blue Card	0.4	0.4
Ryan	34	M	Bremen	BA	Brazil	Citizenship	10	10
Yeleppa	34	M	Bremen	MA	Turkey	PR	10	3
Sara	47	W	Bremen	Diploma	Iran	Citizenship	20	20
Bob	41	M	Bremen	BA	USA	RP	6.5	3.5
Paula	37	W	Bremen	MA	Brazil	RP	1.5	1.5
Gigi	28	W	Bremen	MA	Italy	EU	0.5	0.5
Kassy	36	W	Stuttgart	BA	USA	Blue Card	1.5	1
Thomas	32	M	Stuttgart	BA	USA	Blue Card	1	1
Sofia	34	W	Stuttgart	Ph.D.	Macedonia	TV	1	1
Brian	31	M	Stuttgart	MA	Ireland	EU	6	4
Indogerman	35	W	Stuttgart	BA	India	PR	4	4
Catherine	34	W	Stuttgart	MA	Singapore	PR	3	3
Eagle	63	W	Stuttgart	A-Levels	USA	PR	26	19
Mary	33	W	Stuttgart	MA	Indian	PR	11	7

M = Man; W = Woman BA= Bachelor's degree; MA= Master's degree; OT = Occupational Training; PR = Permanent Residence; RP = Residence Permit; TV = Temporary Visa.

Sample and recruitment

The sample consisted of external migrants who have moved to one of the four cities from another country, aged between 25 and 65 years (see Table 2). We chose this age range as this age group is often balancing family responsibilities and career demands within various spaces. Focusing on this group allows us to delve into the multi-facetted experiences that may differ significantly from those of younger and older participants. We only included migrants with a minimum stay of four months in Germany, as our goal was to capture migrants' daily life experiences and routines rather than the challenges of the immediate first adjusting to a new country. We defined no maximum duration of stay, nor any restrictions on country of origin. However, a fluency in either English, French, German, Portuguese or Spanish was required as the interviews were conducted in either one of these languages.

Participants were recruited in migration-themed groups on social media and via snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). There were no strict sample size requirements, but we set a maximum number of 15 participants per city to keep the complete sample in a realistic frame for analysis. The sampling strategy included aspects of "theoretical sampling," more specifically of "maximal contrasts" and "minimal contrasts." For maximal contrasts, participants were recruited one after the other aiming to identify the next potential participant as one that differs strongly from the previous participant on dimensions such as country of origin, profession, or family structure. The objective of this strategy was

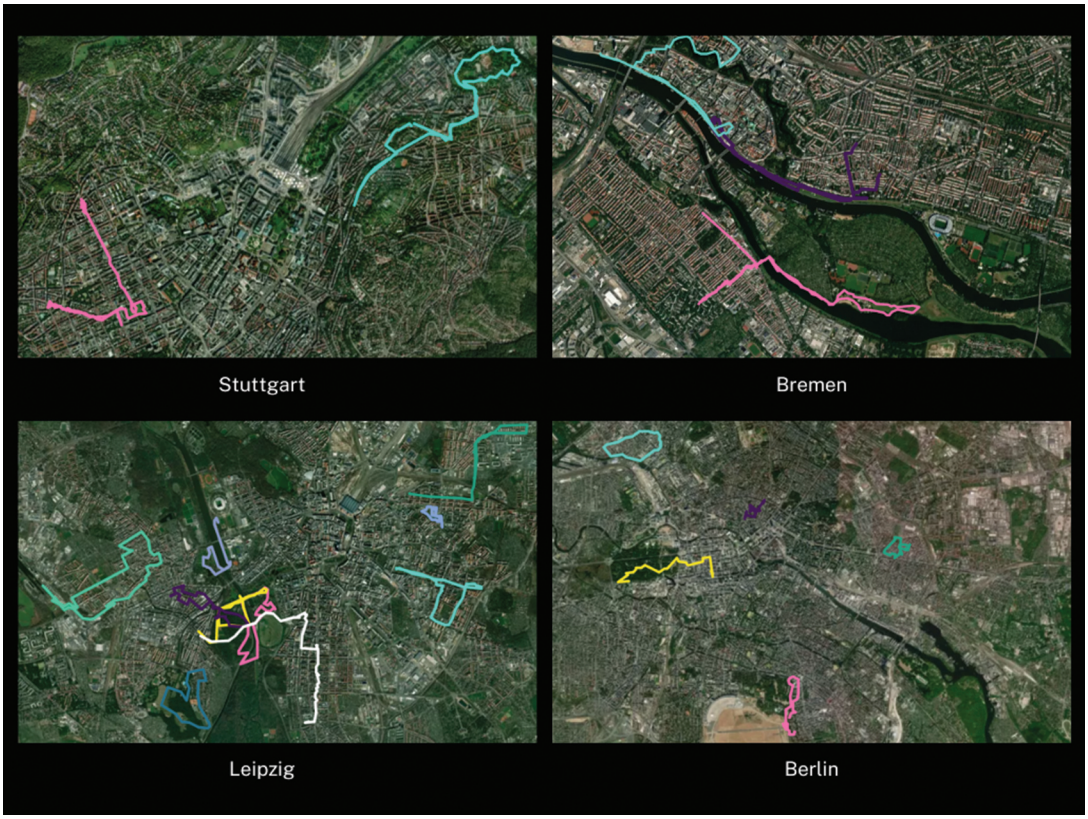


Figure 1. Maps of the GPS tracks of the go-along interviews in Stuttgart, Bremen, Leipzig, and Berlin. Description: The figure shows the walking paths undertaken by the participants and researcher. In Leipzig it is notable that most of the paths circulate in a park area, in Bremen most of the paths follow the river "Weser."

to achieve greater conceptually relevant heterogeneity and irritate themes that were already created in the ongoing data analysis. In addition, minimal contrasts, i.e. selecting cases that are structurally similar, was used for specification of themes.

Materials

The semi-structured interview guide included four main topics: definition of home, urban spaces of home, urban spaces of belonging, and factors of belonging. Each topic included various conversational stimuli based on our research questions such as "What comes to mind when you think about 'home'?," "Do you feel like part of the city? If yes, where particularly?." We did not explicitly ask participants about their identities to avoid guiding their thinking onto an abstract level and to instead keep them focused on spaces. Consequently, it was the analytic challenge to deduce themes related to identity content in connection with the urban spaces. The English interview topic guide was translated and back-translated (Brislin, 1970) to French, German, Portuguese and Spanish with the help of people native in the respective language. Due to the fluid nature of go-along interviews, the semi-structured questions were heavily supplemented with spontaneous comments on and stories about surrounding spaces. The go-along interview paths were tracked using software "Geo-Tracker." Photos of spaces pointed out by the participants as well as ethnographic field observations related to those spaces were taken by the researcher. A field journal was kept to reflect upon the researchers' own assumptions and impressions prior, during and after each interview. Finally, a short demographic questionnaire was administered.

