

A newcomer's sense of belonging

A study on how local refugee foundations influence newcomers' sense of belonging in the Netherlands

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Extended Summary

This thesis aims to understand how local refugee foundations influence the sense of belonging among newcomers in the Netherlands. It therefore incorporates and focuses on newcomers' perspectives, their challenges, their needs, and how they experience and perceive belonging. The main research question is: *How do local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging in the Netherlands?*

Theoretically, this thesis draws on the five factors introduced by Antonisch (2010) that influence one's sense of belonging: autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal. It combines this theory with the role of NGOs in fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers, discusses literature on NGOs and a newcomer's sense of belonging, and its limitations in the literature.

The newcomer's experiences, perspectives, and context are vital in answering the main research question. Thus, methodologically, the research philosophy used for this thesis is interpretivism. The qualitative methods used to collect data are semi-structured interviews and participant observation. At the refugee foundation Buddy to Buddy in Nijmegen, the research was conducted. The program ATLAS.ti was used for thematic analysis and coding to analyse the data from participant observations and semi-structured interviews.

The findings conclude that local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging through empowering them with opportunities to practice languages and by providing space and opportunities to exchange memories and cultures. Secondly, local refugee foundations provide support by offering newcomers opportunities to strengthen their social ties through group activities and friendships. However, emphasis should be put on reciprocal and equal relationships to avoid the process of "othering". Thirdly, local refugee foundations can help foster a sense of belonging in a newcomer's environment. Lastly, local refugee foundations, like Buddy to Buddy, have little direct influence on material support because of their focus on friendship. However, newcomers could gain access to resources through a broadened network.

Further research could focus on how local refugee foundations influence the local population's image of newcomers. The perspectives of locals can help educational institutions, (local) governments, and policymakers set up programs that aim to foster understanding and reduce stereotypes and prejudices. A second suggestion is to research refugee foundations with different aims and compare how they influence newcomers' sense of belonging across various factors of a sense of belonging.

Keywords: sense of belonging, local refugee foundations, newcomers, NGOs, social capital, othering.

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1. Introduction

i want to go home,	crawl through the desert	no one leaves home until home is a sweaty
but home is the mouth of a shark	wade through the oceans	voice in your ear
home is the barrel of the gun	drown	saying-
and no one would leave home	save	leave,
unless home chased you to the shore	be hunger	run away from me now
unless home told you	beg	i don't know what i've become
to quicken your legs	forget pride	but i know that anywhere
leave your clothes behind	your survival is more important	is safer than here

Home- Warsan Shire (lines 73 – 105, 2009)

The poem excerpt above, written by Warsan Shire (a Somali-British poet), vividly captures the situation that makes a person leave their belongings, home, and birth country behind. Shire reflects on the experiences of 'refugees'¹ in her poem, Home, and the harsh conditions they must endure to reach a safer place. Consequently, they were compelled to leave the place where they had built their lives, a home where they felt a sense of belonging.

On a global scale, the number of individuals being forcibly displaced has significantly increased. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 89.3 million people were forcibly displaced by the end of 2021 (UNHCR, 2021). People are forcibly displaced for numerous reasons, including violence, conflict, human rights abuses, persecution, climate change effects, and disasters (UNHCR, 2021; ECHO, 2024). On their journeys to safety, many newcomers endure emotional and physical trauma. This is not fixed to a specific location; it occurs on every continent. Examples include the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe, the loss of family members en route, or being held in Libya under dire conditions, such as a shortage of food or medicine (UNHCR, 2018).

¹ In this master's thesis I will try to minimise the use of terms like 'refugees', 'asylum seekers' and 'migrants'. This fits with the work of Dahinden (2016). She argues that migration studies tend to reinforce the categories they seek to analyse. According to her, using the above-mentioned terms can reinforce an image of 'migrants', 'refugees', and 'asylum seekers' as "others". Dahinden (2016) introduces the concept of 'de-migranticization' to rethink how research is conducted by avoiding the automatic use of categories related to categories of migration. Instead, in this thesis, I will use the term 'newcomers' more often. This is more neutral and inclusive as it does not categorise people based on their reason of migration or legal status and thus fitting with the idea of 'de-migranticization' (Dahinden, 2016).

In the context of the Netherlands, a total of 36,620 people applied for asylum (IND, 2021). The Syrian Arab Republic was the most significant contributor to asylum applications, accounting for 34% of the total. Following Syria, individuals from Afghanistan and Turkey represented 12% and 10%, respectively (IND, 2021). In contrast, the previous year, 2020, witnessed a lower total of 19,132 asylum applications, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the strict regulations enforced globally (IND, 2021).

