

*“I think I almost always identify myself as
an Utrechter, except for when I find
myself among Utrechters”*

The sense of place of students with a non-urban background in the city of Utrecht



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Abstract

This study provides insights into the sense of place of students from a non-urban area who now live in an urban environment. From a literature study, it became apparent that previous research on the sense of place does not consider the previous place of residence nor has there been done much research on this topic in the Netherlands. Focussing on the city of Utrecht, I have conducted participant led walking interviews through places of the participants' choosing. The semi-structured interviews were held with 11 students from different non-urban areas in the Netherlands. Results revealed that the students with a non-urban background have a relative positive attachment to Utrecht, although the attachment and identity remain limited to the student community and facilities. Next to this, the length of residence and mobility of students are important moderators on the sense of place of the students. The conclusion is therefore that students with a non-urban background easily feel at home in Utrecht through the self-segregation of students, even though this is of a temporary nature.

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Chapter one: Introducing the topic

Introduction

Every year, young people from all over the Netherlands pack their belongings and move to big cities to pursue their further education (NOS op 3, 2017). Utrecht is not an exception to this rule as the city receives a lot of students every year, who move out of their parental home to live in the city. In 2020, approximately 3.600 students moved to Utrecht to live in student housing (RTV Utrecht, 2021). In total, the student population makes up for 8,5% of the people living in Utrecht (Waterlander, 2019). As student populations move in influx to big cities like Utrecht and as students make up a large share of the city's population, it is inevitable that they exert influence in the city. For example, students landscapes and gentrification in the city as a result of the presence of students (Chatterton, 2010; Russo & Tatjer, 2007). Processes like this have often been referred to as studentification in academic literature and have been identified in various countries across Europe, like in the UK and Spain, and countries outside of Europe, like China (Chatterton, 2010; Garmendia et al., 2012; He, 2015; Nakazawa, 2017; Russo & Tatjer, 2007; Smith, 2008; Zasina, 2021).

Alongside the great amount of literature available on studentification, it is also interesting to assess the influence of urban environments on how students are emotionally connected to and feel in a place. This is defined in the literature as a sense of place (Cresswell, 2009; Foote & Azaryahu, 2009; Holton, 2015; Semken et al., 2009; de Wit, 2013). However, a search of the literature revealed few studies that focused on the sense of place of students. Moreover, most studies in the field of the sense of place have only focused on the current place of residence of students and didn't take into account differing factors, like the previous place of residence (Holton, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Yazdanfar et al., 2013). As a result, students are often looked at in the literature as one homogeneous group of people, while we know that the experiences of different types of students are very diverse. For example, Guiffrida (2008) and Xiulan (2015) found that rural students often have difficulties adjusting to the city and the university. Thus, we know that the urban experience can be different for students with a rural background than it is for students with an urban background. In this research I will provide insight into the influence of having a non-urban background on the sense of place of students in Utrecht, how it changes over time, and students' strategies to feel more at home in Utrecht.

Objectives

The aim of this research is to document experiences of students with a non-urban background¹ in the city of Utrecht and to provide insights into the difficulties and positive aspects they encountered in settling in an urban environment. Next to this, this research aims to be an incentive for more research on the sense of place of different groups in the Netherlands, especially for different types of students, since there is not much literature done on this topic in the Netherlands. Therefore, the following research question is formulated:

How is the sense of place of students with a non-urban background constructed, how does it change over time and what are the strategies they use to feel more at home in Utrecht?

In order to answer the research question, I will look into the different dimensions of sense of place, namely place attachment, place identity, sense of community and place dependence. I will explain these dimensions in detail in the chapter on the theoretical foundation.

Social relevance

How different students feel in a city (i.e., the sense of place of people) is an important concept to do more research about. A reason for this is that a sense of place can have an influence on the values of people and how they behave. For example, the sense of place can shape people's social, economic, and political preferences (de Wit, 2013). Furthermore, students in particular are an interesting research population as they often move out of the parental home to follow an education in an urban environment. Although young people move to another city to do an education, they do not necessarily perceive this as moving out of their parental home (Lahelma & Gordon, 2003). According to Kenyon (1999), students overall do not have one definitive home-meaning. Instead, they have multiple 'homes' to which they refer: their parental home, their term-time home and their future home. Nevertheless, according to the literature, becoming a student is intrinsically linked to the transition into adulthood (Holdsworth, 2009).

When students move out of their parental home, they often create new opinions and ways of looking at the world (Mulder & Clark, 2002). More specifically, with moving, students have to create a new view on what a home environment entails. Lahelma and Gordon (2003) argue that with moving, the mental meanings, social processes and physical practices are

¹ On page 12 I will explain how I define non-urbanity.

subjected to change. The mental space of a home entails the ideas and images associated to the concept of home. These ideas about the concept of a home differs between individuals, although a common denominator is that a 'home' is linked to the notions of safety, independence, privacy and is seen as a place of shelter (Lahelma & Gordon, 2003). Next to this, a home is perceived as a social space as social relations take place within it. These social relations fill the home with memories and attached emotions and meanings (Bordo et al., 1998). Lastly, a home is sketched as a physical space with tangible aspects and a geographical location, which is perceived in the same way by everyone (Lahelma & Gordon, 2003). All these aspects of the home are easily susceptible to change when students move out of their parental home to pursue their further education.

In addition, it is interesting to make a distinction between students with different parental home environments, as past experiences can shape how people currently feel towards a space (Tuan, 1977). For example, students who grew up in an environment that differs from the urban environment, can have a different sense of place than long-term city residents. Among other things, this is caused by the differences in mental, social and physical aspects between the former place of residence and the new home. For example, according to Hektner (1994), students from a rural area often move away from their community to do an education while students from an urban area can choose to stay in the area they grew up in and thus keep their community. So, students from a rural area need to make the decision to change their home community, whereas students from an urban area often do not have to alter their perceptions and aspects of their place of home. So, as there could be differences between students who are long-term city residents and rural students, it is of importance to do more research on the concept of sense of place and to differentiate between students with different backgrounds.

Scientific relevance

In addition to the social relevance, this research could also offer new relevant scientific insights. To date, the sense of place of students has received little attention in the research literature. Available research on the subject has mostly been restricted to the current place of residence of students (Holton, 2015; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Qazimi, 2014; Smith, 2011; Yazdanfar et al., 2013). However, as demonstrated earlier, when researching the sense of place of different students, it is important to use a broader lens and take into account other factors. In example, the previous place of residence of the students can have an impact on how people experience

and feel in the urban environment. To illustrate, there is already done quite a bit of research on different aspects of rural students living in cities, which I will elaborate on in detail later. The general conclusion from the literature is that students with a rural background experience practical difficulties with adjusting to the urban culture and to university (Guiffrida, 2008; Xiulan, 2015). So, these studies do not focus on the emotional bonds and attachments, thus the sense of place, of rural students with the urban environment.

Most research on non-urban students living in cities is conducted in the U.S., the UK, China, Australia and many other countries. So, little research on the experience of non-urban students in urban environments is performed in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a small, urbanized and densely populated country (World Bank, 2022), with relatively little distances between urban and non-urban areas (Haartsen et al., 2003). As a result, its unique urban-rural connection makes the Netherlands an interesting location to perform this research.

Lastly, most research on this topic conducted in foreign countries is focused on students living on a university campus (Holton, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Yazdanfar et al., 2013). What makes this study different is that it studies the sense of place of students who are residing in neighbourhoods in the city instead of in dormitories. For this reason, other results can be expected. So, with this research I aim to make a contribution to the existing literature by looking at the influence of having a non-urban background on the current sense of place among students in an urban environment in the Netherlands.

Reading guide

In this research, I try to get a deeper understanding of how a non-urban background influences the sense of place of students living in Utrecht. In the literature review, I first give an overview of what is generally seen as the urban and rural experience according to many in the field. Next, I explain what the concept sense of place entails, after which I link the concept to the student experience in the city. After this, I explain how the research is conducted in the chapter on methodology and provide the findings of this study in the chapter on the results. Lastly, I present the conclusions after which I give a critical view and provide for recommendations for future research.

Chapter two: Theoretical foundation

In this chapter, relevant theories regarding the sense of place are discussed. However, before delving into the existing literature on sense of place, a brief overview will be given of what is known in the literature as the urban and rural experience. After this, I will give a critical view on the traditional literature.

Urban and rural experience

Urban experience

When looking at studies that were influential in shaping the concept of urbanism, it becomes clear that defining a general urban experience is a complex task (Harvey, 2010; Milgram, 1970; Nairn et al., 2003; Simmel, 1903; Wirth, 1938). Therefore, we first look back at some older literature in order to get an understanding of how the city is perceived over time.

In traditional literature, the city was a symbol for superficial relationships, human alienation, distanced from nature and anonymity (Ittelson, 1978; Lalli, 1992; Nairn et al., 2003). Simmel (1903) first argued that urban environments cause for an overstimulation in the daily activities of individuals. This overstimulation leads to individuals not being able to deal with a lot of deep relationships, so relations in the city become superficial and distant. In order to provide more clarity around the concept of a city, Wirth (1938) gives a “sociological definition of the city”. He argues that a city consists of three characteristics, namely the relatively large size, the population density and the social heterogeneity. These aspects lead to impersonal relationships and a segmentalization of those relationships. However, Wirth gives a disclaimer that the definition of a city is dependent on its context and the social groups within it. Wirth further underlines the argument that cities cause for an overstimulation of noise, crowding and pollution because of the three characteristics. Milgram (1970) adds the characteristic ‘overload’ to the previous characteristics given by Wirth. Specifically, by experiencing an overload of incentives in the city, people can only get acquainted with a small amount of people.

Lastly, although the literature predominantly describes the city as a place with negative connotations, it can also be a place of opportunities, adventure, freedom, and pleasure for some people (Kern, 2010; Wirth, 1938). Kern (2010) describes this as a dynamic tension between the exciting aspects of the city and the fearful aspects of the city. A good illustration of this paradox is that the city can be seen as a place of feminism and female empowerment, but also as a place

with the presence of a constant threat of violence (Pain, 1997). Next to this, the urban environment provides for more facilities and opportunities, like having more educational opportunities (Thissen et al., 2010) and employment opportunities (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006) than in a non-urban setting. So, it becomes clear that the literature highlights different aspects of the urban experiences, be it more focused on the negative aspects of the city.

Rural experience

The rural experience is mostly depicted in the literature as the opposite from the urban experience (Milgram, 1970; Wirth, 1938). According to Milgram (1970), a rural area entails quieter surrounding with a less dense and more homogeneous population than in an urban environment. Because of less incentives and noise in a rural area, individuals have the opportunity to spend more time on relations and thus let it become less superficial than their urban counterparts. Furthermore, villages or rural areas are in the literature often described as places close to nature, and as having a sense of community, inclusion, peace and security (Geis & Ross, 1998; Lalli, 1992; Nairn et al., 2003). So, the rural experience is being described mostly in a positive manner in the literature.