Reflexivity and establishing trustworthiness

The interviewers were of German, German-Polish and Austrian origin. The position as white women may impact the extent to which participants felt at ease to articulate their perspectives. However, the main researcher has lived in various countries and is familiar with diverse cultural styles of interaction and is trained in creating a comfortable interview atmosphere. In reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) researchers' subjectivity is not perceived as a problematic issue that needs to be controlled, as the approach highlights "the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as analytic resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 3). In the present study, researchers made use of reflexive journaling during the data collection and analysis. This method encourages the researcher to question themselves upon expectations and practices in an ongoing process (Clarke & Braun, 2021). In addition, we aimed to further establish trustworthiness in our study through the following strategies:

(1) Triangulation: By using multiple sources of data, we aimed to corroborate our findings. In addition to go-along interviews, we use face-to-face and virtual interviews, GPS data, observation notes, and photos.
(2) Member checking: We shared the transcripts, as well as our findings with the participants to confirm or refute our interpretations. This can help ensure that our findings accurately reflect the perspectives and experiences of the participants (Nowell et al., 2017).
(3) Peer debriefing: We worked in a team to collect and analyze data, as well as to produce the final report. By including multiple perspectives, the subjectivity of researchers – which can be a source for research (Braun & Clarke, 2021) – can be reflected upon in analyses.
(4) Thorough documentation: We maintained detailed records of the research process, including any decisions made during data collection and analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

Analysis

Data were analyzed using an inductive, reflexive TA approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). TA is a qualitative research method that involves analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This approach enabled us to generate the key themes in the data related to our research questions. We chose to use TA, as it fits the contextualist perspective we take on in our study (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Madill et al., 2000). Furthermore, TA can be used for the type of research questions we ask, i.e., experiential questions as well as questions focusing on influencing factors (Clarke & Braun, 2021).

All audio-recorded material was transcribed in the original language. Researchers familiarized themselves with the data by in-depth reading of the transcripts. The complete dataset was coded, using the qualitative analytical software MAXQDA (VERBI-Software, 2021). While the transcripts remained in their original language, codes were formulated in English. A back-translation approach ensured the appropriate capturing of meaning by the English label (Brislin, 1970). While not mandatory for reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), our approach involved a team effort. Five researchers collaborated in conducting the interviews and in the analytical procedure, holding regular analytical meetings to manage the data volume and enhance interpretative depth. We used open coding, no pre-set codes and coded only the segments of data that were relevant to our research questions. Codes refer to the most basic unit of data that carry meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2021). Codes were organized into subthemes and themes. This involved comparing and contrasting codes across participants and identifying patterns that were common or unique to certain participants or spaces. In our approach themes represent the third level of analysis, whereas the subthemes form the second level – being situated within themes, grouping a number of codes together (see Figure 2, adapted from Duden et al., 2021). Tentative initial themes, defined as meaningful and coherent patterns relevant to the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2021) were developed across cases. Tentative themes were reviewed and refined by writing short synopsis of every theme and naming them. Finally, the analytic narrative was

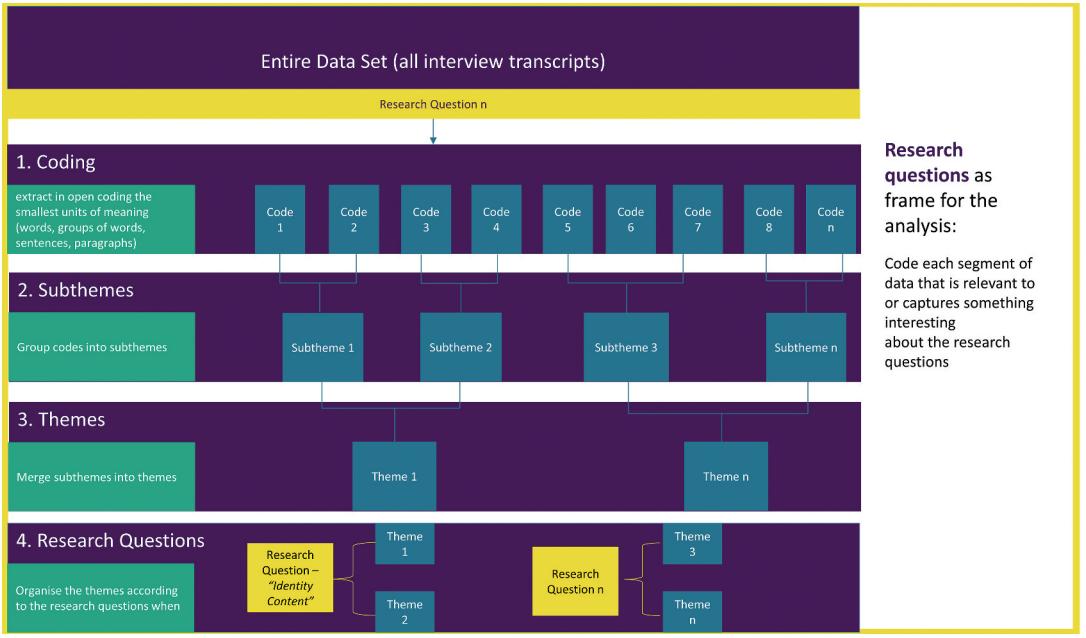


Figure 2. Analytical steps undertaken during the thematic analysis. Description: The figure shows which steps were undertaken by the research team during the thematic analysis to generate codes, subthemes and the final themes.

woven together (Clarke & Braun, 2021) integrating notes from the journal, as well as the GPS data. Hereby, the themes were organized in a manner that they provided responses to each of the three research questions. The GPS data was used to create maps of the walks (see Figure 1). We coded the locations according to the urban space classification by Carmona (2010), for instances into natural/semi-natural spaces (see Table S1 in the supplementary material). In the analysis we mapped the spaces where certain identity content or SoB became more prominent to further identify patterns in how participants experienced specific urban spaces.

Results

The themes developed during the analysis are displayed in Table 3. Research Question 1 is answered by all the themes. Research Question 2 is mainly answered by the themes "Spaces to stand out and fit in" (1), and "Spaces of familiarity" (3). There are some overlaps in the responses to the different research questions which will be explicated in the discussion.

Theme 1 - Spaces to stand out and fit in: majority, discriminatory and international spaces impacting foreign identity salience and belonging

Foreign identity salience in majority spaces – the bad of being noticed in public spaces

Participants described how they became conscious of feeling and being perceived as "foreigners" in spaces that were clearly dominated by members of the majority group, i.e., white Germans. Hereby, being noticed was experienced negatively, since it related to the perception of sticking out based on one's ethnicity or other bodily features connected to negative stereotypes. This was particularly the case for participants who were high-visibility minorities:

> Once I was at a game when Dynamo Dresden played against another team. I had this feeling, because I was the only darker one in the stands, and maybe one of the only ones who has no tattoos. I think I was perceived by many, and I also had the feeling that some also watched me for a long time. And then I had the feeling that I am

Table 3. Themes, subthemes, codes and exemplary spaces from the thematic analysis.