This thesis revisits the striking imagery in Warsan Shire's 'Home' to emphasise the importance of understanding newcomers' experiences. The poem expresses that leaving one's home is rarely a simple choice but is often driven by danger and loss. Yet, even upon arriving in a "safer" environment, newcomers face the significant challenge of rebuilding what has been lost: their sense of belonging. This master's thesis aims to give voice to the stories of newcomers, highlighting their experiences, the challenges they face after arriving in their host society, the Netherlands, and ultimately, the search for a sense of belonging.

1.1 Research problem

After arriving in the Netherlands, newcomers face challenges to adapt to a new environment, the impact of leaving their homeland, and the accompanying emotional burden.

Adapting to a new environment in the Netherlands is made more challenging by the 2022 Civic Integration Programme, which has faced criticism for failing to recognise a newcomer's identity. This programme promises to enhance the 'integration' of newcomers to the Netherlands (Blankvoort et al., 2023). Blankvoort et al. (2023) note that this programme depicts newcomers as the 'unmodern Other'; they are "seen as belonging to a certain, at 'distance-from-Dutch' culture" (p. 466). Such narratives risk alienating newcomers, which can adversely affect their well-being, participation, and sense of belonging. Additionally, it can increase a newcomer's susceptibility to loneliness by hindering the establishment of new social relations. Newcomers already face the challenge of being away from family and friends, who often cannot accompany them to the host country. Having social networks is essential because they offer vital psychological and social support. Baumeister and Leary (1995) highlight that positive, stable, and enduring relationships, along with regular physical interactions, are essential for fostering a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, newcomers arriving in the Netherlands are often confronted with learning a new language, Dutch, and may lack sociocultural knowledge of their host society (Bronstein, 2019). According to Antonisch (2010), language is one of the key factors in fostering a sense of belonging in one's environment. It can evoke "a sense of community, the 'warm sensation' to be among people who not only merely understand what you say, but also what you mean" (Antonisch, 2010, p 648).

Similarly, Pozzo & Nerghes (2020) emphasise that knowledge of the Dutch language and culture is crucial for newcomers to establish a sense of belonging within Dutch society. However, only newcomers who have a good chance of obtaining a residence permit can start with taking Dutch language classes at reception centres (in Dutch: *asielzoekerscentrum*, AZC) (COA, n.d.). According to the COA² (n.d.), newcomers arriving in the Netherlands have a good chance of obtaining a residence permit if more than 50 newcomers from their country receive a residence permit each year (COA, n.d.). This means that not all newcomers have the opportunity to start learning Dutch early on. Other factors or barriers can persist or influence an individual's sense of belonging, even when speaking the same language. More factors will be examined in the next chapter, the Theoretical Framework.

Different organisations assist newcomers with the challenges mentioned above. In the Netherlands, examples of such organisations include *VluchtelingenWerk*, Amnesty International, and the Dutch Red Cross. Some organisations begin their support when newcomers receive their legal status, while others offer assistance from the moment they arrive in the country or apply for asylum. *VluchtelingenWerk* serves as a Dutch NGO that provides expert legal guidance to newcomers at all stages of their asylum procedure (*VluchtelingenWerk*, n.d.).

An example of an organisation that has been present from the start, and where I conducted fieldwork for this thesis, is *Buddy to Buddy*. This organisation connects local Dutch people with newcomers and operates in fourteen cities across the Netherlands (*Buddy to Buddy*, 2022). The matching process at *Buddy to Buddy* consists of four-month-long matching rounds. During these rounds, buddies are matched according to shared interests. Making contact, getting to know each other, and establishing connections despite cultural differences are, according to them, significant parts of the solution to fostering mutual understanding. Through this initiative, *Buddy to Buddy* aims to combat loneliness among newcomers and create a city where everyone belongs (*Buddy to Buddy*, 2022).

Despite the presence of NGOs supporting newcomers, such as *Buddy to Buddy*, it remains unclear how effective these organisations are at fostering a genuine sense of belonging or whether they may unintentionally reproduce exclusionary structures. Consequently, there is a societal need to understand how NGOs contribute to or hinder newcomers' sense of belonging in specific local contexts.

Additionally, from a scientific perspective, much of the academic literature on belonging among newcomers emphasises individual-level coping strategies, neglecting the structural and relational dimensions. As stated by Berding-Barwick and McAreavey (2023), research is “preoccupied with the individualised nature of adaptation rather than challenging the social context in which

² Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (COA) is responsible for the reception and guidance of newcomers in the Netherlands.

individual experiences take place” (p. 1844). Belonging is not just about an individual’s strength, but it can also be influenced by the limitations or support provided by society (e.g. policies, NGOs, etc.) (Berding-Barwick & McAreavey, 2023). Newcomers must be able to pursue their aspirations and stay connected to their homeland while adapting to a new culture, as this is important for the recognition of their identity. However, Berding-Barwick and McAreavey (2023) note that an immigration system that “seeks to delete an individual’s past as if time were irrelevant can undermine personal resilience, it can hamper the capacity to act and to adapt” (p. 1857). By failing to recognise an individual’s past, the immigration system fails to value newcomers for who they are, despite its supposed role in providing them protection. Instead, it can lead to anti-immigration discourse for political gain, making newcomers feel unwelcome (Berding-Barwick & McAreavey, 2023). However, current research often isolates individual experiences from the broader social environments in which they are embedded.