The rural and the urban are being used as separate categories in research and policy for quite some time. Nowadays, however, the dichotomy fades and the concepts of urban and rural are blurring as more villages are undergoing the process of urbanization (Dymitrow & Stenseke, 2016). Especially in the Netherlands, the differences between urban and rural experiences could be narrow, because of smaller distances between rural areas and big cities and a relative high population density (Milieu en Natuur Planbureau, 2007). Furthermore, how individuals experience an environment could vary between different groups as it is dependent upon personal and cultural characteristics, shaped by past experiences (Clayton et al., 2009; Ittelson, 1978; Nairn et al., 2003). So, it could be that city residents with a different place of residence in the past could have another experience in the city than long-term city residents. Lastly, although the traditional literature is useful to get a sense of what ‘the urban’ and ‘the rural’ entail, it could be that the literature is somewhat outdated. For example, more diverse interactions and relationships are nowadays possible, like online interactions. For this reason, it could be that the literature is not entirely representative anymore and that people nowadays have different experiences in rural and urban environments. So, it is important to get a good understanding of how different groups of people experience the urban environment. In this

research I will focus on students with a rural background who have arrived to the city of Utrecht to follow an education.

Rural students in cities

There is a relatively small body of literature that is concerned with the sense of place among students from non-urban areas. Most attention has focused on the provision of well-being and academic achievement of students with a non-urban background. Studies that focus on the academic aspects show that students with a non-urban background overall have great difficulty with getting access to universities (Amankulova, 2018; Dundar & Lewis, 1999; Kamyab, 2008; Voicu & Vasile, 2010), managing expectations before going to university (Morton et al., 2018), and adjusting to urban and university culture (Guiffrida, 2008; Xiulan, 2015). However, as regards to the difference in academic achievement of non-urban students and their urban peers in universities, there has not been found a consensus in the literature. More traditional literature has namely found that non-urban students perform less than urban students (Dale & Miller, 1972; Greenberg & Teixeira, 1995; Roscigno & Crowle, 2001) as opposed to more recent literature which has found no significant difference in academic achievement (Liao et al., 2013; Maddah, 2019; Postiglione et al., 2017). Next to this, research has dedicated attention to the reasons why young people move from rural areas to cities in the Netherlands and other countries (Thissen et al., 2010). They found that especially young people leave rural areas to follow an education or for job opportunities. So, in short, it becomes clear from the literature that most non-urban students experience a somewhat disadvantaged position compared to students with an urban background.

Sense of place among students

A growing body of literature has investigated the sense of place among students. However, those two aspects combined, namely the sense of place of students and having a non-urban background, has gotten little attention. In this section, I will explain what there is known about this topic in the field of research.

Mobility and the sense of place of students formed the central focus of a study by Lee et al. (2015) in which the authors found several consequences of mobility among students. Namely, they found that highly mobile students overall showed lower levels of place

attachment, dependence, identity, and community and were also less happy than students with strong place emotions. Another factor that contributes to the sense of place of students is the physical aspect of the environment and the length of residence in a place (Yazdanfar et al., 2013). Lastly, Holton (2015) points out that youngsters need to alter their ideas on the sense of place when they become students in their own city. So, the sense of place of students alters when they become students, both of long-term city residents and newcomers, and it is found to be moderated by length of residence and mobility of students.

In the following section, I will sketch the context of rural areas in the Netherlands. Subsequently, I will go into detail about the previous literature on sense of place.

Rural areas in the Netherlands

As said before, the Netherlands is a small and urbanized country with a high population density in comparison to other countries, and rural areas are quite sparse (Haartsen et al., 2003; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Still, the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS] (2009) reported that in 2008 the Netherlands consisted of 6.000 rural neighbourhoods. The majority of those neighbourhoods were situated in Gelderland. Also, Dutch people perceive rural areas to be situated mainly in the periphery of the Netherlands, especially in the North (Haartsen et al., 2003). The OECD (2020) gives the following definition for rural areas in the Netherlands: “Rural areas, called ‘platteland’ in Dutch, refer to the land outside the city reserved primarily for agricultural activities. ... The rural definition in the Netherlands acknowledges mixed rural/urban areas and rural areas close to cities, but not remote rural areas.” So, in such a high urbanized and small country with relatively short distances between urban and rural areas, the differences between urban and rural culture could be less extensive than in other countries (Haartsen et al., 2003). Therefore, I will use the term *non-urban areas* to refer to rural areas in the Netherlands.

Sense of place

For this thesis, I will use the most important concepts within sense of place in student geographies according to different literature (Pretty et al., 2003; Qingjiu & Maliki, 2013; Smith, 2011), namely *place attachment*, *place identity*, *sense of community* and *place dependence*. Together, these concepts call on the different aspects of human experience and together form

the sense of place as described by Hodgetts et al. (2010), Jones et al. (2000), Jorgensen and Stedman (2006), Pacione (2009), and Tonts and Atherley (2010). The sense of place can thus be understood as an umbrella term to describe different concepts of sense of place, which are often used interchangeably in the literature (Pretty et al., 2003). Although the concepts are theoretically interwoven and overlapping, for this thesis I will evaluate the four concepts as separate concepts. So, they can be better understood as different ways of thinking about the same concept of sense of place (Pretty et al., 2003). I will explain each concept below. First, I will provide an overview of how the sense of place is understood in the literature.

Within the literature, a general definition of sense of place is used, namely the meanings, attachments and emotive bonds people give to or have with a place (Cresswell, 2009; Foote & Azaryahu, 2009; Holton, 2015; Semken et al., 2009; de Wit, 2013). Moreover, a sense of place calls on different aspects of the human experience, namely the affective (emotions), conative (behaviour), and cognitive (beliefs) aspects. So, these three aspects together construct the sense of place of people (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2000; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2006; Pacione, 2009; Tonts & Atherley, 2010). As it calls on the different facets of the human experience, the sense of place can influence, for example, the way we look at relationships with people, the way we treat our surroundings, our attitudes towards political and social issues, and how we identify ourselves (de Wit, 2013). Next to this, a sense of place is not something fixed. Rather, it is a complex concept which is created by the interplay between people, and people and place (Hodgetts et al., 2010; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Pretty et al., 2003; Shamai & Ilatov, 2005; Tonts & Atherley, 2010; Yazdanfar et al., 2013). As a result, people create different interpretations of place based on their experiences within the place (Casakin & Billig, 2009; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Stedman, 2003; Tonts & Atherley, 2010).

In addition to the definition of a sense of place, it is important to get further clarification on how a sense of place is operationalised in the literature. Most researchers investigating a sense of place have utilised the scale created by Shamai (1991), which I will now explain. He argues that people can have a sense of place on three different levels, namely: belonging to a place, attachment to a place, and having a deep commitment to a place. The first level is characterised by the feeling of togetherness within the place and having the knowledge of the basic aspects and symbols of the city. The second level involves having an emotional connection with the place and identifying with the goals and the needs of the place. The last level contains a commitment to a place through having an active role in the community and by being willing to make sacrifices for the larger interests of the place. In order to classify people

on the scale of sense of place, he divides the levels into different sublevels, namely: (0) Not having any sense of place, (1) Knowledge of a place, (2) Belonging to a place, (3) Attachment to a place, (4) Identifying with the goals of the place, (5) Involvement in a place, (6) Making sacrifices for a place (Shamai, 1991, p. 350). Together, the scale forms a continuum, as the different levels cannot be separated entirely, but overlap on some domains. According to different literature, having a historical connection to a place is needed in order to develop a sense of place (Shamai & Ilatov, 2005). Next to the attachment to the environmental characteristics of a place, it is namely also important to have memories of the people and the place (Eisenhauer et al., 2000). So, for students who are new to the urban environment, it could be difficult to form a sense of place.

Place attachment

Place attachment is defined in the literature as the related emotional bonds people have towards the material aspects, spatial features and affective ties of a place (Inalhan & Finch, 2004; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Low & Altman, 1992; Seamon, 2012; Stedman, 2003). As such, it refers to the affective (emotional) structure within the concept sense of place (Smith, 2011). When individuals form an attachment to a place, they generally do that on two levels. These two levels include the physical and the social aspects of a place, which I will explain shortly. First of all, people can form attachment to the objective features of a place like the geographical local and the physical design (Fisher et al., 1977). The process is mainly a result of the overall satisfaction of people towards the facilities, services, and surrounding areas and building of a place (Stedman, 2003). According to Yazdanfar et al. (2013), people's satisfaction of a place has the greatest impact on people's attachment to a place. Secondly, the social aspects of a place include the social behaviour of individuals, such as social participation and involvement in a place (Fisher et al., 1977). So, by being satisfied about the physical and social aspects of a neighbourhood, the overall attachment to a place is being fostered.

The literature has highlighted some other explanations how attachment can be formed to a place. First of all, many researchers recognise that the length of residence plays an important role in the emotional attachments people have towards a place, also defined as the rootedness (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Eisikovits & Borman, 2005; Tuan, 1980). People who are only temporary or for a short amount of time in a place, like tourists or newcomers, have less attachments to a place than people with much more historical connections to the place (Hay,

1998). Next to this, as said briefly before, by having social relationships with people in a place and by interacting with others, individuals can get attached to a place (Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995).

Students are known to be highly mobile and often travel back to their parental home during long weekends or vacations. As a consequence of this, it often becomes difficult for students to get attached to their new place of residence in the city of study (Holton, 2015). Especially for students from a non-urban area who are travelling longer distances to visit their parental home, it could be difficult to form attachments to their new home in the city. Tuan (1977) argues in accordance with this that stillness of place is crucial for individuals to form attachments to a place. Next to this, students from a non-urban area do not have deep rooted connections to the city as they grew up in another place and are used to different physical surroundings.

Place identity

Place identity is part of the self-identity of an individual, like social class or gender (Proshansky et al., 1983). Proshansky (1978) defined place identity as “those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideals, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to this environment” (p. 155). It is thus linked to the cognitive aspect (beliefs and perceptions) of sense of place (Inalhan & Finch, 2004; Kyle et al., 2004; Rooney et al., 2010; Wulfhorst et al., 2006). It is an important concept within the sense of place because a sense of place is more than the emotional bonds or attachments people experience towards a place. People define themselves through their physical surroundings. In other words, the process of self-identity is influenced by the qualities of a certain place (Qazimi, 2014).

According to Lalli (1992), an urban place identity can be developed by the process of identifying with objects, individuals, groups, or environments. This way, individuals recognise similarities with the self and the environment, which provides for points of reference in the place identity of people. Furthermore, Lalli (1992) has operationalized the concept urban-related identity in order to determine the identification of individuals with a city, consisting of the dimensions continuity, attachment, familiarity and commitment. First of all, the dimension continuity refers to the extension of the personal past in the city. Specifically, it refers to the

connection between the past personal experiences and the current place of residence. Next, the attachment implies the feelings of being at home in a place, also described by belongingness and rootedness. Thirdly, the dimension familiarity includes the perception of recognition in daily activities and actions in a place. So, it refers to how well a person can get familiarised in an urban environment. Last of all, the dimension commitment implies that people are willing to continue living in an urban environment. So, it refers to the future of an individual. These different dimensions can be used in this research as a guiding tool to determine whether students with a non-urban background are considered to have a place identity with the urban environment.