Theme	Subthemes	Codes	Exemplary Spaces
Theme 1 **Spaces to stand out and fit in**: Majority, discriminatory and international spaces impacting foreign identity salience and belonging	Foreign identity salience in majority spaces – the bad of being noticed in public spaces	Spaces where people make you feel like a foreigner All-white-spaces Looking different than the majority in the space and having the eyes on you	White soccer games FRO White neighborhood
	Discriminatory & culturally exclusive spaces	Exclusionary cultural symbols Spaces missing accessibility Spaces full of rules Posh-spaces Public authorities Inaccessible spaces Unwelcoming spaces	Public institutions FRO, doctors' office Library, posh restaurants Christmas market Soccer Games Outskirts of the city
	Being part of international spaces	Diversity of international spaces Accessibility of international spaces	International school Workplaces Markets
Theme 2 **Spaces of being oneself**: Providing opportunity for authenticity to build and continue one's identity and social roles	Identity continuity: spaces that allow you to be who you used to be	Connectedness to nature: past & present Spaces to celebrate and share the culture of origin Spaces to continue hobbies	Forest, park, river, lake Afrobeat parties Aikido dojo
	Spaces to remember the past and build new memories	Reminders of places of origin Familiar concept spaces Spaces with nice German features Special spaces to create new memories Spaces of human history	Concerts, restaurants Rivers, lake, water Afro markets, Brazilian supermarket Urban garden, Späti, bakery Christmas markets, Berlin Wall
	Spaces of authenticity vs. maintaining a façade	Spaces that allow me to be my authentic self Public spaces are quieter than oneself	Parks, forest, workplace, clubs House of friends or family
	Spaces activating specific social role identities irrespective of "foreigner" status	Being a parent Being a "Berliner" Being young Being a professional or expert Flexible identity – privilege to switch	Playground Workplace Neighbourhood, city Club

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Theme	Subthemes	Codes	Exemplary Spaces
Theme 3 **Spaces of well-being**: Aesthetic, blue-green and social immersion spaces fostering well-being and belonging	Aesthetic and useful spaces make you feel free in the city	Beautiful or ugly spaces Public activity spaces Spaces of collective action Spaces to seek out with friends Spaces that make you feel free Functional spaces	Parks, urban garden City center, bars, restaurants Bridge, Maker space Swimming pool Skate par, sailing association Bike lanes, public transit
	The special case of urban blue & green spaces – belonging with and without other people	Peace and quiet in nature Belonging alone in nature Wellbeing through BGS BGS for walks and sports BGS to spend time with people	Parks, lake, pond, forest "Kleingarten" (garden plot) Urban garden
	Watching, seeing & co-existing with others – social immersion spaces	Atmospheric spaces Being among, but not interacting with people	Library, café Park, canal
Theme 4 **Spaces of familiarity**: Nodding encounters and knowing one's way around in public spaces fostering sense of belonging	Knowing one's way around or feeling lost in anonymous spaces	Transitory space & commercial spaces are anonymous and create feeling lost Insecurity in unknown neighborhoods Knowing how things work & where they are	Houses of friends, workplace, library Own neighborhood Train stations, bus stop, airports City center, shopping mall
	Nodding encounters - The good of being noticed in public spaces	Being recognized in frequent spaces Spontaneous & coincidental meet-ups	Bakery, café, restaurant, dogpark, BGS Kindergarden, shops
	Positive daily social interaction make you feel like you belong	Spaces as opportunities to meet and connect It is more about the people than the space Spaces of negative daily interactions	Workplace Biergardens, dance studio, gym Cafés, restaurants, supermarkets

BGS = Urban Blue Green Spaces; FRO = Foreigners' registration office.

> observed. I was there with my buddy, who said to me "no, nothing happens. You just have to be quiet." But I still had the feeling that if there is a crazy person who wants to insult me, he will certainly do so. (Tanupa, Leipzig)

These experiences were often linked to "all-white-spaces" such as predominantly white neighborhoods (e.g. Schleußig in Leipzig), or hockey games in which migrants, and particularly people of color (PoC), would be a small minority. Especially PoC reported experiencing "othering" behavior – majority group members would, for example, stare at them or not recognize a Black person they had seen before. "*I'm Black so, once I step out of the door, there is always something to remind me that I'm not from around here.*" (Timothy, Leipzig). "*For example, I am Asian, so the first thing when you look at me, you already know I do not belong.*" (Catherine, Stuttgart). By contrast, more heterogenous, diverse spaces decreased the salience of experiencing "foreignness."

Discriminatory and culturally exclusive spaces

Certain spaces conveyed cultural exclusivity through symbolic values, like Christian symbols associated with Christmas, leading some participants to feel they didn't belong:

> The sight of this can be a sign that I do not belong here because Christmas is not something I celebrate at home. For me Christmas tree is a western thing right. [A sign] of I am in a foreign country, a foreign land. There are a lot of signs that I do not belong here. (Cathy, Berlin)

Spaces hindering SoB also included those with implicit cultural norms enforced even by strangers (relating to RQ2 regarding social interaction), spaces dominated by certain demographics (e.g., "all-white spaces"), or spaces linked to a particular type of architecture and urban design, which were associated with exclusionary attitudes:

> In other places that the architecture is like Plattenbau [prefabricated high-rise] and you can see that is a lower price, then that is automatically connected with let's say working class people, less cultural hubs, less art hubs, less possibilities of expression. And that way of living in Grünau [city district in Leipzig] is automatically tangibly associated with right wing way of thinking. Therefore, PoC are not so welcome in that place. In this case me being the brown person. (Carlos, Leipzig)

The experience of feeling excluded was also prominent in spaces that did not allow migrants to fully participate due to cultural or local barriers such as language inaccessibility. This was a shared experience among the participants, independent of being a visible minority or not – having migrated to Germany was sufficient. A prominent example here was the foreigners' registration office (FRO; "Ausländerbehörde"):

> P: [It] also makes the Ausländerbehörde [FRO] more stressful because they are the place that will not do English. [. . .] There is among, I do not know whether to call it the expat or the immigrant community, there is a common knowledge that any particular Beamte [officials] that you talk to, might absolutely refuse to speak English with you. On the grounds that you are in Germany, you will speak German. [. . .] the person that I work with at the Ausländerbehörde, every time there is meeting and she puts a list of things that she wants me to bring, she always puts translator on the list. Never mind that we have been writing in German for months, she puts translator on the list of things to bring. (Thomas, Stuttgart)

In that way, public authority spaces, notably the FRO, impeded SoB due to the language inaccessibility, i.e., providing information exclusively in German. Participants also felt the expectation to speak German in these spaces, and experienced challenging interactions with staff and functional barriers. Additionally, public authority spaces often required implicit systemic, cultural or bureaucratic knowledge compounding the difficulty. Furthermore, "posh" and "luxurious" spaces, like upscale restaurants, were perceived as culturally exclusive in terms of creating social class barriers, thereby generating feelings of non-belonging.