1.2 Relevance

The concept of a sense of belonging has been frequently used by various scholars (e.g., Antonisch, 2010; Fenster, 2005). However, a gap remains in the literature regarding the role of NGOs in fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers, particularly in localised settings (Hausermann et al., 2021). According to Hausermann et al. (2021), “Despite their importance in the resettlement process, there has been little focus on the critical role that NGOs play in creating belonging” (p. 14). This thesis aims to provide insights into the empirical findings on fostering a sense of belonging by NGOs in a localised setting, focusing on the city of Nijmegen. The methodology will provide more context for the demographics of the city of Nijmegen. The findings will thus have broader scientific relevance for similar cities that welcome newcomers.

Moreover, as noted in the research problem, the majority of existing studies focus on the positive contributions of NGOs but do not critically explore their possible limitations or unintended effects, which relates to the societal relevance (Hausermann et al., 2021). This thesis aims to broaden theoretical debates regarding the sense of belonging and the role of NGOs in this context. The findings will assist future research in better understanding how newcomers’ everyday experiences, their sense of belonging, and the role of NGOs are interconnected.

The societal relevance, moreover, revolves around the fact that the number of forcibly displaced individuals worldwide remains high. These individuals are seeking new places to live, whether temporarily or permanently. It is vital for them that they feel a sense of belonging in this new place (Antonisch, 2010). By analysing the role of NGOs, such as Buddy to Buddy, in fostering connections between newcomers and residents of this ‘new’ place, this master’s thesis will examine how NGOs can contribute to a newcomer’s sense of belonging. The lack of research on the role of

NGOs in fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers can imply a disconnect between policy and practice, as policies do not actively consider the role or impact of NGOs in this regard. The conclusions drawn from this research can provide NGOs, (local) governments, and policymakers with insights on how to better support newcomers in overcoming emotional and cultural challenges. This can ultimately help foster a sense of belonging among newcomers and contribute to a society where everyone feels welcomed and valued. It is essential to research this because, if not, there is a risk that the needs of newcomers will not be met or acknowledged.

Furthermore, it is crucial that the voices of newcomers are heard and valued as they are often overlooked or neglected in discussions concerning their well-being (Damen et al., 2022). Damen et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of acknowledging newcomers' perspectives by using the saying "About but not without" (p.1). When newcomers are included, discussions begin to shift. People will become embarrassed about "referring to fellow human beings as 'burdens' and the conversation moves to the real value that refugees offer and how they can contribute" (Refugee Council of Australia, 2021, p. 2). This is essential for NGOs, (local) governments, and policymakers to develop inclusive policies and support systems that truly meet the needs of newcomers and strengthen their sense of belonging in society (Damen et al., 2022). This master's thesis will embrace this approach by focusing on the newcomer's experiences and needs.

1.3 Research objective and research questions

The research problem and its relevance indicate a gap in NGOs' role in fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers. It remains unclear how effective these organisations are at fostering a genuine sense of belonging or whether they may unintentionally reproduce exclusionary structures. The primary objective of this thesis is thus to understand how local refugee foundations influence the sense of belonging among newcomers in the Netherlands. This thesis will therefore incorporate and focus on newcomers' perspectives, their challenges, their needs, and how they experience and perceive belonging. To achieve this, this thesis will answer the following main research question:

How do local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging in the Netherlands?

The sub-questions used to help answer the main research question are:

1. *What does a sense of belonging mean for newcomers in Nijmegen, and what key components contribute to it?*

To understand how local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging, it is essential first to define the newcomer's perspective on belonging. This sub-question helps identify the elements that newcomers associate with a sense of belonging. Without this, it would be difficult to

determine how local refugee foundations influence this feeling. Furthermore, as mentioned in the section on societal relevance, including newcomers' perspectives is essential to developing inclusive policies and support systems that genuinely meet their needs. Moreover, concentrating on Nijmegen will fill the literature gap concerning how local foundations promote a sense of belonging among newcomers, particularly within a local context. While numerous studies have examined belonging broadly, there has been limited research on its meaning in specific cities, particularly from the perspectives of newcomers.

2. *How do social relationships influence the sense of belonging for newcomers?*

This sub-question will explore the importance of family, friendships, and community in fostering a sense of belonging for newcomers. By investigating how newcomers establish and sustain social relationships, we can highlight for local refugee foundations, local governments, and policymakers the significance of prioritising relationship-building, identifying the types of social ties that matter, and determining how to support newcomers better.