According to Proshansky and Fabian (1987), a place identity is primarily formed through the place an individual grows up in. Children develop an identity as they grow up and, in that time, they learn what is right and wrong and how they can differentiate their environment from other places. Furthermore, Chow and Healey (2008) argue that the transition from the parental home to the university can cause for challenges because of the break from routines and from a controlled environment. However, it can also cause for excitement as students gain independence, which softens the shock of the transition (Tognoli, 2003). What strikes as important factors in the development of the place identity among students, are the identification with the physical structure of a house and with significant people, like family and friends, in a place. Moving away from the place they call home and from friends and family can cause for students to develop new norms and values and to reinterpret the self-image and identity (Chow & Healey, 2008). Rural students especially can experience difficulties with developing a place identity in the city, as they grew up in a totally different surrounding, namely a non-urban area.

Sense of community

Another factor that contributes to the creation of a sense of place for people is engaging with the place and with its people (Pretty et al., 2003). Therefore, a sense of community is an important element in the sense of place. A sense of community has gotten the following widely used definition in the literature: “The perception of similarity with others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure.” (Sarason, 1974, p. 157). Next to this, McMillan and Chavis (1986) have given another definition of sense of community, namely: “A feeling that the members of a

community have in relation to their belonging to a community, a feeling that the members worry about each other and that the group is concerned about them, and a shared faith that the needs of the members will be satisfied through their commitment for being together” (p. 9). In other words, a sense of community reflects the social environmental features of a place and the feelings that the community looks out for them. People who have a low sense of community often report they feel lonely and isolated. On the other hand, having a strong sense of community can lead to feelings of life satisfaction, heightened well-being and having a sense of self-efficacy (Sum et al., 2009).

Chavis et al. (1986) list the most important factors for the creation of a sense of community in their theoretical model of sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections. Membership to a group entails the feeling of belonging to a group. Secondly, influence refers to the exchanged relations in a group and the feeling of being able to exert influence the group and to be influenced by the group. Thirdly, integration and need satisfaction concerns the satisfaction with how the resources in the community meet the demands of individuals. Last of all, shared emotional connections regards the shared events and created memories between individuals (Chavis et al., 1986; McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Peterson et al., 2008). Hay (1998) makes a comment that having historical connections and knowledge about a place, contributes to the feelings of a sense of community. This means that it is easier for long-term residents to develop a sense of community than for newcomers, like students who are new to the city. However, new students still have chance to develop a sense of community through superficial, partial or personal connections to people in the city.

Other literature on the sense of communities among students has primarily focused on the sense of community in higher education settings, called the collegiate sense of community [CSOC] (Kirk & Lewis, 2015). The CSOC focuses on different aspects than this study, like the sense of community and student burnout (McCarthy et al., 1990), a sense of community in an online learning environment (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Ouzts, 2006; Wighting et al., 2008), sense of community and student persistence (Jacobs & Archie, 2008), and sense of community student participation (DeNeui, 2003). This research, however, focuses on the influence of the urban environment on the sense of community among students with a non-urban background.

Walker and Raval (2017) are one of the few studies to do research on the sense of place among rural residents in urban environments. They found in their study on the psychological

sense of community among college students from rural hometowns in the U.S. that young people experience a positive sense of community, but there's also a flipside. Often, rural youngsters feel like they belong with the town and with its people and they feel supported by the community. However, they also fear for the future as they do not want to get stuck in their hometown and they feel isolated from other communities. So, moving to a new city could be freeing for rural students to meet and connect with new people, yet it could also be a somewhat more negative experience as they move away from their community.

Place dependence

Place dependence refers to how well a place serves goal achievement (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Pretty et al., 2003; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981). In the literature, two dimensions of place dependence are given. The first dimension is the physical and social resources available in the place to fulfil the goals and satisfy the needs of individuals. The second dimension refers to the quality of the place in comparison to other places (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981). So, it is a much more functional attachment people have to a place in comparison to the other dimensions. Furthermore, as people are more intended to act upon fulfilling their goals, this strand refers to the conative (behavioral) structure of sense of place (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981).

Comparing and evaluating a place to other places is mostly a subconscious process, although certain circumstances could heighten people's awareness of aspects of a place (Pretty et al., 2003). In theory, people could also be dependent on places they have never even visited as that particular place provides a unique setting for goal achievement of individuals (White et al., 2008). For non-urban students, moving to a metropolitan area, the city could offer much more opportunities and physical resources for them to fulfil their goals and needs, as it has more facilities than a rural area or small town (Thissen et al., 2010). Therefore, students with a non-urban background could have a higher place dependence in the city than in their former hometown.

Chapter three: Methods

In this section, I will reflect on the way this research is performed. The question aimed to answer in this thesis is as follows:

How does having a non-urban background influence the sense of place of students, how does it change over time and what are the strategies they use to feel more at home in Utrecht?

By reflecting on the research, I will talk in-depth about my choice to use qualitative methods, namely the walking interview method, and about my choices in the process of participant recruitment and selection, the data collection process, the quality of the research, and the process of data analysis. First, I will explain in detail what the walking interview method entails and what both the advantages as disadvantages are of chosen method.

Qualitative research: walking method

In order to get a better understanding of the sense of place of individuals, I have used a qualitative method, namely walking interviews. Walking interviews consist of (semi-)structured conversations which are held while the researcher and participant walk a certain route next to each other (Anderson, 2004; Clark & Emmel, 2010; Evans & Jones, 2011; Jones et al., 2008). There are multiple formats of walk along interviews (Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009; Clark & Emmel, 2010; Kusenbach, 2003). In this case, I used a participant driven walking interview, in which the participant decided where the interview would take place and which route we would take. This way, the participant is seen as a sort of expert guiding the researcher through the city (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Evans & Jones, 2011).

The goal of this research was to both gain insights into the sense of place of students and to examine which influence a non-urban background exerts in an urban environment. The walking interview method suits this goal best as it allows to get a better understanding of people's relationships with place as it allows people to remember certain emotions connected to a place (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Evans & Jones, 2011). Furthermore, this method is particularly useful in studying how participants interact with the place and the people in the neighbourhood by both observing the participants and by asking questions (Jones et al., 2008; Kinney, 2017). So, the reason I have used to method is because it is a well-established approach in exploring the connection between the self and place.

There are multiple benefits linked to using the walking interview method. First, walking makes the talking easier for people (Kinney, 2017). A reason for this is because people can articulate their thoughts more easily by thinking about experiences and events while simultaneously being in their spatial context (Clark & Emmel, 2010). Secondly, walking

interviews take the awkwardness away from face-to-face interviews as it allows for natural breaks. It also gives participants time to think about their answers and reflect on them (Riley, 2010). Lastly, by doing an activity together, namely walking a certain route, the power imbalance between researcher and participant is diminished (Kinney, 2017). This makes it less likely that participants give socially desirable responses and thus gives richer data on the understandings of place and people (Evans & Jones, 2011).

However, there are also a few practical and ethical issues regarding the use of the walking interview method. The first one being that walking interviews take place outside and thus there is an unpredictability concerning the weather. So, it is important to have a back-up option or to have an option to alter the date or time of the interview to keep it safe and comfortable to conduct the interview (Carpiano, 2009). Next, as the participant is in charge of the route, it could be that the walk (accidentally) crosses an unsafe area. Because of this, it is wise to consult beforehand together which area is walked during the interview (Jones et al., 2008). Thirdly, as it is a walking interview, the participant should be physically able to walk, which excludes certain people from taking part in the interview (Evans & Jones, 2011). The fourth practical issue is that, due to noises on the street, it could be that the interview is partly not recorded (Clark & Emmel, 2010). So, this can give difficulties with analysing the data. Last of all, confidentiality cannot always be ensured when walking in a public place. So, it is important to have discussions beforehand with the participants about what to do when we meet an acquaintance of the participant or when the participant feels uncomfortable to answer a question in public (Clark & Emmel, 2010).

Participant group

Semi-structured walking interviews were conducted with 11 participants, of whom four males and seven females. Criteria for selecting the participants were as follows: they had to be studying and residing in Utrecht on the moment of data collection. Next to this, they had to have grown up in a rural area in the Netherlands, which means they had to have lived in a small village containing less than 1000 addresses per square kilometre (CBS, 2022). As a result, the participants originated from different rural areas in the Netherlands, which can roughly be divided into two groups, namely: the first group containing six participants who lived in a 31-77 km ratio from Utrecht, and the second group consisting of five participants who lived more than 118 km from Utrecht, mainly in the north of the Netherlands. Table 1 shows a concise

overview of the characteristics of the sample. I have chosen to put the interviewees in the table in an order according to the distance from their old place of residence to Utrecht. A reason for this is because people living closer to Utrecht could have visited Utrecht more often than people living further away from Utrecht. This could have had an influence on how they perceive and experience Utrecht while living there during their education.

Furthermore, the participants ranged in age from age 20 to 29 and they ranged from living two months to eight years in the city of Utrecht. The participant group consisted additionally mostly out of students who were relatively at the end of their bachelor's education or doing their master's. So, this could have shaped the outcomes of the interviews, as young students who just started their education could have a different outlook on the sense of place than relatively older students who often already have contacts in the place. Furthermore, the sample consisted of slightly more females (7) than males (4), which is roughly representative to the gender distribution of students in Utrecht (RTV Utrecht, 2018). Lastly, there has been made an effort to assemble a diversity in the participant group regarding the address density of the previous place of residence and regarding the length of living in Utrecht.

Table 1:
Sample characteristics

Interviewee	Age	Male/ Female	Address density per square kilometre	Distance to Utrecht	Length of living in Utrecht
1.	23	M	117	33 km	2 months
2.	23	F	315	41 km	4 years
3.	23	M	234	51 km	4 years
4.	22	M	230	57 km	1,5 years
5.	20	F	905	76 km	3 years
6.	25	M	375	77 km	5 years
7.	23	F	61	118 km	6 years
8.	24	F	36	127 km	9 months
9.	24	F	18	150 km	1,5 years
10.	29	F	18	150 km	8 years
11.	24	F	155	152 km	6 years

The participants were sampled by the use of the own network of the interviewer and later on by the use of the snowball method. The snowball method implies that already sampled participants give referrals to others who also meet the characteristics to be a potential participant (Johnson, 2014). The interviewer is a female with a relatively high socio-economic background who has a background in sociology and currently is enrolled in her master's Human Geography. She lived most of her childhood in Nieuwegein, a municipality close to Utrecht, but she calls herself an 'Utrechter'. On the moment of writing, she lives five years in student housing in Utrecht. Furthermore, the first participants were recruited by asking friends, roommates, and acquaintances whether they knew potential participants in their network who met the requirements and were willing to do an interview. Together, approximately 30 people were contacted to participate in the interview. The most common reasons students mentioned for not participating is not being interested to participate or not having the time to participate in a walking interview. Next to this, students who did not meet the selection criteria often came from a village which contained more than 1000 addresses per square kilometre. This criterion made it difficult to search enough participants. In addition, three students who were willing to participate cancelled at the last moment or misinterpreted the selection criteria, which resulted in them not being able to participate. The students were more willing to participate in the walking interview when they were asked through a mutual friend, which could have influenced the outcomes of the research for the reason that the participant group is not entirely representative for the students with a non-urban background in Utrecht. Next to this, it could be that the students who participated were more interested in the topic of the research, which could have influenced the results of this research.