Being part of multicultural spaces

In contrast to this and in logical connection to the first subtheme, participants experienced SoB in multicultural spaces. It was easier for participants to develop SoB when they did not feel like the only minority member in a space and instead experienced a space as diverse and socially heterogeneous. They felt a special bond with other non-Germans, i.e., a bond by shared "Otherness." International spaces were also distinguished by their accessibility and a higher degree of cultural sensitivity in spaces where diversity is the norm (e.g., international schools, workplaces in larger international organizations). Participants in Berlin often commented on the city in and of itself as being very diverse:

> P: I think I am very much part of this city. Like being an immigrant here, like my friends in Berlin my really good friends in Berlin are all foreigners, so I feel that I am like one of them and if they are Berliners, I am one of the Berliners as well. (Cathy, Berlin)

One of the reasons that diverse spaces were valued was that they allowed participants to blend in and not be stared at for looking different. Sometimes high-visibility minority people would seek out spaces

where they belonged to the majority for a positive experience, e.g. one PoC participant achieved a SoB by blending in at afrobeat parties where the majority audience was Black. Multi-language infrastructure and international staff in certain spaces facilitated access for participants and increased their SoB: "*There's the cafe where I feel quite good. We've been going for last three or four years, I would say. I know the staff there, and I know it's very multi-cultural. I could also speak English*" (Indogerman, Stuttgart).

Theme 2 - Spaces of being oneself: providing opportunity for authenticity to build and continue one's identity and social roles

Identity continuity: spaces that allow you to be who you used to be

Some spaces allowed participants to maintain and express parts of their identity that they had perceived as an integral part of who they used to be before migration. This was often the case in blue-green spaces (BGS), where participants experienced a connectedness to nature they had felt in the past. It also occurred in spaces where they could participate in other activities (e.g., certain hobbies) they had engaged in before migration:

> There are things about my life here and my social scene here that are consistent with my life in the US. And so those places or those communities can feel more like home just because they're a similar vibe in a different location. One example would be the Aikido Dojo. I've been practising for 12, 13 years. And there is a fairly consistent mindset in a Dojo. Even if the communities and people in there might be different. It's a certain level of open mindedness and non-judgmentalness. So that feels at home even if it's maybe an unfamiliar Dojo. (Kassy, Stuttgart)

Furthermore, participants felt SoB in spaces where they could celebrate their own culture. These spaces often were frequented by other people of the same country of origin, by other internationals, but also consisted in public spaces that simply allowed for a sharing of a diversity of cultures.

Spaces to remember the past and build new memories

Some spaces were described as particularly helpful in evoking SoB because they either connected participants to the past or were sites of construction of meaning through the formation of new memories. A sense of the past was typically present in places that reminded participants of their origins, such as supermarkets that offered food from the culture of origin, but also concerts or, for one participant, spaces close to the water where the noise of seagulls would evoke memories. Similarly, participants described familiar concept spaces as increasing their SoB. For example, the "Späti" – a late-night corner shop, in front of which people often meet, was seen as a reminder of a vibrant atmosphere in the country of origin:

> There is a kind of bar that people hang out in front of [. . .] And people here have the wrong idea that it's dangerous. But actually, it's quite the opposite, they're having fun. It's very similar to Brazil, at night, outside, a lot of talking, a lot of people having fun and singing, they never bother you. [. . .] But people are usually like "oh man, isn't that weird, that part of the street." For those who aren't used to this "boteco" [Brazilian bar] culture, this internet café seems a dangerous place [. . .] For me, it reminds me of Brazil, the good bohemian part, when you walk past and sing or drink in the street, it reminds a lot of "botecos." (Ryan, Bremen)

Furthermore, historical spaces were described as evoking a non-culture-specific, general sense of connectedness to human history and in doing so, providing SoB to something bigger than oneself and one's current situation as a migrant. Examples of such spaces were historical city quarters or specific sites like the Berlin Wall. Complementing spaces evoking existing memories, participants also spoke about how spaces helped them develop new memories in their current city and how this made them feel like they belonged. These spaces included spaces considered typical for Germany such as bakeries, Christmas markets, but also BGS, all of which they associated with personally meaningful events or people.

Spaces of authenticity vs. maintaining a façade

Participants portrayed spaces of authenticity - places, where they could feel not judged, be free to express their "true selves," and/or where the rules of the place concurred with their own values. Examples of these spaces were BGS, the workplace, and (sub-)culture-specific places such as clubs and parties: "*I can go to a club and dance, the way I want. And that's fine, nobody will judge me, I like that about the nightlife here. You can be yourself, because there are crazier people than you.*" (Liloco, Berlin). By contrast, participants described certain spaces in which they felt they had to hide their true self. For instance, a participant explained how she had to "tone down" the way she acted in public spaces, since she felt judged by Germans for being "too loud" (Flower, Leipzig).

Spaces activating specific social role identities irrespective of "foreigner" status

Participants specified diverse social role identities unrelated to their migration background, including being a parent or a young person, and how these identities were at the forefront of their being in specific spaces such as playgrounds or clubs. These social role identities often overlapped with identity content of majority members, by which thethe foreigner/minority identity became less important. A particularly prominent social role identity was the professional or expert role activated at the workplace. Here, people described feeling appreciated and recognized. It also allowed them to overcome potential feelings of inferiority they experienced as migrants in other areas of their life:

> I always felt comfortable with sports right from the start, because I know the area quite well, as a gymnast and as a coach. And that helped me a lot in the beginning. I knew how it works, and when I could not say something verbally, I simply showed it. I showed the movements or the exercises in gymnastics to the other coaches. (Tanupa, Leipzig)

Theme 3 - Spaces of well-being: aesthetic, blue-green and social immersion spaces fostering well-being and belonging

Aesthetic and useful spaces make you feel free in the city

Participants reported SoB in urban spaces that they appreciated for the beauty and functionality. Aesthetic spaces included beautiful architecture, walking paths with plants and places with a view:

> Due to the geography and the fact that Stuttgart is in a valley surrounded by hills, you almost always have a view onto the city, so you can orientate yourself very well. [. . .] Here you're constantly presented with the city as a whole, so you're walking and then you can look down and you see buildings and parks. So, you're connected visually in a completely different way to the city. (Brian, Stuttgart)

This contrasted with "ugly spaces" hindering SoB, such as city centers that lacked charm or spaces that were designed in a car-centered way. Aesthetic spaces were often spaces that were also described as being useful, including, for example, public activity spaces. For instance, a bridge in Leipzig localized between important spots in the city was described as both, aesthetically pleasing, and functional, serving as a space for cultural activities like concerts. Aesthetic and useful spaces were also spaces in which people met with friends, such as restaurants, bars and cafés, or spaces of collective action such as urban gardens. Spaces where SoB was described primarily based on the functionality of the space (without necessarily being very aesthetically pleasing) included public transit spaces, supermarkets, playgrounds and bike lanes. The latter were appreciated for the reliable and safe commute they allowed and the feeling of freedom that came with cycling in the city:

> As we are walking here in Berlin, it reminds me also of one of my first memories that I felt at home in Berlin, is when I arrived here as a student, and I was cycling for the first time, and I got to know a bit more of the city. Because I was still taking a lot the bus and the first time that I had a bike in a new city and I was cycling for the first time, that I felt a sense of a freedom or an enthusiasm of discovering the city and that I could feel at home here. (Sonia, Berlin)

This sense of freedom permeated many of the aesthetic and useful spaces participants were describing – the freedom to let your children play in a public space, to sit down on the pavement and enjoy a coffee, to swim naked in a lake. This freedom was often rooted in the high accessibility of spaces, especially with regards to physical and cultural barriers (e.g., walkability and proximity; information being available in other languages than German): "*I have a general feeling a stronger feeling of being at home when I am around my building because I know that I can just walk home and be there in like five minutes.*" (Eliel, Berlin). The need for proximity became particularly apparent in the go-along interviews in Berlin, where participants selected routes in their neighborhood (see Figure 1) and stressed how rarely they would leave this neighborhood.