3. *What challenges do newcomers face in establishing social connections?*

To understand how local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging, it is essential to examine the challenges they face in forming social connections, both with and without the foundation's support. Understanding the experiences of these newcomers can offer valuable insights for local refugee foundations, local governments, and policymakers regarding the importance and impact of their support in tackling the newcomers' challenges.

4. *What role does the Buddy to Buddy program in Nijmegen play in mediating the social and material aspects of belonging for newcomers?*

This sub-question will explain how Buddy to Buddy in Nijmegen fosters social relationships and its material support (e.g. resources and access to information) regarding a newcomer's sense of belonging. By answering this question, the knowledge gaps mentioned in the scientific relevance concerning both the positive and negative outcomes of local refugee foundations on belonging can be further examined. It can, furthermore, also provide practical recommendations for improving the Buddy to Buddy (or other local refugee foundations) programs.

These sub-questions are interconnected. The first sub-question focuses on identifying the elements that newcomers associate with a sense of belonging. The second explores a key element of belonging for newcomers: social relationships, which connect to local refugee foundations like Buddy to Buddy,

where I conducted my fieldwork for this thesis. The third sub-question examines the challenges faced by newcomers in establishing these social relationships. Finally, the role of the local refugee foundation, Buddy to Buddy, is crucial to analyse its influence on the earlier-mentioned elements that newcomers associate with a sense of belonging.

1.4 Reading guide

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of this master's thesis, presenting key theoretical insights from the current academic debate on the sense of belonging and related concepts. Furthermore, this chapter will provide insights into the role local refugee foundations play in promoting a sense of belonging for newcomers and highlight the existing literature gaps.

Chapter 3 details the research methods used in this thesis. This chapter describes the process of data collection, coding, and analysis and explains the rationale behind using qualitative research. It also explores my positionality as a researcher and the ethical implications of the thesis. Furthermore, it provides context for this master's thesis. It will delve deeper into Buddy to Buddy, providing a comprehensive overview of the organisation, its mission and approach in facilitating connections between locals and newcomers (in Nijmegen). Moreover, this chapter will provide the context of the municipality of Nijmegen, a brief overview of the demographics of newcomers in the Netherlands, and an explanation of Dutch asylum and integration policies.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the qualitative analysis, offering in-depth responses to the sub-questions mentioned in this thesis. This chapter will present the insights derived from the data of this thesis's research. It will show the newcomers' perspectives on belonging alongside the theory.

Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the main research question and provides a thorough analysis of the findings. Additionally, it includes reflections on the research and writing process and recommendations for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The main objective of this thesis is to understand how local refugee foundations influence the sense of belonging among newcomers in the Netherlands. Scholars have used the term belonging in various fields, such as anthropology, political science, history, and sociology (Antonisch, 2010; Fenster, 2005). When the term belonging is introduced in literature, it is usually used as a synonym for citizenship or identity. However, belonging is more than that; it is a multi-dimensional concept. For newcomers to feel a sense of belonging, they do not need to identify as a Dutch person. The sense of belonging of a newcomer in Nijmegen is unique to each individual, making it a dynamic and complex process.

To analyse the sense of belonging of newcomers (in the municipality of Nijmegen), I will use the five factors that influence one's sense of belonging, introduced by Antonisch (2010). There are alternative concepts connected to the sense of belonging, although not interchangeable. Therefore, it is essential to understand the differences and similarities between these alternative concepts and the sense of belonging to illustrate why the concept of belonging is used in this thesis. The coming section will examine this and will subsequently delve deeper into Antonisch's five factors (2010).

2.1 Alternative concepts

An analysis of newcomers in a society is frequently approached from the perspective of 'integration'. For example, the Dutch governmental institution, Central Agency for Statistics (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS), takes this approach as well in their yearly report about integration (CBS, 2022). This report compares various ethnic groups with the average of the total Dutch population across dimensions such as crime, income, employment, social relations, education, and health. The CBS defines integration as the degree to which individuals with a migration background and those with a Dutch background are growing towards each other. Growing towards each other means the extent to which these two groups compare to each other on the different dimensions described above (CBS, 2020).

The usage of the concept of integration, as seen above, has been criticised by various scholars. Korteweg (2017) notes that "the focus on immigrant integration leads to a failure to attend to various political, social and economic troubles of 'host' societies" (p. 428). It fails to attend to both troubles that are and those that are not associated with the presence of individuals, labelled as 'immigrants' (Korteweg, 2017).