Data collection process

In the first three weeks of April 2022, the potential participants were contacted through WhatsApp. This period overlapped partly with the data collection period, as participants referred other potential participants. Specifically, the interviews were conducted in the last three weeks of April and the first week of May of 2022. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews took place in a spot in Utrecht chosen by the participant. Beforehand, the participants were namely asked to choose a spot in Utrecht which meant a lot to them, for example a place to which they had special memories, which reminded them of home, or where they first felt at

home in Utrecht. The participants were asked to give verbal consent about the objectives and the scope of the study, and about the recording of the interviews. The interviews lasted between 31 minutes and one hour and six minutes. The interviews were recorded by asking the participants to put wired earphones in or around their ear, so the microphone was near the mouth of the participant. The earplugs were attached to the recording phone of the interviewer. Next to the recordings, the routes taking during the interviews were documented and lastly the participants were asked to take pictures of spots they felt were contributing to their story. In order to get answers to the research question and subquestions, the participants were asked questions about the following topics: first impressions of Utrecht, attachment to Utrecht, identity to Utrecht, dependence towards Utrecht, community in Utrecht, changes over time, and strategies to feel more at home in Utrecht.

Based on the topic list, 11 interviews have taken place. Almost all interviews went smoothly, and participants were positive about their experiences. The participants understood the assignments and questions and the participants gave comprehensive and relevant answers to the questions. The main difficulty I experienced was finding students that grew up in a village small enough to participate, and who were willing to participate. Next to this, a few potential participants indicated that they moved to another, bigger village or city in their childhood, or lived parttime in a city due to divorced parents. In those cases, I could not include them in the sample for my research as they were already used to an urban environment while growing up. Secondly, at times, potential participants or referrals did not read the assignments properly, which lead them to misunderstand the requirements. As a result, I could not include a substantial number of students in my dataset as they ended up not meeting the requirements. However, by asking around in my own network and by using the snowball method, the threshold to participate in my research became smaller. After eight or nine interviews, the responses from the participants became more consistent, which lead to data saturation.

Context of Covid-19

The interviews were conducted shortly after the corona lockdown, in which all the people in the Netherlands had to stay at home for three months. This meant that the students got online lectures, seeing friends was limited, and shops and facilities were closed. In total, the Netherlands has had two years of corona measures which restricted the behaviour and freedom of people. In the time of the interviews, the society had just opened up again and the corona

measures were let go completely. This could have the implication that the students were excessively happy in this time and therefore reported to be more positive in this time than they would otherwise be. On the other hand, a possible consequence of the corona measures is that the students have not gotten to know the city as well as they could have without corona measures. A last implication is that the students might still have a fear to make use of the public space and facilities in the city, in the case they get infected with the corona virus. When reading the findings of this research, the context in which the interviews were conducted should be kept in mind.

Data analysis

In this thesis, I choose to do data analysis according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to this thematic analysis, the first step is to transcribe the interviews. This helps with the process of understanding the data and helps to form the first ideas about the results of the data. All the interviews were transcribed by hand in Microsoft Word and were anonymised from the beginning. By transcribing everything by hand, everything that was said was written down that was said, apart from stop words, hesitations, sounds made while thinking, or background noise. Next to this, I choose to make the transcriptions as soon as possible after conducting the interviews. This way, it helps the researcher to process the information and to better identify possible similarities, trends or differences (McGrath et al., 2019).

After making the transcriptions, the interviews can be coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were coded by hand, highlighting the most important themes by linking it to codes. The codes formed the basis for the analysis of the interviews. During the analysis, the data was interpreted, and similarities and differences recognised. The obtained results will be presented in the next chapter. The decision was made to present the quotes from the interviewees in the original language, namely in Dutch. The translations, however, are made by the interpretation of the interviewer and can be found in the footnotes.

Chapter four: Results

Since the concept sense of place consists of four aspects that have been identified relevant for student geographies, namely: place attachment, place identity, sense of community and place dependency, I will present the results according to these aspects. Subsequently, I will present the results on how the sense of place of students with a non-urban background changed over time, and on their strategies to feel more at home in Utrecht.

1. Sense of place

1.1. Place attachment

Utrecht: small but big

In order to assess how place attachment of students in Utrecht is influenced by having a non-urban background, the interviewees were asked about their emotional bonds towards Utrecht. The results provide evidence that the students with a non-urban background generally have very positive feelings towards living in Utrecht. An example of the positive feelings of students towards Utrecht: *“Ik vind het (Utrecht) heel leuk, ik ben er heel positief over. Ik vind het heel gezellig. Ik vind het heel fijn. Een beetje die balans tussen voor mijn gevoel heel veel groen, heel veel parken en bomen, maar toch ook wel dat stadsgevoel. Maar toch ook dat hele schattige. Het is klein, maar groot, het heeft alles voor mijn gevoel.” (Interview 2)*². Nevertheless, the students who lived for less than two years in Utrecht showed they were less attached to Utrecht than the students who were living for a longer period of time in Utrecht, as is also found in other research (Holton, 2015; Tuan, 1977). I will go into more detail about this, when discussing the findings on changes over time.

² “I like it (Utrecht) very much, I am very positive about it. I think it is very cosy. I think it's very nice. A bit of a balance between what I feel is a lot of green, a lot of parks and trees, but also that city feeling. But also very cute. It's small, but big, it has everything in my opinion. (Interview 2).”

The students mainly expressed positive feelings towards the following aspects of the urban environment: the fact that it reminds them of their old village, the green spaces, the small size of the city, and the facilities. First of all, the majority of the students interviewed make the comparison of Utrecht to a small village. When asked the question to name characteristics of Utrecht, a person answered: *“Ik denk toch een dorpse stad. Het is klein, maar groot. Je komt altijd wel een bekende tegen en alles is te fietsen.”* (Interview 7)³. Two students who have lived on the Ina Boudier Bakkerlaan [IBB], a studentcomplex housing a lot of students, mentioned that especially the IBB felt as a small village within the city. The reason the students gave for this is that they knew a lot of other students living on the IBB, people were polite to each other and greeted each other, and they felt connected to the other residents. A picture was taken by interviewee 11 of the IBB to show the place where she feels most at home in Utrecht.



Image 1: The studentcomplex IBB

Locations of walking interviews

Furthermore, the places the students chose to do the walking tours in were mostly parks in Utrecht. The students were asked beforehand to choose a place in Utrecht which has a special meaning to them. As a result, the students mostly picked places where they first felt at home in Utrecht, or which reminded them of their old place of residence. A reason students gave for having chosen parks to conduct the walking interview in are because they liked to be surrounded by nature, to find some peace and quiet, because it reminded them of home, because it made them feel connected to Utrecht, and because they have memories with friends in those places. By conducting the interviews through a walk along method and by being in a place of their choosing while doing the interviews, it allowed the interviewees to recall memories and emotions attached to certain places in Utrecht. One person said the following about being reminded of home: *“Bij mijn ouders woon ik aan het randje van mijn dorp. Ik heb niet echt burens ofzo. Dan kijk je uit op alleen maar weiland en koeien. Ik dacht, dat is hier eigenlijk ook*

³ "I think it is a town that looks like a village. It is small, but big. You always bump into someone you know and everything is within cycling distance" (Interview 7).



wel een beetje zo. Dit is wel iets wat me aan thuis herinnert. Dit is wat me heel erg doet denken aan thuis, met de koeien en het weiland. Ik woon sinds een paar maandjes op deze plek en dat is dichtbij deze polder.” (Interview 2)⁴. Image 2 illustrates this quote.

Image 2: A meadow with cows near the Gagelbos in Utrecht

Another example of a students’ preference to be in parks: *“Ik hoef niet alleen maar de dolle jungle (van de stad) te hebben. Dat zit er best ver af van hoe het er thuis uitziet.” (Interview 1)⁵. This student also stated that he feels especially connected to Utrecht when he “chills” in the park with other people from Utrecht.*

The students who chose other places to do the walking interview in, mostly picked places to which they have memories or which they visited frequently. One student for example chose the neighbourhood where he first lived in Utrecht because she first felt at home in this place in Utrecht. She further said the following: *“Nou ik heb hier in deze wijk gewoond. Ik heb daar altijd leuke tijden meegemaakt. Het was een goede start van mijn studententijd. Een goeie uitvalsbasis wat dat betreft.” (Interview 7)⁶.*

Positive characteristics of Utrecht

⁴ "At my parents' house, I live at the edge of my village. I don't really have any neighbours or anything like that. You only have a view of the meadow with cows. I thought, it's a bit like that here too. This is something that reminds me of home. This is what really reminds me of home, with the cows and the meadow. I have been living in this place for a few months and it is close to this polder." (Interview 2).

⁵ "I do not have to have the crazy jungle (of the city) constantly. That does not resemble home for me." (Interview 1)

⁶ "Well I have lived here in this neighbourhood. I always had good times there. It was a good start to my student days. It was a good base in that respect." (Interview 7).

Other characteristics the students' attributed to Utrecht were the relatively small size, "overzichtelijk", safe, warm, hip, and "lieflijk". One person stated that the safe and cozy feelings she has towards Utrecht is, for example, influenced by the fact that Utrecht does not have any night shops and therefore doesn't feel like a big metropolis. Next to this, the relatively small size of the city facilitates that everything is within cycling distance, and that it is not as colossal and touristy as Amsterdam. Another female student stated that she feels safe because there are so many women in Utrecht: "*Het is echt een vrouwenstad. Daardoor voel je je ook weer heel fijn en veilig.*" (Interview 10)⁷. So, the fact that Utrecht is relatively small, contains green spaces, provides for communities within the city, and other characteristics of Utrecht, reminds the students of their old place of residence and has a positive influence on students' emotional bonds with the city. Image 3 shows a picture of a petting zoo, which reminded interviewee seven of home, because his parents also have a petting zoo next to their house. Therefore, he likes to come to this place in Utrecht.



Image 3: a petting zoo within the Griftpark

Urban vs rural

Lastly, a somewhat counterintuitive result is that the students attribute the same characteristics to urban life and rural life as provided by the (Geis & Ross, 1998; Lalli, 1992; Nairn et al., 2003). However, they ascribe negative feelings towards living in a rural area and positive feelings towards living in the city. A few students said they noticed at the beginning that the people in Utrecht are more to themselves and do not greet each other as often as in their old village. However, they found the anonymity of the city pleasant: "*Ik vond het juist wel fijn dat anonieme. Bij ons in het dorp als je dan iets deed, had iedereen het in de gaten. Dit geeft wel veel vrijheid, dat je iets kan doen wat je zelf wilt.*" (Interview 9)⁸. Other characterizations the students attributed to Utrecht were less social control, more opportunities and facilities, and people being open minded, individualistic, progressive, hip, young, and high educated. So, the negative connotations the literature assigned to the aspects of the urban experience (Ittelson,

⁷ "It really is a women's city. That makes you feel very good and safe." (Interview 10).