The special case of urban blue & green spaces – belonging with and without people

BGS, like parks and forests, offered a unique quality: participants felt SoB in BGS independently of others. This distinctiveness was linked to the spaces' aesthetics, functionality, but moreover to the experience of being in nature, which conveyed peace and tranquility: "*Sailing. It's my safe space. It's a moment when I don't need to look at my cell phone, I don't need to be with anyone. Even if I'm sailing alone, it's okay, no, it's not being lonely. It's solitude.*" (Ryan, Bremen). "*I feel belonging in the forest. The plants, it's green, the different sounds, the small animals, insects. I also had that as a child in Bolivia and that's why it's very special for me to be in contact with nature*" (Tanupa, Leipzig). Participants frequented BGS for various activities, including solitary pursuits like reading, writing, walks, and sports, as well as for socializing with friends. They described these spaces positively impacted their well-being. The specific BGS composition varied by city: In Bremen, the river Weser was highlighted, as seen in go-along interviews (Figure 1). In Berlin and Leipzig, parks were prominent, with Leipzig additionally featuring forests and lakes. In Stuttgart, participants noted a scarcity of urban BGS but emphasized the surrounding nature.

Watching, seeing and co-existing with others – social immersion spaces

Participants reported that sometimes they would seek out places in which they could immerse themselves into the social life of the city, observing others without necessarily interacting with them or being recognized. Participants experienced spaces with unfamiliar people such as parks as contributing to a SoB and making them feel that they were not alone in this world. Particularly the atmosphere created by people sitting outside, for instance having coffee on a bridge, or sitting on stone stairs next to a canal, would evoke this sense of connection to the space and the city:

> What I really like to do is just sit in cafés and watch people and drink a coffee in peace. When I sit in a café like that, I also have a feeling of belonging. I have the impression that I have people around me who somehow feel the same way as I do at that moment, right? They're just sitting outside, looking at people. It's also like a small community. People who simply take time out. And let the impressions take effect on them together. Yes, that's where I feel comfortable, where I feel totally at home. (Sherin, Berlin)

However, for people who did not yet have strong social connections, seeing other people in public spaces, particularly in groups, sometimes also made them feel lonely.

Theme 4 - Spaces of familiarity: nodding encounters and knowing one's way around in public spaces foster sense of belonging

Knowing one's way around or feeling lost in anonymous spaces

There were spaces which, due to their size or nature of use, had the capacity to either make participants feel lost and like they did not belong, or so familiar with the space that they felt at home. Transitory spaces, such as airports, train and bus stations were reported to evoke feelings of alienation, particularly through the anonymity they entailed. Similar feelings occurred in commercial spaces, like city centers and shopping malls, stemming from factors such as anonymity, crowding, lack of diversity, or

incongruent values: *"Höfe am Brühl, this ultra-capitalist place, where only shops exist. In those kinds of places I feel very foreign, because I don't belong to the super capitalist society anywhere in the world*" (Carlos, Leipzig).

Certain neighborhoods and outskirts were identified as hindrances to SoB due to feelings of insecurity. This resulted from inadequate lighting or unfamiliarity, and from encounters with unusual individuals (e.g., drug users). In contrast, participants found SoB in familiar settings like friends' homes, their own neighborhoods, workplaces, or libraries, primarily due to the comfort of familiarity.

Nodding encounters – the good of being noticed in public spaces

Being recognized was often described as a positive experience people made in spaces they frequented, such as their general neighborhood, bakeries, and cafés or the kindergarten:

> When I'm coming home from work, I get to my street and the people from the restaurant and the kiosk already know me, I pass by and they say "hi, what's up? How are you?" We exchange a few words. It does make you feel at home. I don't think I'm a stranger here, I know people, they know me. It feels like I belong here. (André, Berlin)

The sense of being perceived and recognized as an individual in one's frequent surroundings created a positive SoB in these instances. On the most basic level, it was the nodding encounters that led participants to experience SoB: a familiar face on the street nodding at them or smiling in sign of recognition. Sometimes it also involved someone stopping shortly for small-talk and the exchange of a few words, such as with neighbors. Yet, the most important aspect of the subtheme was the positive experience for participants of being recognized and having familiar faces acknowledge them in public spaces.

Positive daily social interactions make you feel like you belong

SoB was also described to emerge from planned and coincidental positive daily interactions with people. Common spaces for unplanned interactions were daily routine spaces, such as the supermarket. Planned social interactions would occur in spaces that provided opportunities to meet and connect, such as parks, beer gardens, or dance studios. Here, participants could meet friends, but also new people: *"I think the most important places in Berlin are for me also meeting points where you meet where you share experiences with other people, or where you can come together. And that is for example the playground*." (Sonia, Berlin). Conversely, when participants experienced negative social interactions in the same routine spaces, like supermarkets it decreased their SoB: "*To feel like you belong there's a lack of empathy here. A very simple thing, for example, you're walking peacefully down the street, and someone bumps into you. In Portugal, everyone says 'Oh, sorry!.' Here people don't even look*." (Maria, Leipzig). This subtheme highlights that for many participants the social dimension was more prominent than the spatial dimension when asked about their SoB.

Discussion

The present study aimed to better our understanding of the ways in which urban spaces shape migrants' SoB and identity content in the context of international relocation. While previous research has mostly focused on the role of social connections in shaping individuals' belonging (Allen et al., 2021) the present research extends this body of literature, by including the role of urban spaces. We developed four themes in our analysis: (1) Spaces to stand out and fit in: Majority, discriminatory and multicultural spaces impacting foreign identity salience and belonging, (2) Spaces of being oneself: Providing opportunity for authenticity to build and continue one's identity and social roles, (3) Spaces of well-being: Aesthetic, blue-green and social immersion spaces fostering well-being and belonging and (4) Spaces of familiarity: Nodding encounters and knowing one's way around in public spaces fostering sense of belonging. The present study supports the finding by Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) that there seems to be a dynamic relationship between identity processes and the spatial environment. In particular, our findings

support the view that individuals use spaces to maintain self-continuity, as well as to foster and establish new identities. Additionally, we found support for a place-referent continuity, where the spaces serve as a memorial to an individual's past. However, and in contrast to Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) we did not find evidence for individuals using specific space identifications to gain positive distinctiveness over people identifying with other spaces. Our study extends the previous work by integrating the perspective of migrants and looking beyond the residential environment of participants. Our findings highlight how processes of identity and belonging are embodied in the physical environment by showing how spaces are relevant for the salience of certain identity content, and, through aspects such as familiarity, aesthetics and social immersion provide opportunities for authenticity, sense of belonging and well-being. In the following part we will highlight certain interconnected aspects of the generated themes and discuss them in relation to the literature and potential implications.