Schinkel (2018) elaborates on this notion by suggesting that when issues such as unemployment, homophobia, or incarceration emerge, they are not solely viewed as societal problems. Instead, they are often framed as individual challenges faced by those perceived to be "outside" of society and in need of "integration". By framing societal issues as individual challenges,

society is portrayed as problem-free, as any existing issues are being attributed to immigrants who are collectively associated with these issues (Schinkel, 2018). Vertovec (2007) also observes this and notes that a 'groupist' understanding of newcomers overlooks the processes of diversification and hybridisation that have contributed to today's complex 'super' diversities (Vertovec, 2007; Vertovec, 2020, p. 8). In other words, with a 'groupist' understanding, it is meant that newcomers inherently are part of distinct groups that homogeneously share culture and values (Vertovec, 2020).

This narrative of "bringing people into society" perpetuates the notion that immigrants in Western Europe are still in the process of arrival (Boersma & Schinkel, 2017). Consequently, the children of immigrants are also labelled as immigrants, suggesting they are still "on the move" towards integration into society (Schinkel, 2018). These labelled immigrants are actually 'always already' full members of immigrant-receiving societies, both in terms of participation and of belonging (Korteweg, 2017). This is because immigrants have become integral to defining belonging within the countries they live in. They serve as a contrast to frame the concept of belonging by focusing both on how immigrants do and do not belong (Korteweg, 2017). Because of an emphasis on differences, immigrants can experience a reinforcement of feelings of exclusion, which in turn influences feelings of belonging (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2014). It can also impact how a host society views immigrants, as such framing can result in binary views of immigrants: either as valuable contributors to society or as outsiders who do not belong (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2014; Korteweg, 2017).

Next, I will explore alternative concepts to integration as I will avoid using the term "integration" in my thesis due to its narrow framing. The term emphasises the differences between newcomers and host societies, potentially reinforcing feelings of exclusion. As mentioned above, authors like Korteweg (2017) and Schinkel (2018) criticise the concept of integration for failing to address broader societal issues and for maintaining a binary view of newcomers, either as valuable contributors or as outsiders. Additionally, the concept overlooks the complexities of 'super' diversities and the already significant role of newcomers in defining societal belonging.

The concepts of "home", "place belongingness", "home-making practices", "sense of belonging", and "place-making" are alternative concepts that have been used to analyse newcomers in society. First, home is more than a place, a site in which we live (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). It is important to understand the complexity of "home" as both a physical and emotional concept. It has a dual nature of offering security and belonging, while also potentially evoking feelings of alienation, rejection, hostility, and fear (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Dowling & Mee, 2007). This duality, highlighted by Blunt & Dowling (2006) and further emphasised by Dowling & Mee (2007), highlights the importance of recognising how personal investments in "home" develop one's identity and sense of self. Recognising this is essential for addressing the various experiences of individuals within their living

environments, acknowledging that "home" can be a source of comfort and distress (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Dowling & Mee, 2007).

Furthermore, notions of home are also central in migrations. Migration often disrupts individuals' sense of home, as they leave one home behind, whether voluntarily or under coercion (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). These international movements are also processes of establishing home, as senses of belonging that move over space and are created in new places (Blunt & Dowling, 2006).

The concept of place belongingness is connected to the concept of 'home'. According to Antonisch (2010), the concept of place belongingness is when an individual is emotionally attached to a particular place. This particular place is felt as 'home', so in order for a person to feel like they belong, the individual should feel 'at home'. Home is in this case not defined as a "domestic(ated) material space", but as "a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment" (Antonisch, 2010, p. 646). In this case, the geographical scale of 'home' has a diverse range from one's house to one's local neighbourhood or national homeland. Furthermore, the security of knowing you are in a safe place from violence is crucial. Antonisch (2010) describes it as "where you belong is where you are safe; and where you are safe is where you belong" (Antonisch, 2010, p. 648). This does not mean that the 'safe receiving society' is in all cases the only place where individuals feel like they belong. There are various forms of belonging, which can also include the place that is left behind when fleeing. In other words, belonging can be a transnational concept as well. When individuals lack feelings of place belongingness, this can lead to a sense of alienation, isolation, and loneliness (Antonisch, 2010).

As mentioned above, place belongingness is when an individual is emotionally attached to a particular place and feels it as 'home'. The feeling of being at home is attained through home-making practices. Home-making practices are day-to-day domestic living experiences that transform a particular place into a home (Bilecen, 2015). As Smets & Sneeep (2015, p. 93) note: "Home-making practices take place against the backdrop of permanency and movement, staying and leaving, continuity (practices of everyday life) and discontinuity (changes which threaten everyday practices)". In other words, home-making practices occur among various constants and changes in everyday life and are shaped by both stability and change.

Furthermore, home-making practices are defined by the presence of people like family and friends (Bilecen, 2015). Intergenerational relations, like the presence of (grand)children or (grand)parents, are of importance here too (Bilecen, 2015). Informal socialising with these significant others at home is a fundamental element of home-making practices (Bilecen, 2015). The results of home and home-making practices can lead to a sense of belonging (Smets & Sneeep, 2015).