⁸ "I liked the anonymity of it. In our village, if you did something, everyone noticed. This gives a lot of freedom, that you can do what you want." (Interview 9).

1978; Lalli, 1992; Nairn et al., 2003) are not acknowledged by the students. It does, however, correspond with the few more recent studies on the positive aspects of the urban environment, which are mainly focused on the physical aspects of the city (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Thissen et al., 2010).

Living in a rural area is, according to the students, characterised by a calm atmosphere, a lot of green spaces, social control, a homogeneous group of residents, kindness, and attentiveness, which correlates with the literature (Geis & Ross, 1998; Lalli, 1992; Nairn et al., 2003). However, the students mentioned the flip sides of this, namely the fact that there was nothing to do in the villages. Secondly, due to the social control, the students always had to behave and act according to the norms, otherwise their neighbours would talk about them. Multiple students mentioned the phrase *“doe maar normaal, dan doe je al gek genoeg”* (Interview 3, 6 and 11)⁹ to describe the life in their village. Other characteristics that students attribute to the residents of their old village are narrow-minded, and conservative. However, the students were not all negative about their old villages, as is illustrated by the following quotes: *“Aan de ene kant is er veel sociale controle op een goede manier. Iedereen kent elkaar, iedereen praat met elkaar. Het is altijd open. Als je door het dorp loopt moet je er altijd rekening mee houden dat je extra tijd nodig hebt omdat je mensen tegen gaat komen die tegen je gaan praten over het leven. Dat is op die manier heel erg leuk. Aan de andere kant, soms ook een beetje op een negatieve manier omdat er veel wordt geroddeld. Er wordt veel van elkaar gevonden. Ook weer doordat iedereen elkaar kent, dus op die manier vervelend soms. Er wordt dus veel gepraat op een goede en slechte manier.”* (Interview 2)¹⁰. Another example: *“Ze zijn wat ouder allemaal. De jonge mensen trekken allemaal weg. Het zijn wel boeren. Iets minder open minded. Hier in Utrecht heb je heel multi culti en dat is op het platteland gewoon iets minder.... Dus ik denk wat rechtser, wat ouder, wat lager opgeleid. Klinkt allemaal heel negatief, dat is het ook weer niet. Iedereen is wel heel aardig en heel behulpzaam.”* (Interview 8)¹¹. These quotes show that the students are also positive about certain aspects of living in their old neighbourhood, although they were mostly eager to move to an urban environment.

⁹ "Just act normal, then you're already crazy enough" (Interview 3, 6 and 11)

¹⁰ "On the one hand, there is a lot of social control in a good way. Everyone knows each other and everyone talks to each other. It is always an open atmosphere. When you walk through the village, you always have to take into account that you need extra time because you are going to meet people who are going to talk to you about things. It's a lot of fun that way. On the other hand, sometimes in a negative way because there is a lot of gossip. People think a lot of each other. Also because everyone knows each other, so in that way it's sometimes annoying. So there's a lot of talking in a good and bad way." (Interview 2)

¹¹ "They are all a bit older. The young people are all moving away. They are farmers. A bit less open-minded. Here in Utrecht you have a very multi culti and in the countryside it's just a bit less.... So I think a bit more right-

So, several answers can be given to the following subquestion: *How do students with a non-urban background experience place attachment to Utrecht?* First of all, students with a non-urban background experience very positive emotional bonds towards Utrecht. These positive feelings are both related to the physical and social aspects of Utrecht, which according to the literature fosters place attachment (Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995; Fisher et al., 1977; Stedman, 2003; Yazdanfar et al., 2013). Furthermore, the students often made a resemblance to their old village, which according to them makes Utrecht a pleasant place for them to live in. This relates to the third dimension of the urban-related identity theory of Lalli (1992), namely the familiarisation of a person in an urban environment.

1.2. Place identity

Student identity

In this section, I will assess *How does having a non-urban background influence how students identify with Utrecht?* First of all, we will look at what the place identity entails for students. One major finding is that the majority of the students do not necessarily identify as a resident of Utrecht. Rather, they identify with the student population of Utrecht. A reason for this is that students mention they mostly come into contact with other students, they do not come into contact often with non-student residents in Utrecht, and because they see themselves as temporary residents. I will explain this in more detail below.

To the question whether they identified themselves as an Utrechter, an interviewee answered that she calls Utrecht her home, but doesn't identify as an Utrechter for the reason that she is mostly among students instead of with other Utrecht residents. "*Omdat ik niet het gevoel heb dat ik zo thuis ben in echt de stad. En dat ik me niet echt binnen de Utrechtse sferen bevind. Meer binnen de studenten importsferen. Daarom zou ik mezelf geen Utrechter noemen.*" (Interview 5)¹². Other students say they remain mostly in their 'student bubble' and therefore do not identify with the other residents in Utrecht.

Furthermore, the students were mostly hesitant when trying to answer the question whether they felt connected to the people in Utrecht. A reason for this is because they say they

wing, a bit older, a bit less educated. It all sounds very negative, but it's not. Everyone is very nice and very helpful." (Interview 8)

¹² "Because I don't feel like I'm really at home in the city. And that I'm not really within the Utrecht spheres. More within the student import spheres. That's why I wouldn't call myself a Utrechter." (Interview 5)

are not in contact as often with the residents of Utrecht, but more with other students in Utrecht. An example of such an answer: *“Wat zijn nou de mensen in Utrecht? Zijn dat de studenten of...? Dat vind ik een lastige. Studenten voelen allemaal een beetje als rondtrekkende zigeuners. Niet echt gebonden zeg maar.”* (Interview 10)¹³. The feeling of not identifying to the non-student residents in Utrecht, but rather identifying as a temporary inhabitant of Utrecht who is not yet rooted to a place, is shared by many other students. It is further illustrated by the following quote: *“Ja, maar ik denk dat het (identificeren met Utrecht) samenhangt met dat ik nog student ben waardoor het voelt dat ik hier tijdelijk woon. Als ik hier een baan zou krijgen en er dus voor zou kiezen om hier te wonen, dan zou het wat permanenter voelen. Voor mij is student zijn nog een beetje als een soort nomade die rondtrekt.”* (Interview 10)¹⁴. The students rather see themselves as part of the student population in Utrecht.

Influence of old place of residence

When asked about a more general identification to Utrecht, the students mention that they still carry a piece of the identification to their old place of residence with them. The reasons they give for this is that the ways of thinking and their values still are greatly influenced by their old place of residence. An example of an answer to the question whether the student identified with Utrecht: *“Ik ben een beetje een stugge, of ja, nuchtere Fries. Dus dat is wel anders. Maar ik ben iemand die me wel heel goed kan aanpassen, dus ik kan op zich wel gauw erbij passen. Maar ik ben wel anders of denk anders over sommige dingen misschien.”* (Interview 9)¹⁵. Another answer to the question whether a student identified with her old place of residence: *“Als mensen vragen waar ik vandaan kom, dan zeg ik gewoon Friesland omdat ze niet weten waar ik dan zou wonen. Dan vragen ze of ik Fries praat, maar dat doe ik niet. Ik kom er wel vandaan en het zal altijd deel van mij zijn, maar ik heb er niet zo veel mee. Misschien heb ik wel een bepaalde nuchterheid die hoort bij een identiteit van het Fries zijn. Dat vind ik dan ook wel weer mooi. Dat je af en toe een stapje terug kan zetten en van een afstandje kan kijken wat*

¹³ "What are the people in Utrecht? Are they the students or...? I find that a difficult question. Students feel a bit like wandering nomads. Not really bound together, so to speak." (Interview 10)

¹⁴ "Yes, but I think that (identifying with Utrecht) is related to the fact that I am still a student, so it feels like I am living here temporarily. If I got a job here and chose to live here, it would feel more permanent. For me, being a student is still a bit like being a nomad who travels around." (Interview 10)

¹⁵ "I'm a bit of a stubborn, down-to-earth Frisian. So that is different. But I am someone who can adapt very well, so I can easily fit in. But I am different or think differently about some things maybe." (Interview 9)

er nou eigenlijk allemaal gebeurt. Dat kan ik wel waarderen." (Interview 11)¹⁶. This correlates to the research of Proshansky and Fabian (1987) that states that the place identity, and thus the morals and values of a person, is primarily formed through the place an individual grows up in. The students, however, indicate that their identity can change depending on where they live and with whom they are surrounded.

Shared identity through similarities

However, the students do mostly indicate that they identify more with the residents of Utrecht than they do with the residents of the small village they grew up in. When asked the question how they would characterise the people in their old place of residence, the general answers that were given entailed that it was a place with a homogeneous group of inhabitants, consisting of "stugge mensen", right-wing voters, less open minded, but also kind, and helpful. In contrast, when asked the question how they would identify Utrecht, they mention the characteristics of open-minded people, who keep more to themselves, a multicultural group, left-wing voters, and a place with a lot of students. All but one interviewees said that they identify more with the characteristics of the city of Utrecht, since they have more similarities to the people in Utrecht. Nonetheless, when the students compare themselves with residents who live their whole lives in Utrecht, they often do not identify with them as they feel like they do not have anything in common with them. This is illustrated by the following quote: "... *als ik dan bij een oud iemand ga poetsen die al zijn hele leven in Utrecht woont, dan heb ik niet het idee ik voel me verbonden met jou omdat we allebei in Utrecht wonen. Dat schept dan niet de band ofzo.*" (Interview 5)¹⁷. This relates to the research on the importance of shared events and memories in the creation of a sense of place (Chavis et al., 1986; McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Peterson et al., 2008). The students experience more shared memories with the other students living in Utrecht than with the non-student residents in Utrecht.

¹⁶ "When people ask where I am from, I just say Friesland because they don't know where I live. Then they ask if I speak Frisian, but I don't. I am from Friesland and it will always be a part of me. I do come from Friesland and it will always be part of me, but do not care about it as much. Maybe I have a certain levelheadedness which belongs to the identity of being Frisian. That is what I like about it. That you can take a step back now and then and look at what is happening from a distance. I can appreciate that." (Interview 11)

¹⁷ "... If I go and clean the house of an old person who has lived in Utrecht all his life, I don't feel a bond with you because we both live in Utrecht. That doesn't create a bond or anything." (Interview 5)

Relative sense of place

The students indicated that how they identify with Utrecht is dependent on who they relate to at that moment, as the following quote indicates: *“Ik denk dat ik me bijna altijd identificeer als Utrechter, behalve als ik mezelf onder de Utrechters bevind.”* (Interview 2)¹⁸. This quote illustrates that the students do have a sense of place in Utrecht, but that their connection to Utrecht is selective. Multiple students, for example, mention that they do not identify with the people who had a childhood in Utrecht or who live there for a long period of time as they do not share that experience. Next to this, two interviewees indicated that they do not identify with people who speak a local colloquialism. The reason an interviewee gave for this is as following: *“Je hebt misschien de mensen die hier hun hele leven al wonen en ook plat Utrechts praten. Ik heb dat niet en dat deel ik ook niet met die mensen. Maar de grootste reden daarvoor is dat ik hier niet ben opgegroeid.”* (Interview 6)¹⁹.