Spaces of non-belonging and shared identity content

Our findings indicate that certain spaces, such as predominantly all-white or discriminatory spaces, stimulate "foreigner"-identity content, evoke feelings of non-belonging and having to mask one's authentic self. These feelings stem from multiple factors, including limited accessibility (e.g., language barriers at a doctor's office), material features (e.g., perceived exclusionary cultural symbols at Christmas markets), the demographic composition of the space (e.g., an all-white audience at a soccer game), and the interactions within these settings (e.g., experienced discrimination in semi-public spaces like the FRO). Specific spaces hence seem to be associated with adverse social encounters for migrants, encompassing social exclusion, Othering, and discrimination (Hankela, 2020; Schmitt et al., 2010).

Conversely, multicultural spaces where participants interacted with other migrants (e.g., international schools, language exchange cafés) nurtured a sense of shared Otherness and allowed participants to be their genuine selves. These spaces felt culturally accessible (e.g., participants could communicate in English or their native language) and allowed participants to blend in and celebrate their own culture. Specific spaces triggered the activation of identity content related to social roles such as being a parent (Galliher et al., 2017), which overlapped with the identities of majority group members. This aligns with identity theories like cross-categorization, emphasizing individuals' ability to belong to multiple social groups simultaneously, and the idea of identity switching, where individuals adapt their identification based on the social context, emphasizing different group memberships accordingly (Brewer, 2013; Turner et al., 1994).

Spatial elements of belonging: familiar concepts, blue-green spaces and aesthetics

Blue-green, aesthetic, and familiar concept spaces were also experienced by participants as enhancing their sense of identity continuity, SoB, and authenticity, aligning with prior research demonstrating the positive influence of incorporating BGS and vegetation in urban environments on human well-being (Barton & Pretty, 2010). Specifically, our study revealed that BGS not only facilitated social connections but were also experienced as boosting participants' SoB alone and by itself, independent of any social interactions. This effect could be associated with a phenomenon previously described in literature as "nature connectedness," i.e. "the extent to which an individual includes nature within his/her cognitive representation of self" (Schultz, 2002, p. 67). Feeling connected to nature may constitute an element of participants' identity that transcends physical locations, fostering a sense of continuity from their place of origin to their current abode. Consequently, our research contributes to the body of knowledge by indicating that BGS may provide spaces of psychological home, hold a high "attachment potential" (Lewicka, 2011, p. 222) and might support migrants' well-being in urban settings. At the same time, this effect is probably not specific to immigrants – most of the literature on BGS has

investigated the effects of these spaces in the majority population and found positive influences on well-being (Barton & Pretty, 2010).

Previous research has also linked aesthetic spaces to belonging and place attachment (Kohlbacher et al., 2015; Mazumdar et al., 2000). Jaśkiewicz (2015) found that urban aesthetic satisfaction is influenced by inherited and discovered place attachment and local identity. Discovered place attachment also predicts sensitivity to visual pollution, commonly observed in active choosers of residence (Lewicka, 2013). This suggests aesthetic spaces may impact newcomers, like migrants, differently than long-time locals, warranting exploration in future research.

Moreover, in our study, participants felt SoB in spaces that resonated with their place of origin, triggered memories, or shared conceptual similarities. Research has indicated a connection between place-based attachment and the presence of familiar physical elements (Cheng & Kuo, 2015), including access to products from one's country of origin (Huizinga & Van Hoven, 2018). Familiarity, defined as a general understanding of what to expect in a particular environment (Blokland, 2017), was described by our participants as "knowing my way around." Regularly visiting a space may contribute to developing a sense of familiarity, as observed by Felton (2012) in the case of cafes, where habitual use fosters a sense of place connection and SoB. In addition to habitual use, we suggest that encountering spaces with familiar elements and concepts – reminders of the place of origin -, such as the German "Späti" (corner shop), which resembles a Brazilian "Boteco" (simple bar) in usage, can offer migrants a sense of continuity (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

Nodding encounters and weak ties - being recognised in public spaces

Our results showcase the duality of being noticed in public spaces: participants expressed a desire to "blend in" unnoticed, and yet derived an SOB from being recognized in "nodding encounters" (Blokland, 2017). From a social psychology perspective, participants' apparent paradoxical desire to "blend in" and "be recognized" in public spaces can be understood through Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 2003). This theory posits that individuals seek a balance between the need for differentiation and the need for inclusion. Migrant participants in our study may experience tension between "blending in" to avoid discrimination and "being recognized" to assert their individuality. Importantly, positive recognition corresponded to individual acknowledgment, while negative experiences of being seen were linked to being perceived as a minority group representative rather than an individual. This dynamic operates bidirectionally, with one's personal experience influenced by how one is perceived and vice versa.

Nodding encounters, i.e., brief interactions where one is recognized as an individual in public spaces (Blokland, 2017; Felder, 2020; Hankela, 2020) proved central in our study: These encounters include being acknowledged by a café waiter or sharing smiles with familiar strangers encountered in daily life (Blokland, 2017) and foster familiarity and a sense of security (Felder, 2020). Public familiarity can surpass the importance of strong neighborly ties (Link et al., 2022) and is facilitated in "spaces in between" (Altenburger, 2017), like playgrounds, cafes, and squares, supporting the development of both weak and strong social connections (Hankela, 2020; Huizinga & Van Hoven, 2018). Consequently, the absence of such spaces may hinder heterogeneous network development (Barwick, 2017). At times, neither weak ties nor nodding encounters, but simply observing people enhanced participants' SoB: Our study revealed that participants actively sought opportunities to immerse themselves passively in social life by frequenting spaces like cafés or public open areas such as parks. Similarly to the effects of BGS, the importance of nodding encounters, weak ties and social immersion spaces for SoB might not be limited to immigrants but extend to the majority population. Our sample does not allow for such comparisons, but future research could set out to investigate in which ways migrants and the majority population experience similar or distinct processes of SoB in these spaces.

Limitations and future research

Our study commenced shortly after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a critical context to consider in terms of daily routines and accessible spaces which may have negatively impacted SOB and well-being (Duden et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2023). Additionally, seasonal variations should be acknowledged, as our interviews took place in Germany's coldest and darkest months, limiting outdoor urban space usage. The prominence of BGS as a theme may reflect participants' awareness of this seasonal variation.