Furthermore, home-making practices by migrants do not operate solely on a local or national

scale but can also have a transnational dimension (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021; Poelen, 2025). These sides can coexist (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021). Migrant transnational practices can be reconceptualised “as forms of homemaking over a distance, as they articulate their need to retain and materialize a deep-rooted sense of home toward a place from which they are physically distant, but socially proximate” (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021, p. 6).

Similar to home-making practices are place-making initiatives. The distinction between the two terms is subtle, as they both involve the material and social practices that make a space more desirable (Hoolachan, 2020). According to Hoolachan (2020), “the main difference is the ‘something more’ feature of home that distinguishes it from other places and thus which distinguishes home-making from place-making” (p. 215). In domestic life, ‘place’ is often invoked to explore home's challenges and shortcomings, i.e. the darker side of home (Hoolachan, 2020). When the ideal of home falls short, ‘place’ can serve as an alternative, as it indicates that “an element of home has been lost or perhaps did not exist at all” (Hoolachan, 2020, p. 215). Moreover, Hoolachan (2020) decided to use the concept of place-making instead of home-making practices to retain a focus on people’s efforts to construct a pleasant and personalised living space, which may reflect something home-like but within a space, like a hostel, that is inherently lacking the ability to provide the full qualities of the ideal home. In this thesis, such a space could also serve as a reception centre.

Furthermore, according to Gill (2010), place-making can be used as a survival strategy, as exploring new spaces can lead to discovering opportunities in a new place. Even when newcomers lack the personalised ideal home mentioned above, processes of place belongingness can begin, for example, in the city where the newcomer resides (Antonisch, 2010). The process of turning space into a place with personal attachments often occurs in everyday practices. For example, the “everyday act of walking in the city is what marks territorialization and appropriation and the meanings given to a space” (Fenster, 2005, p. 243). This could lead to place belongingness, as an individual can become emotionally attached to a particular place (Antonisch, 2010).

In conclusion, after carefully examining various concepts surrounding the experiences of newcomers, I have decided to focus on the concept of "sense of belonging" over other concepts like "integration", "home", "place belongingness", "home-making practices", and "place-making". This decision is driven by the understanding that "sense of belonging" encompasses a comprehensive understanding of how individuals connect with their surroundings and (host) societies. In contrast to, for example, "integration", which often emphasises differences and may reinforce feelings of exclusion. Furthermore, the concept of “sense of belonging” moves beyond the limitations of physical space and allows for a more inclusive exploration of how newcomers navigate their identities and relationships in new environments than place-making and place belongingness. Lastly, I have not

chosen the concept of home-making practices as this thesis will also look at how individuals attempt to construct a personalised living space, which may reflect something home-like but within a space, such as a reception centre, that inherently lacks the full qualities of an ideal home. Next, I will delve deeper into the concept of a sense of belonging.

2.2 A sense of belonging

The five factors introduced by Antonisch (2010) that influence one's sense of belonging are autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal.

The autobiographical factor relates to "one's past history – personal experiences, relations, and memories that attach a particular person to a given place" (Antonisch, 2010, p. 647). Fenster (2005) adds to this, stating that childhood memories are of importance in this context too. Besides childhood memories, memories of one's ancestors and the presence of family also add to a sense of belonging in a certain place. De Certeau (1984) defines the process by which a sense of belonging is established as the transformation of a place, which becomes a space of accumulated sentiments and attachment by means of everyday practices. Belonging to a place is here based on the intimate corporal experiences, accumulated knowledge, and memory of everyday walking. The sense of belonging is thus a dynamic process as it changes over time when these everyday experiences occur more often. In other words, these new personal experiences and knowledge of a certain place by these everyday practices reinforce a sense of belonging and relate to the autobiographical factor of belonging (Antonisch, 2010; Fenster, 2005). Learning more about someone's 'past history' can thus give insight into what influences one's sense of belonging in a particular place, in this case, a newcomer's belonging in Nijmegen.

The relational factor refers to the social and personal ties that enrich an individual's life in a certain place. These ties can be 'strong ties', which are connections between family and close friends, also known as bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). With bonding social capital, Putnam means networks which are "inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups" (Putnam, 2000, p.20). These networks are crucial since they often provide psychological and social support to their members, which is vital for newcomers who are often isolated from their family and close friends. Baumeister and Leary (1995) emphasise this as well: positive, stable, long-lasting relationships with frequent physical interactions (in other words, 'strong ties') are needed in creating a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, these social ties or relations do not need to be on a local or national level. These relations can be transnational in nature. The family or friends of a migrant do not always have the opportunity or possibility to come with the migrant to the host country. However, remaining in contact plays an important role in their sense of belonging. Online communication through for example email

or mobile phones allows migrants to stay in contact with their significant others and help (re)create a sense of belonging (Bonini, 2011). The role of social media in fostering bonding social capital primarily lies in migrants' need for emotional support, overcoming feelings of loneliness, and monitoring friends and family members back home. Consequently, some scholars suggest that reliance on social media may decelerate the integration process into the host society, as newcomers become less dependent upon finding friends and develop social connections in their host society (Alencar, 2018). Alencar (2018) further notes that maintaining social relationships in the home country and being associated with transnational online communities can help migrants overcome adjustment challenges instead of producing social segregation in the new society (p. 1592).