However, when the students find themselves surrounded by people from outside of Utrecht or who know less about Utrecht than they do, they identify more with Utrecht. For example, a few students mentioned when people from out of Utrecht come and visit Utrecht, they feel like they really belong in the city. *“Mijn peetmoeder had ik hier bijvoorbeeld een keer op bezoek. Dan laat ik haar de stad zien. Tja, ik wil niet zeggen dat ik me dan trots voel ofzo. Wat is een ander woord voor trots? Ik vind het gewoon heel leuk om haar de stad te laten zien en te laten zien waar ik dan woon.”* (Interview 4)²⁰. Another student said the following: *“Het is meer als er vriendinnen van mij uit Friesland komen en ik dan de stad laat zien. Dan heb ik het gevoel hier woon ik en ik ken dingen. Als ik dat laat zien, voel ik me wel trots. Dat had ik toen wel. Dat het voor hen helemaal nieuw is en dat ik me er heel bekend in voel.”* (Interview 9)²¹. Next to this, three interviewees indicated that they especially feel connected with Utrecht when they have been in another place in the Netherlands and they arrive with the train in Utrecht. They said that having been away and arriving back in Utrecht, makes them realise that Utrecht is the place they call home.

¹⁸ "I think I almost always identify as an Utrechter, except when I find myself among Utrechters." (Interview 2)

¹⁹ "You may have people who have lived here all their lives and also speak in an Utrecht accent. Well, I don't have that and I don't share it with those people either. But the biggest reason for that is that I didn't grow up here." (Interview 6)

²⁰ "For example, I had my godmother visit me here once. Then I showed her the city. Well, I don't want to say that I feel proud or anything. What is another word for proud? I just like to show her the city and show her where I live." (Interview 4)

²¹ "It's more when friends of mine come from Friesland and I show them the city. Then I have the feeling I live here and I know things. When I show them, I do feel proud. I did have it one time. It's all new to them and I am completely familiar in it." (Interview 9)

Increased sense of place at big events

Lastly, the interviewees explained they feel especially connected with Utrecht when a big event is happening. Examples are the festivities around a sporting match, like soccer or a rowing competition, or Koningsdag. To the question whether the interviewee could give an example of when she felt really connected to Utrecht, she answered: *“Ik denk wel als ik hier ben en er is iets, bijvoorbeeld een koningsdag of een ander evenement. Dat iedereen dan op straat is en aardig is tegen elkaar en loopt gewoon. Dan voel ik me ook wel, dit is mijn stadje en hier hoor ik wel.”* (Interview 2)²².

So, in sum, regarding the subquestion *In what way do students with a non-urban background experience place identity in Utrecht?*, the students give mixed answers on whether they identify with Utrecht. More specifically, whether they identify as an Utrechter is dependent on to whom they compare themselves. Specifically, they regard themselves more so as members of the student population, which are temporary residents of Utrecht. Next to this, most students say their place identity is partly formed by their old place of residence, which correlates to the research of Proshansky and Fabian (1987). However, the results of the interviews have not shown that the students have had difficulties with reinterpreting their place identity after the break from their old place identity, as suggested by different literature (Chow & Healey, 2008; Tognoli, 2003). As regards the urban-related identity scale of Lalli (1992), it can be concluded that the students overall belong to the fourth dimension, namely commitment, because most of the students mention they want to keep living in an urban environment, albeit not necessarily in Utrecht.

1.3.Sense of community

Out of the interviews, it became apparent that the students have similar perspectives regarding the sense of community. Namely, having friends and other social relations in the place where they live, is the most important reason they gave for why they feel at home in Utrecht. When asked the question which was the most important reason the students felt connected to Utrecht, the answer most of the interviewees gave was their social network in Utrecht. *“Omdat ik er nu*

²² "I think when I'm here and there is something happening, like King's Day or another event. That everyone is out on the street and being nice to each other and just walking. Then I also feel like this is my little town and this is where I belong." (Interview 2)

woon en omdat heel veel van mijn vrienden er wonen. Het is meer door de sociale relaties en dat ik het daardoor ervaar als mijn thuis." (Interview 6)²³. This quote stresses the importance of having friends in the students' place of residence, as is also described by Fisher et al. (1977). It should be noted that the students referred mostly to other students when talking about their friends in Utrecht.

Sense of community as student community

Another closely related finding is that the sense of community of students is limited to the community of students. This is illustrated by the following citation: *"Ik heb vooral veel te maken met studenten. ... Ik heb niet het idee dat het iets specifiek van Utrecht is, maar de fase waar ik nu in zit en al de mensen waar ik contact mee heb ook in zitten: namelijk dat het allemaal studenten zijn."* (Interview 6)²⁴. Especially the interviewees who have lived on the IBB or the Tuindorp-West Complex stated that they perceive those places as communities of students, as mentioned before. One person said the following about living on the IBB: *"Mensen zeggen ook allemaal gedag tegen elkaar. Het is een soort van een klein dorp binnen Utrecht. Waarbij ik eerst zo zat van ik wil niet meer in een dorp wonen, vond ik het daar heel leuk dat je juist daar een beetje die sfeer had. Dat iedereen met elkaar verbonden was en gewoon iets kleiner."* (Interview 11)²⁵. The importance of the student population becomes even more clear as they mention they undertake activities with other students in places where mostly students are present, live with other students, and perceive Utrecht as a student city. Nevertheless, one student mentioned he takes part in neighbourhood initiatives with other residents of the neighbourhood. However, he does this to represent the student perspective: *"Sinds kort zit ik in de buurtgebeuren. We hebben een bootje gebouwd voor de buurt. Ik zit daardoor ook in de buurtbelangenorganisatie van de wijk. Met allemaal boomers, maar dat vind ik ook wel heel grappig. Daar had ik ja opgezegd omdat ik dacht, ik woon hier ook en ik wil me ook wel mee bemoeien met dingen als dat nodig is vanuit ons studentenperspectief."* (Interview 3)²⁶.

²³ "Because I live there now and because a lot of my friends live there. It's more that I feel at home because of the social relations I have." (Interview 6)

²⁴ "I mainly deal with other students. ... I don't think it's something specific to Utrecht, but the phase I'm in now and all the people I'm in contact with are in: namely that they are all students." (Interview 6)

²⁵ "People also all greet each other. It is a kind of small village within Utrecht. Before I was like, I don't want to live in a village anymore, but I really liked the fact that there was a bit of that atmosphere. That everyone was connected to each other and that it was just a little bit smaller. (Interview 11)

²⁶ "Recently, I joined the neighbourhood thingy. We built a boat for the neighbourhood. As a result, I am also in the neighbourhood interest group. It is all with boomers, but I find that very funny. I said yes because I thought,

Importance of friends

Next to this, the students mentioned they are not necessarily connected to Utrecht, as they could have also felt at home in any other city. However, since they made important friends in their years of study in the city, they feel like they are in that way connected to Utrecht. The following quote exemplifies how students do not feel a connection to Utrecht as a city, as they could have had the same connection to another city: “*Op zich voel ik me wel verbonden met de stad. Ik denk omdat ik er dan dus woon en er uit ga en het de plek is waar ik dingen meemaak en ik me fijn voel. Maar het is niet dat ik me echt onderdeel van Utrecht voel ofzo... Ik denk dat als ik in Nijmegen was gaan studeren, dan had ik me ook zo gevoeld.*” (Interview 5)²⁷. Other students, especially the male students, consider Utrecht as their home simply because they live there and because they build friendships in the place. So, the students mention they are mostly connected to Utrecht because they have friends in this place, which mostly consist of other students, and it is the place they live in and make memories. This results relates to the theoretical model of sense of community of Chavis et al. (1986), which state that membership, influence, integration, and shared emotional connections are key aspects in the creation of a sense of community. Different students have mentioned these aspects while talking about their social network in Utrecht.

One student, who only lived two months in Utrecht, said he still has his main social network in his old village, which is why he still considers his old village as his home. However, he also mentions the following about the importance of having friends in his place of home: “*Ik denk hoe meer connecties je in Utrecht hebt en hoe meer je sociale leven hierheen zou verplaatsen, dat dat meespeelt in het thuisvoelen in Utrecht. En dat thuis meer gaat om de mensen om je heen en om de plek waar jij je fijn voelt dan waar je kamer is.*” (Interview 1)²⁸. He mentions that he still travels back to his parental home often to visit friends and because of obligations, which is why he does not have much time to spend with friends in Utrecht. Next to this, because he lives in a small remote village, it is not easy travelling back and that is why he

I live here too and I also want to get involved in things if that's necessary for our student perspective." (Interview 3)

²⁷ "I do feel connected to the city. I think because I live there and go out there and it's the place where I experience things and I feel good. But it's not that I really feel part of Utrecht or something... I think if I had studied in Nijmegen, I would have felt the same way." (Interview 5)

²⁸ "I think the more connections you have in Utrecht and the more your social life would move here, that it helps with feeling at home in Utrecht. And that home is more about the people around you and where you feel comfortable than where your room is." (Interview 1)

always stays longer than necessary in his old village. The students who live for a longer period of time in Utrecht, however, mention they do not travel back to their parental home as much as they used to because they want to spend more time with their social network in Utrecht and because travelling back is quite a hassle. This result is also found by Holton (2015), who argues that highly mobile students often have difficulties getting attached to their new place of residence and to the people.

Knowledge of the city

Furthermore, due to their social contacts in Utrecht, the students said that they could more easily find their way around Utrecht, since their friends took them to different places in Utrecht or showed them different sites in Utrecht. *“Ik heb de weg en mijn plek in Utrecht goed leren kennen door mijn sociale contacten.”* (Interview 9)²⁹. The students mentioned furthermore that they started to feel at home in Utrecht when they could go from point A to point B without having to consult Google Maps. Due to the social activities they had in the city with their friends and from their study associations, they got to know many different places in Utrecht. So, next to the social aspect of feeling more at home in Utrecht, having friends in their place of residence also helps the students to feel more at home in a practical manner, namely by getting to know the city and getting more knowledge about the city. The importance of having knowledge of basic aspects and symbols of the city in order to develop a sense of place, is in accordance with the research by Shamai (1991).