Despite our focus on identity in our research questions, we did not explicitly inquire about identity content to prevent participants from abstracting their experiences into predefined identity categories. Developing themes related to identity content in our thematic analysis proved challenging and required extensive team discussions among coders.

Our findings suggest that while the social aspects of spaces and SoB are pertinent, they extend beyond mere social categories. Firstly, the unique characteristics of a space influence the social aspect, and secondly, certain spaces (e.g., BGS, bike lanes) and spatial features (e.g., aesthetics, familiar elements) appear to impact SoB and identity content independently of social factors. Future research can benefit from departing from the notion that space and SoB are purely social categories (Allen et al., 2021; Hopkins & Dixon, 2006; Speller et al., 2002).

Implications

An intriguing aspect of our findings is that many places where participants reported SoB were characterized by limited contact with the majority group (i.e., Germans). These tended to be locations where participants were among other internationals or in solitary natural settings. However, given that migrants are typically in the minority in most countries, promoting their SoB within the majority group is essential for both individual and overall societal success and well-being. Our findings may be influenced by assimilationist attitudes prevalent in Germany (Brubaker, 2001), which often frame differences negatively. In this context, migrants may naturally turn to other internationals to foster SoB (Bauer & Hannover, 2020). Contrarily, countries like Canada with more multiculturalist attitudes frame cultural differences positively and encourage migrants to celebrate diversity (Berry, 2013), which may foster SOB (Birnbaum et al., 2021).

Additionally, public authority spaces, particularly the FRO, were described as unwelcoming, diminishing participants' SoB. This is concerning since these spaces often serve as initial and vital contact points for newcomers to a new place of residence and are unavoidable to them. Enhancing the welcoming nature of these spaces through multi-language accessibility, reducing reliance on culture-specific or localized prior knowledge, or increasing awareness about knowledge that is not universally understood (e.g., differences in the role of hospitals in the medical system) should be a priority.

Lastly, our results emphasize the need for a diverse range of aesthetic and blue-green urban spaces, including those suitable for solitary enjoyment, and those conducive to social immersion or interaction. Access to these types of spaces is crucial. Accessibility encompasses practical and material aspects (physical accessibility, addressing language barriers, and ensuring spaces do not require substantial expenditures) as well as cultural and psychological aspects (preventing exclusion due to opaque social norms, mitigating the overwhelming presence of the majority group, and avoiding culture-specific exclusionary symbols). Promoting the creation of such spaces through deliberate urban planning and local support for small businesses and non-governmental initiatives can tangibly enhance the sense of belonging and local identification among migrants, ultimately contributing to their well-being and the overall improvement of the community.

Note

1. Migration background is a concept used in German census research referring to people who either themselves were born without German nationality or have one parent who was born without German nationality.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of student assistants who helped in the data collection and transcription of the interviews.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the FernUniversitaet in Hagen.

ORCID

Gesa Solveig Duden http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3196-0755
Julia Reiter http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7451-9441
Anette Rohmann http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4757-1460

Author contributions statement

Following the CRediT taxonomy (https://credit.niso.org/), the authors each fulfilled the following contributor roles: GD: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Funding acquisition, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; JR: Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; CB: Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; MM: Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; CH: Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; AR: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing.

Data availability statement

The data of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. They are not publicly available as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

References

Adli, M., Berger, M., Brakemeier, E.-L., Engel, L., Fingerhut, J., Gomez-Carrillo, A., Hehl, R., Heinz, A., Mayer, J., & Mehran, N. (2017). Neurourbanism: Towards a new discipline. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, *4*(3), 183–185. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(16)30371-6

Allen, K.-A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D. M., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *73*(1), 87–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409

Altenburger, E. (2017). *The spaces in between at orbit high: An analysis of teenage behavior during breaks at school*. University of Missouri-Columbia.

Altman, I., & Low, S. M. (Eds.). (1992). *Place attachment*. Plenum.

Barton, J., & Pretty, J. (2010). Urban ecology and human health and wellbeing. *Urban Ecology*, *12*(1), 202–229.

Barwick, C. (2017). Are immigrants really lacking social networking skills? The crucial role of reciprocity in building ethnically diverse networks. *Sociology*, *51*(2), 410–428.

Bauer, C. A., & Hannover, B. (2020). Can I be myself around natives? *Social Psychology*, *51*(6), 396–407. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000423

Berry, J. W. (2013). Research on multiculturalism in Canada. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *37*(6), 663–675. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.09.005
Bhugra, D. (2004). Migration and mental health. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *109*(4), 243–258. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0001-690X.2003.00246.x
Bilecen, B. (2017). Home-making practices and social protection across borders: An example of Turkish migrants living in Germany. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, *32*(1), 77–90. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-015-9490-1
Birnbaum, H. J., Stephens, N. M., Townsend, S. S., & Hamedani, M. G. (2021). A diversity ideology intervention: Multiculturalism reduces the racial achievement gap. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *12*(5), 751–759. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620938227
Blokland, T. (2017). *Community as urban practice*. Polity.
BPB [Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung]. (2022, January 1). *Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund.* Kurz und knapp. https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/
Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238
Brewer, M. B. (2003). Optimal distinctiveness, social identity, and the self. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 480–491). Guilford Press.
Brewer, M. B. (2013). Reducing prejudice through cross-categorization: Effects of multiple social identities. In S. Oskamp (Ed.), *Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination* (pp. 165–183). Psychology Press.
Brislin, R. W. (1970). Back-translation for cross-cultural research. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *1*(3), 185–216. https://doi.org/10.1177/135910457000100301
Brubaker, R. (2001). The return of assimilation? Changing perspectives on immigration and its sequels in France, Germany, and the United States. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *24*(4), 531–548. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870120049770
Canales, M. K. (2000). Othering: Toward an understanding of difference. *Advances in Nursing Science*, *22*(4), 16–31. https://doi.org/10.1097/00012272-200006000-00003
Carmona, M. (2010). Contemporary public space, part two: Classification. *Journal of Urban Design*, *15*(2), 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/13574801003638111
Carpiano, R. M. (2009). Come take a walk with me: The "go-along" interview as a novel method for studying the implications of place for health and well-being. *Health & Place*, *15*(1), 263–272. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2008.05.003
Cheng, C.-K., & Kuo, H.-Y. (2015). Bonding to a new place never visited: Exploring the relationship between landscape elements and place bonding. *Tourism Management*, *46*, 546–560. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.08.006
Chen, W., Hall, B. J., Ling, L., & Renzaho, A. M. (2017). Pre-migration and post-migration factors associated with mental health in humanitarian migrants in Australia and the moderation effect of post-migration stressors: Findings from the first wave data of the BNLA cohort study. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, *4*(3), 218–229. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(17)30032-9
Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
Duden, G. S., de Smet, S., & Martins-Borges, L. (2021). Psychologists' perspectives on the psychological suffering of refugee patients in Brazil. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, *46*(2), 364–390. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-021-09717-6
Duden, G. S., Reiter, J, Pasweg, A., & Weibelzahl, S. (2023). Mental health of healthcare professionals during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – a comparative investigation from the 1st and 2nd pandemic year. *BMJ Open*, *13*(3), e067244. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-067244
Felder, M. (2020). Strong, weak and invisible ties: A relational perspective on urban coexistence. *Sociology*, *54*(4), 675–692. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519895938
Felton, E. (2012). Eat, drink and be civil: Sociability and the café. *M/C Journal*, *15*(2), 1–2. https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.463
Galliher, R. V., McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (2017). An integrated developmental model for studying identity content in context. *Developmental Psychology*, *53*(11), 2011. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000299
Goulahsen, L. (2017). Understanding the complexity of identity and belonging: A case study of French female migrants in Manchester and London. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *24*(2), 158–173. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815617977
Hankela, E. (2020). Segmented urban space and the ethics of belonging in migrants' Johannesburg. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *43*(6), 931–949. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1635255
Hauge, Å. L. (2007). Identity and place: A critical comparison of three identity theories. *Architectural Science Review*, *50*(1), 44–51. https://doi.org/10.3763/asre.2007.5007
Hopkins, N., & Dixon, J. (2006). Space, place, and identity: Issues for political psychology. *Political Psychology*, *27*(2), 173–185. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2006.00001.x
Huizinga, R. P., & Van Hoven, B. (2018). Everyday geographies of belonging: Syrian refugee experiences in the Northern Netherlands. *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, *96*, 309–317. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.09.002
IOM. (2022). *World migration report 2022*. UN Migration.