The opposite of 'strong' ties are 'weak ties', which are occasional encounters with strangers in public spaces, as mentioned by Buonfino and Thomson (2007). Putnam (2000) uses the concept of bridging social capital to refer to these 'weak ties'. Bridging social capital is open networks which are "outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages" (Putnam, 2000, p. 20). This form of social capital is inclusive towards different ethnicities and consists of heterogeneous groups. Newcomers' ethnicities, in most cases, vary from each other, which means that they need to come into a space that bridges social capital. This leads to an open network that is inclusive of people with diverse backgrounds. An advantage of this is that it can give newcomers access to a wide range of information and connections. Furthermore, the "friendliness of local people" plays "a central role in making refugees and migrants feel 'at home' in a new social environment" (Hebbani et al., 2017, p. 89). Being greeted and recognised by others in the local neighbourhood has a positive impact on the image of the neighbourhood and on the host society (Hebbani et al., 2017).

Both forms of social capital are vital for newcomers to have a social sense of belonging. However, the concepts of bridging and bonding social capital have also been criticised for focusing on the positive aspects of forming relationships (Santoro & Wilkinson, 2015). Portes (1998) also criticises the concept of social capital. He introduces four negative consequences of social capital: exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and downward levelling norms. First, with the exclusion of outsiders, Portes (1998) means that social capital can strengthen in-group cohesion but may also exclude outsiders, restricting their access to resources. This is also noted by Putnam (2000), who argues that bonding social networks can lead to the exclusion of heterogeneous groups or individuals. Second, excess claims on group members explain that social capital means privileged access to fellow members' resources. This can diminish opportunities for entrepreneurial success (Portes, 1998). The third negative consequence of social capital is restrictions on individual freedoms. This concerns how social network obligations can limit personal freedom, pressuring individuals to follow group norms against their personal values and

interests (Portes, 1998). Lastly, downward levelling norms entail that community norms may deter achievements beyond the group's average, causing "downward leveling" (Portes, 1998, p. 17). This pressures an individual to meet lower standards, hindering (individual or group) progress (Portes, 1998).

On the other hand, bridging social capital is inherently seen as good since the "exclusionary aspects of social relationships are reserved only for bonding social capital" (Spaaij, 2012, p. 1523). However, these exclusionary aspects are also present in bridging social capital. Spaaij (2012) gives an example of an exclusive bridging encounter in sport. In his research, he analyses sporting encounters between Somalis and other ethnic groups and concludes that these can "magnify inter-group differences and tensions" (p. 1530). Lastly, relationships or personal ties are not strictly binary. Social relationships are complex, often embodying both bonding and bridging elements. Attempting to categorise relationships into a strict binary between bridging and bonding can oversimplify and reduce the complexity of an analysis (Claridge, 2018).

The cultural factor focuses on forms of cultural expression, such as language, "traditions and habits, related, for instance, to religion and cultural practices like, for instance, food production or consumption" (Antonisch, 2010, p. 648). Language is seen as a crucial element by Antonisch (2010) as well, to be able to feel like you belong in a particular place. Language can evoke "a sense of community, the 'warm sensation' to be among people who not only merely understand what you say, but also what you mean" (Antonisch, 2010, p. 648). Pozzo & Nerghe (2020) emphasise this as well, stating that, for example, Dutch language knowledge is considered crucial for newcomers to develop feelings of belonging to the Dutch society. It is thus vital for newcomers to start early with learning the language of the country where they applied for a permit to stay. This emphasises the importance of organisations, like NGOs, that are present in the initial phase of integration (before obtaining a residence permit).

However, Pozzo & Nerghe (2020) and Antonisch (2010) also note that language can lead to the demarcation of 'us' from 'them'. Pozzo & Nerghe (2020) describe this with the notion of the 'doubleness' of the Dutch language acquisition, because it serves both as a means of inclusion and exclusion. Dutch language proficiency is crucial for newcomers to feel like they belong in Dutch society. Yet, they often face a 'deficit approach' that assumes their lack of qualifications and language skills hinders their sense of belonging (Pozzo & Nerghe, 2020, p. 843). In the dominant discourse, newcomers are often portrayed as deviating from the norm of the Dutch self (Pozzo & Nerghe, 2020). This is also known as the process of 'othering' in which social categories are being made to distinct groups of people (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). This intensifies the 'doubleness' paradox as they improve their language abilities since they are increasingly being exposed to this exclusionary

discourse (Pozzo & Nerghes, 2020).