So, out of the interviews, it became apparent that the students are especially drawn to other students in the city, as they undertake activities with them, live with them, sport with them, and work with them. For the students, their friends, meaning other students, are the most important factor why they feel at home in Utrecht. The students also mention that they form their own community of students in the city, which is separately from the other residents in Utrecht. These results on the segregation of students in the city are closely related to the research area of studentification (Chatterton, 2010; Garmendia et al., 2012; He, 2015; Nakazawa, 2017; Russo & Tatjer, 2007; Smith, 2008; Zasina, 2021), which refers to “the multifaceted urban transformations resulting from increases in and concentrations of student populations.” (Nakazawa, 2017). I will elaborate further on this in the discussion.

²⁹ "I got to know the way and my place in Utrecht very well through my social contacts." (Interview 9)

1.4. Place dependence

Utrecht and need fulfilment

Regarding the subquestion *How does having a non-urban background influence the place dependence of students in Utrecht?*, two main results became apparent. First of all, students all mentioned that in this stage of their life, living in Utrecht satisfies all their needs. The majority of the students mentioned they did not want to live anywhere else in this moment than Utrecht. Reasons they gave for this were that everything is within cycling distance, Utrecht is centrally located and has convenient public transport connection, the “hectiek en reuring” suits them, Utrecht contains a lot of facilities, but also contains enough green spaces, and the students identify with the people living in the city. Next to this, the students said they could not wait to live in a city when they were younger, as they wouldn’t have to travel as much anymore, and they could meet new people and have a more exciting life. The satisfaction on the physical and social resources of Utrecht and the comparing to other places, like their former place of residence, correlates with the research of Jorgensen and Stedman (2001).

Critical remarks regarding Utrecht

Secondly, the students additionally give some critical notes regarding whether Utrecht meets their goal achievement. One student mentioned that the night-time facilities and cultural events in Utrecht do not offer for a diverse taste in music and exhibition. To illustrate, she mentioned the following: *“maar bijvoorbeeld musea heb je veel meer in Amsterdam... Een beetje qua cultuur uitjes en qua uitgaan hou ik iets meer van iets alternatieve muziek. En ik heb het gevoel dat Utrecht daarin iets minder van aanbiedt.”* (Interview 5)³⁰. Another student mentioned that it is hard to not be enthusiastic about Utrecht, as we currently live in a post-corona time in which events are not being cancelled and the freedom to go to parties and see people are prominent. Lastly, multiple students mentioned that they are very satisfied with Utrecht, although they find it difficult to look into the future. For instance, rent prices are very high which makes it difficult to find a suitable apartment to live, houses are relatively small and most of the time lack a garden. One student said the following about living in Utrecht in the future:

³⁰ "But you have a lot more museums in Amsterdam... A bit in terms of cultural outings and in terms of going out I like a bit more alternative music. And I have the feeling that Utrecht offers a little less of that." (Interview 5)

“Later wordt het misschien moeilijk om een betaalbare woning te zoeken. Dan vind ik misschien op een andere plek werk waar ik moet gaan wonen. Of de mensen waarvoor ik hier woon weggaan. Dan is het een logischere keuze om ergens anders te gaan wonen.” (Interview 6)³¹.

Two students gave different reasons for not wanting to live in Utrecht in the future, namely that they are likely to grow weary of Utrecht and want to explore an even bigger city in the future.

In conclusion, regarding the subquestion *In what way do students with a non-urban background experience place dependence in Utrecht?*, we can conclude that Utrecht serves the goal achievement of students with a non-urban background. Most students, namely, mention that living in Utrecht fulfils all their needs and serves goal achievement, which refers to place dependence (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Pretty et al., 2003; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981), except for a few critical remarks about living in Utrecht. However, most students are not sure whether they will stay living in Utrecht as the city might not serve to their goal achievement in the future.

2. Changes over time

First impressions of Utrecht

As indicated previously, in order to give an answer to the research question, it is important to look at how the sense of place of students with a non-urban background changes over time. From the interviews, three main findings can be drawn. First of all, the students overall mention that the transition from a rural environment to an urban environment proceeded smoothly. A couple of difficulties the students mentioned was that some of the students were nervous to find suitable student housing in Utrecht, as there are not a lot of rooms available. *“Ik denk dat ik het spannend vond om een kamer te zoeken met al die hospiteeravonden. Ook omdat ik van ver weg kwam, dus ik moest eigenlijk echt een kamer vinden, omdat heen en weer reizen niet te doen is.”* (Interview 7)³². Next to this, different students mentioned they were anxious to live independently from their parents and take care of themselves. Furthermore, once in the city, a few of the students said they had to get used to the amount of activities and people in the city. One interviewee said the following to the question what she had to get used to: *“De praktische*

³¹ "Later, it may become difficult to find affordable housing. Then I might find work in another place where I have to live. Or the people I live here for might leave. Then it is a more logical choice to live somewhere else." (Interview 6)

³² "I think I was anxious to look for a room with all those hospiteer nights. Also because I came from far away, so I really needed to find a room because travelling back and forth was not doable." (Interview 7)

dingen van hoe de stad in elkaar zat, maar ook de bruisendheid van de stad. Dat ik bijvoorbeeld met de UIT-week allemaal mensen opeens zag. Dat vond ik heel leuk. Het was wel heftig qua prikkels, maar ook super leuk." (Interview 11)³³. Other students said they had to get used to the large and modern buildings, to which one student referred to as "*sciencefiction*" (Interview 9), as well as to the city being "*weg geasfalteerd*" (Interview 6), meaning that there is a lot of tarmac present in the city. Lastly, one student mentioned that she was at first feeling lonely in the city: "*Ik voelde me het weekend gewoon een beetje eenzaam. Maar daarna was dat weg, omdat ik allemaal mensen leerde kennen.*" (Interview 5)³⁴. The students explained that their fears and nervousness faded shortly after their arrival in Utrecht. However, due to corona, some students mentioned they still felt lonely once in a while.

Characterizing Utrecht

Secondly, the interviewees stated they first knew Utrecht because they went shopping in the city or because they went to climb the stairs of the Dom Tower. As a result of these few short visits, they said they had somewhat of an image of the city. However, a few students said they found it difficult to give characteristics of Utrecht once they lived there. This became evident as some students were at first not sure how to answer the related question. One student stated the following: "*Wat het juist kenmerkt is dat het weinig kenmerken heeft. Ik kan Utrecht heel moeilijk plaatsen. Je hebt bijvoorbeeld Amsterdam, Rotterdam en Den Haag die een cultuurtje hebben. Ook bij Brabant in veel steden. Bij Utrecht heb ik dat gevoel niet helemaal.*" (Interview 5)³⁵. However, later in the interview, the students attributed more and more characteristics to the place and the people. A few examples of the characteristics ascribed to Utrecht are the small size, the green spaces, the "lieflijke" and "overzichtelijke" character, and the hip, young and high educated people. Nevertheless, all of the interviewees agree that Utrecht is a student city. This shows that the interviewees do have a general shared view of the city, although it is first defined by the main sights and the ability to shop in the city. So, most students have knowledge of the basic aspects and symbols of Utrecht and have positive feelings towards those aspects,

³³ "The practical things of how the city was put together, but also the vibrancy of the city. That, for example, during the UIT-week I suddenly saw all kinds of people. I liked that very much. It was intense in terms of stimuli, but also super fun." (Interview 11)

³⁴ "I just felt a bit lonely that weekend. But after that it was gone, because I got to know all these people." (Interview 5)

³⁵ "What characterises it is that it has few features. It is very difficult for me to place Utrecht. You have, for example, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague that have a culture. You also have Brabant in many cities. With Utrecht, I don't quite have that feeling." (Interview 5)

which means, according to the scale of Shamai (1991), that those students have formed an attachment to the place.

Length of residence

The third, and last, finding is that the length of living in Utrecht has an influence on all the dimensions of sense of place. More specifically, the students mentioned that they got to feel more connected to Utrecht, identified more with Utrecht, became more part of the student community, and the goals of students became more focused on the urban environment as they lived longer in the city. This was also evident from the literature (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Eisikovits & Borman, 2005; Tuan, 1980; Yazdanfar et al., 2013).

One person explained she felt more connected to Utrecht because she gained memories in the place: *“Ik heb het altijd leuk gevonden, ik voel me er nu gewoon meer verbonden mee. Ik woon er langer, ik heb er nu herinneringen. Dus ik denk dat het wat sterker is geworden het gevoel.”* (Interview 2)³⁶. Furthermore, the longer the students reside in Utrecht, the more knowledge they gain about the place. Some of the students state that this basic knowledge about Utrecht, helps them to feel connected to Utrecht. Next to this, students are beginning to see Utrecht as their place of home when they settle down in Utrecht, meaning that they get friends, a job, join a sporting club and other activities in Utrecht. Most of the students indicated that they first kept their job and sporting club in their old place of residence. However, after a while, they began transferring these activities to Utrecht as they recognised Utrecht as their new place of residence.

Last of all, almost all students mention they are feeling less connected to their old place of residence as they live longer in Utrecht. The students who live for a long amount of time in Utrecht, mention that they are going less and less back to their old village. The reasons they give for this, is that they identify less with the residents of their old village once they started to identify more with the residents in Utrecht. Another reason is that they are visiting their parental home less in comparison with when they just moved to Utrecht.

However, the students who live less than two years in Utrecht said they are not yet that attached to Utrecht, as they still travel back often to their parental home or still have obligations

³⁶ "I have always liked it, I just feel more connected to it now. I live there longer, I have memories there now. So I think the feeling has become a bit stronger." (Interview 2)

in their old village, like a job, friends or driving lessons. They gave the same line of reasoning for the other dimensions of identity, community and dependence. Nevertheless, they also mentioned that they are very positive towards the features of Utrecht, and that the attachment to Utrecht is likely to grow as they will know more people in Utrecht and have less obligations in their old place of residence in the future. Also, the students who lived for more than two years in Utrecht overall stated that they now travel less often to their parental home in comparison to when they had just moved to Utrecht and that their attachment to Utrecht has grown over the years. This shows that the length of residence in a place plays an important role in developing place attachment (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Eisikovits & Borman, 2005; Holton, 2015; Tuan, 1980; Yazdanfar et al., 2013).

In conclusion, the students mentioned that the transition to living in a city went relatively smoothly and they were all quickly used to the urban environment. This was not expected from the literature, as most studies performed in other countries found that rural students have difficulties adjusting to urban and university culture (Guiffrida, 2008; Xiulan, 2015). Next to this, low mobility of students and having a stillness of place are seen in the literature as necessary elements in order for students to form attachments to a place (Holton, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Tuan, 1977). The results of this research concur largely with the related literature, although the students with a high mobility do mention that they are positive about living in Utrecht. Lastly, length of residence in a place has a positive effect on all the domains of sense of place, as is confirmed in previous literature (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Eisikovits & Borman, 2005; Holton, 2015; Tuan, 1980; Yazdanfar et al., 2013).

3. Strategies to feel more at home

So far, this chapter has focused on discussing the findings on the sense of place and the changes over time of students with a non-urban background. I will now move on to discuss the strategies they use to feel more at home in Utrecht.