Jaśkiewicz, M. (2015). Place attachment, place identity and aesthetic appraisal of urban landscape. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, *46*(4), 573–578. https://doi.org/10.1515/ppb-2015-0063
Kohlbacher, J., Reeger, U., & Schnell, P. (2015). Place attachment and social ties–migrants in three urban settings in Vienna. *Population, Space Place*, *21*(5), 446–462. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1923
Koopmans, R. (2004). Migrant mobilisation and political opportunities: Variation among German cities and a comparison with the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *30*(3), 449–470. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183041000168203 4
Kratke, S. (2001). Berlin: Towards a global city? *Urban Studies*, *38*(10), 1777–1799. https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980120084859
Lewicka, M. (2011). Place attachment: How far have we come in the last 40 years? *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *31*(3), 207–230. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.10.001
Lewicka, M. (2013). Place inherited or place discovered? Agency and communion in people-place bonding. *Estudios de Psicología*, *34*(3), 261–274. https://doi.org/10.1174/021093913808295154
Link, F., Señoret, A., & Valenzuela, F. (2022). From community to public familiarity: Neighborhood, sociability, and belonging in the neoliberal city. *Urban Affairs Review*, *58*(4), 960–995. https://doi.org/10.1177/10780874211021512
Madill, A., Jordan, A., & Shirley, C. (2000). Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis: Realist, contextualist and radical constructionist epistemologies. *British Journal of Psychology*, *91*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1348/000712600161646
Mazumdar, S., Docuyanan, F., & McLaughlin, C. M. (2000). Creating a sense of place: The Vietnamese-Americans and Little Saigon. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *20*(4), 319–333. https://doi.org/10.1006/jevp.2000.0170
McLean, K. C., Syed, M., & Shucard, H. (2016). Bringing identity content to the fore: Links to identity development processes. *Emerging Adulthood*, *4*(5), 356–364. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696815626820
Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847
OECD. (2020). *Highlights: Cities in the world - a new perspective on urbanisation*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, A. (2019). Snowball sampling. *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036831710
Patel, K., Kouvonen, A., Close, C., Väänänen, A., O'Reilly, D., & Donnelly, M. (2017). What do register-based studies tell us about migrant mental health? A scoping review. *Systematic Reviews*, *6*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-017-0463-1
Proshansky, H. (1978). The city and self-identity. *Environment and Behavior*, *10*(2), 147–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/001391657810200 2
Quassoli, F., & Dimitriadis, I. (2019). "Here, there, in between, beyond. . .": Identity negotiation and sense of belonging among Southern Europeans in the UK and Germany. *Social Inclusion*, *7*(4), 60–70. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i4.2386
Rothman, S., Gunturu, S., & Korenis, P. (2020). The mental health impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities. *QJMA International Journal Medicine*, *113*(11), 779–782. https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcaa203
Schmitt, M. T., Davies, K., Hung, M., & Wright, S. C. (2010). Identity moderates the effects of Christmas displays on mood, self-esteem, and inclusion. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *46*(6), 1017–1022. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.05.026
Schneider, V., Duden, G., Landmann, H., & Rohmann, A. (2023). If you know from the start 'how long', then you can always adjust to it better": A qualitative study of adults' experiences and coping with two years COVID-19 pandemic in German. *Current Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-05158-z
Schultz, P. W. (2002). Inclusion with nature: The psychology of human-nature relations. In P. Schmuck & W. P. Schultz (Eds.), *Psychology of sustainable development* (pp. 61–78). US: Springer.
Sigmon, S. T., Whitcomb, S. R., & Snyder, C. R. (2002). Psychological home. In A. T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn, & B. J. Bishop (Eds), *Psychological sense of community* (pp. 25–41). Springer.
Speller, G. M., Lyons, E., & Twigger-Ross, C. (2002). A community in transition: The relationship between spatial change and identity processes. *Social Psychological Review*, *4*(2), 39–58.
Stadt Leipzig. (2020). *Migrantenbefragung. Ergebnisbericht* Amt für Statistik und Wahlen. https://static.leipzig.de/
Thorne, A., McLean, K. C., & Lawrence, A. M. (2004). When remembering is not enough: Reflecting on self-defining memories in late adolescence. *Journal of Personality*, *72*(3), 513–542. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00271.x
Timotijevic, L., & Breakwell, G. M. (2000). Migration and threat to identity. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *10*(5), 355–372. https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-1298(200009/10)10:5<355:AID-CASP594>3.0.CO;2-Y
Turner, J. C., Oakes, P. J., Haslam, S. A., & McGarty, C. (1994). Self and collective: Cognition and social context. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *20*(5), 454–463. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167294205002
Twigger-Ross, C. L., & Uzzell, D. L. (1996). Place and identity processes. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *16*(3), 205–220. https://doi.org/10.1006/jevp.1996.0017

Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Racial Identity in the 21st Century Study Group. (2014). Ethnic and racial identity during adolescence and into young adulthood: An integrated conceptualization. *Child Development*, *85*(1), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12196

VERBI-Software. (2021). *MAXQDA 2022* [computer software]. VERBI Software. maxqda.com.

Walsh, K. (2011). Migrant masculinities and domestic space: British home-making practices in Dubai. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *36*(4), 516–529. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00442.x

Westwood, S., & Phizacklea, A. (2000). *Trans-nationalism and the politics of belonging*. Psychology Press.

Young, A. F., Russell, A., & Powers, J. R. (2004). The sense of belonging to a neighbourhood: Can it be measured and is it related to health and well being in older women? *Social Science & Medicine*, *59*(12), 2627–263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2004.05.001