Discovering new places

First of all, the most frequently mentioned strategy the students used to feel more at home in Utrecht, was to actively discover new places in Utrecht. For instance, several students mentioned they go everywhere by bike in order to explore new places and to learn to get from

one location to another without having to use Google Maps. Next to this, the students said they regularly went to different restaurants or cafes to get to know more places in Utrecht and to feel more at home in Utrecht. These places where the students referred to were mostly places from the student community. Possessing basic knowledge about the city, knowing their way around, and not having to consult Google Maps, was for students an important factor to determine whether they felt at home in Utrecht. An example of an answer to the question why a student feels at home in Utrecht is the following: *“De herkenbaarheid van de stad en de straatjes en het feit dat ik nu zonder op Google Maps te kijken van de ene kant naar de andere kant kan bewegen, geeft ook het idee dat dit steeds meer een thuis is geworden.”* (Interview 6)³⁷. That familiarity with the urban environment is an important aspect of identifying with the city, can also be seen in the literature (Lalli, 1992; Shamai, 1991).

The student who lives only two months in Utrecht mentioned that he does not feel at home in Utrecht yet, but that it is likely that this will grow as he lives for a longer period of time in the city: *“Ik denk als je er langer woont en er vaker op uit gaat en nieuwe plekken ontdekt waar je dan nieuwe herinneringen opdoet, dan heb je net wat meer plekken in Utrecht die belangrijk voor je zijn en waar je dus waarde aan hecht. En dat beperkt zich nu heel erg nu tot het Griftpark en de binnenstad en misschien de plekken waar mijn vrienden wonen. Als ik misschien een keer een fietstocht ga doen, kom ik misschien weer nieuwe mooie plekken tegen, maar dat heeft tijd nodig.”* (Interview 1)³⁸.

Meeting new people

Next to exploring new places in Utrecht, the students mentioned they put in effort to meet new people in order to feel more at home in Utrecht. The students do this by, for example, joining an association. By joining a study, student or sporting association, students get more easily into contact with people they normally would not encounter. Furthermore, one person said the following about how she put in an effort to feel more at home in Utrecht: *“Dus toch wel actief bij verenigingen enzo aansluiten. Dus bij de klimvereniging en bij de IBB. Je moet wel echt*

³⁷ "The recognisability of the city and the streets and the fact that I can now move from one side to the other without looking on Google Maps also gives the idea that this has become more and more of a home." (Interview 6)

³⁸ "I think if you live here longer and go out more often and discover new places where you create new memories, then you have a few more places in Utrecht that are important to you and that you value. And right now that is very much limited to the Griftpark and the city centre and maybe the places where my friends live. Maybe if I go for a bike ride, I'll come across some new beautiful places, but that takes time." (Interview 1)

actief ervoor kiezen om met mensen te gaan samenwonen. Dat heeft heel erg geholpen dat ik me meer thuis ging voelen in Utrecht."³⁹ (Interview 10). Another interviewee also mentioned that living with roommates helps to feel more at home than living in a studio. This is in line with the research of Shamai (1991), which states that to create a sense of place, an individual needs to play an active role in the community. For students, however, this community is limited to the student population in Utrecht.

It becomes clear from the strategies the students use to feel more at home in Utrecht, that they mostly are focused around socially and physically being around students and student spots. This segregation of students in the city, is an interesting finding. As said before, it relates to the research field of studentification (Chatterton, 2010; Garmendia et al., 2012; He, 2015; Nakazawa, 2017; Russo & Tatjer, 2007; Smith, 2008; Zasina, 2021).

Chapter five: Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the sense of place of students with a non-urban background in Utrecht. In order to provide an answer to the research question of this thesis, four subquestions were formulated, for which results were given in the previous chapter. Based on the results of the interviews, the following research question can be answered:

How is the sense of place of students with a non-urban background formed, how does it change over time and what are the strategies they use to feel more at home in Utrecht?

First, it can be concluded that students I interviewed perceive living in Utrecht as a very positive experience. More specifically, the students perceive living in Utrecht as a place of freedom, since there is not as much social control in the city in comparison to their former place of residence, which they experience as positive. This is a surprising result, as previous literature is mostly positive on the effects of social control in rural areas (Geis & Ross, 1998; Lalli, 1992; Nairn et al., 2003) and is negative on the anonymity in urban environments (Ittelson, 1978; Lalli, 1992; Nairn et al., 2003). It is, however, in line with the research of Walker and Raval (2017), who found that some students experience their rural hometown as isolating while experiencing the urban as liberating.

³⁹ "So, by actively joining associations. So, with the climbing association and with the IBB. You really have to actively choose to live with people. That really helped me feel more at home in Utrecht." (Interview 10)

These positive feelings towards Utrecht are also partly the result of students identifying more with the people in Utrecht, meaning the other students in Utrecht, than with the people in their former place of residence. However, they perceive themselves as a separate group of temporary residents in the city. This relates to the title of this research, which indicates that they do identify as an Utrechter and feel attached to Utrecht when they are around their fellow students in the city. However, they do not identify as an Utrechter when surrounded by other Utrechters, meaning people who live their whole life in Utrecht. This brings us to the next conclusion, namely that having friends in the place of residence is crucial for students with a non-urban background to feel at home in a place. So, the sense of community is a big part of the sense of place for this particular group of students, although it remains limited to the student community.

This study has also shown that Utrecht fulfils the needs of the students with a non-urban background, as was expected due to the large number of facilities in a city (Thissen et al., 2010). However, Utrecht might not contribute to the goal achievement of the interviewees when they are no longer students. This is due to a change in needs once they complete their studies. Moreover, most students perceive Utrecht as a temporary place of residence while doing their studies. It can thus be concluded that the students do not perceive themselves as established and rooted in Utrecht, even though the results show that they do experience a positive sense of place. This does not correspond with the literature on the importance of rootedness for a positive sense of place (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Eisikovits & Borman, 2005; Lalli, 1992; Tuan, 1980).

The second part of the research question concerns the changes in the sense of place over time. This study has found that, generally, for people who do not (yet) live in Utrecht and only visit the city once in a while, the city is defined by its central position in the Netherlands and by the shopping facilities and main sights like the Dom Tower. However, once the student moves to Utrecht, the sense of place changes and the related feelings of the students become more focused towards the student facilities and fellow students living in the place. Next to this, it can be concluded that length of residence and mobility are important moderators on all domains of sense of place, which corresponds with the literature (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Eisikovits & Borman, 2005; Holton, 2015; Tuan, 1980; Yazdanfar et al., 2013).

Regarding the third part of the research question, the strategies of students to feel more at home in Utrecht, this study has found that an important strategy in the homemaking of students with a non-urban background is related to the self-segregation of students in the city. The students feel at home in Utrecht because the city offers multiple opportunities for students

to be with their own homogeneous community, such as living areas, student associations, café's, sporting facilities and healthcare facilities. So, not only are the students socially linked to the student community, but they are also physically more drawn to student populated facilities. This is closely related to the research field of studentification (Chatterton, 2010; Garmendia et al., 2012; He, 2015; Nakazawa, 2017; Russo & Tatjer, 2007; Smith, 2008; Zasina, 2021). Thus, it is relatively easy in the city of Utrecht to feel at home for the students with a non-urban background, since the city offers these possibilities to feel at home with the student community and the city.

Chapter six: Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the construction of the sense of place of students with a non-urban background in an urban environment like Utrecht. It is important to do research about different groups of students in Utrecht, since different groups could have different experiences in the city of Utrecht. Within the group of students, there could be general truths, but there can also be differences. It became apparent out of the interviews that for students with a non-urban background that they had relatively positive experiences in the city of Utrecht. The students with a non-urban background feel relatively easily at home in Utrecht as there is such a strong community of students with which they can identify themselves. More specifically, there appears to be a sort of parallel community of students in the city next to the other residents of Utrecht, which makes it easy for the students to feel at home in Utrecht. However, it should be noted that that this attachment is of a temporary nature as the students with a non-urban background probably will not stay living in Utrecht after their studies.

So, the attachment of students with a non-urban background to Utrecht is selective and limited to the student community and places in Utrecht that are related to the student culture. This self-segregation of students in the city is an interesting finding for the city of Utrecht. Namely, it is possible that Utrecht provides for unique opportunities for students to feel connected to the student community and therefore help with the process of homemaking for students with a non-urban background. However, it could also be that the segregation of the students in the city could have unwanted negative consequences for the social cohesion in the city, next to the positive effects it has on the homemaking of students with a non-urban background. As the students do not have much interaction with the other inhabitants of Utrecht,

it could create tensions between the different groups of residents in Utrecht. However, in order to give policy recommendations further research needs to be done on this topic.

Furthermore, a couple of limitations of the current study can be recognised. First of all, a limitation to this study is that the participant group consisted mostly out of relatively old students who were at the end of their bachelor program or doing their master's. Next to this, they were all students who enjoyed living in Utrecht. Due to the difficulty to recruit participants and the relatively short time to conduct the interviews, the participants were recruited by using the snowball method. A more diverse and larger group of participants could have produced different results, such as more difficulties in the homemaking process of students. However, it could be argued that when students have a negative sense of place in Utrecht, they would not be living in the city anymore. Nevertheless, efforts have been made to select a representative group of participants, in the sense of gender, distance to Utrecht and address density of the former place of residence. Another limitation of this study is that the results of this study cannot be translated entirely to a different context. One reason for this is that the research is conducted in the post-corona lockdown period, which could have influenced how students experience and feel in a place. Next to this, respondents are asked relatively difficult questions about subconscious feelings and about their opinions in the past. This made the answers less reliable since the emotions are difficult to recall. Lastly, the sense of place of a person is not something fixed. Rather, the way people think of certain aspects is influenced by external factors. The sense of place can therefore change over time due to the interplay between people, and between people and place. Despite these limitations and the exploratory nature of the research, this study offers insights into the construction of the sense of place of students with a non-urban background. However, while processing the findings, the context of the research should be taken into account.

This research has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. First of all, further research needs to be done to establish whether the results of this study can be translated to other urban environments in the Netherlands. So, the question is whether Utrecht provides unique possibilities for students so they can more easily feel at home in the city, like the social and physical student communities and facilities in the city, or whether this is a general strategy of student to feel more at home in an urban environment. This also connects with the following recommendation for further research, namely to explore the social aspect of studentification in the city. To my knowledge, current research on studentification has focused mainly on the physical aspects of the presence of students in the city, namely the urban transformations in the

city as a result from increasing student populations, such as gentrification (Chatterton, 2010; Garmendia et al., 2012; He, 2015; Nakazawa, 2017; Russo & Tatjer, 2007; Smith, 2008; Zasina, 2021). As mentioned before, this research links in some way to the research field of studentification, namely on the topic of social and physical segregation of students in the city. However, it predominantly calls for more research on the social aspect of increasing student populations in an urban environment. Last of all, the term 'sense of place' is in different studies approached in different ways, as also mentioned before. This made writing a theoretical basis and making predictions about the sense of place of a specific group for this study somewhat complicated. It would be good for the academic research field of the concept of sense of place, if there will be created more clarity around this topic and if the terms will be delineated more clearly. So, further research is necessary, to create more clarity around the concept sense of place.

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