Antonisch (2010) uses the concept of the politics of belonging to explain the process of othering. Namely, having a sense of belonging is not solely a personal matter, but also a social one. As mentioned above, bridging social capital is vital as inclusion by the community of the receiving country is needed to create a sense of belonging. For example, newcomers often need to assimilate into the culture, language, etc., of the receiving country in order to 'belong' (Antonisch, 2010). Contrastingly, in the first years in the Netherlands, newcomers often lack opportunities to actively engage in discursive spaces due to their physical separation from Dutch natives, especially in reception centres and language programs (Pozzo & Nerghes, 2020). This emphasises processes of othering, counteracting feelings of belonging.

Religion serves not only as a spiritual solace but can also serve as a means of fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009). According to Mazumdar & Mazumdar (2009, p. 256), "many immigrants have turned to religion to ease the stress of transition and to find meaning in a new social world". Religion can be integrated into the lives of newcomers in diverse forms. First, they can create religious infrastructure, including organisations, clubs and educational institutions for community building and identity transmission. Additionally, they can construct sacred spaces, like mosques and churches, to continue practising their religion in their new surroundings. Lastly, they can set up commerce in religious merchandise and services, further illustrating the complex and varied ways religion could play a role in the newcomers' lives (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009). People's traditional cultural beliefs, thus, can play a vital role in their sense of belonging (Stroope, 2011).

Besides religion, newcomers also use food practices to create a sense of belonging. Bailey (2017) notes that "practices such as fasting, food avoidance and ceremonial consumption of foods in the transnational family space or in the communal space with co-ethnic migrants create this sense of belonging" (p. 53). Bailey (2017) has researched the sense of belonging of Indian migrants in the Netherlands (focusing on food practices), stating that 'Dutch' food was often seen as something outside the domestic setting, whereas Indian food was seen as central. Preparing and cooking Indian food helped the participants of Bailey's research "cope with the dislocation and reminded them of the daily rhythms they experienced....in India" (p. 55).

The economic factor contributes "to create a safe and stable material condition for the individual and her/his family" (Antonisch, 2010, p. 648 Yuval).-Davis and Kaptani (2008) mention that a sense of belonging to society is stronger when individuals are engaged in labour and have the opportunity to build a professional life. However, this economic embeddedness in society is not only important from a material outlook, but also "in relation to make a person feel that s/he has a stake in

the future of the place where s/he lives” (Antonisch, 2010, p. 648). These feelings can lead to a sense of belonging in Nijmegen or the Netherlands. However, this economic factor might be challenging, as newcomers often also face socio-economic stressors such as poor housing and unemployment.

Lastly, legal factors like a residence permit/citizenship are essential as well in order for people to create a sense of belonging. The possession of a residence permit gives one the right to work, to stay, to obtain social benefits, etc. This ‘formal structure of belonging’, as mentioned by Fenster (2005), is vital to having a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the security of knowing you are safe from violence is crucial.

2.3 NGOs and belonging

NGOs play a role in promoting a sense of belonging with newcomers in various ways. NGOs contribute to the five factors introduced previously: autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal. (Antonisch, 2010).

Firstly, NGOs contribute to the autobiographical factor of belonging. As mentioned earlier, the autobiographical factor is about one’s past history, personal experiences, relations, and memories that an individual attaches to a particular place (Antonisch, 2010). NGOs can facilitate spaces for newcomers with a similar background and experiences to come together and connect based on their shared values, stories, and aspirations (Santoro & Wilkinson, 2016). The autobiographical factor is also about the transformation of a place through everyday practices that lead to a place becoming a space of accumulated sentiments and attachment (Antonisch, 2010; Fenster, 2005). However, the contribution of NGOs on this is lacking in the literature.

Second, the role of NGOs on relational factors includes organising social activities to be able to create new spaces of encounter between newcomers and the city residents (Togral Koca, 2019). An example of a social activity is organising a sports activity. According to Olivier-Mensah (2019), leisure time can play a crucial role in the lives of newcomers. Engaging in recreational activities, like sports, provides a temporary break to the various challenges and feelings of deprivation they may encounter in the host society (Olivier-Mensah, 2019; Togral Koca, 2019). These activities help to connect with others, particularly in the beginning phase of settling in a new country (Olivier-Mensah, 2019). Another example given is that NGOs can open meeting points, such as a welcome café, to allow newcomers and city residents to meet each other or people from the same diaspora (Olivier-Mensah, 2019). These social activities aim to create a sense of belonging as well as reduce stereotypes and prejudices on both sides by connecting newcomers with the local population (Olivier-Mensah, 2019; Togral Koca, 2019).

Another way to encourage bridging between newcomers and a host society is through NGOs that seek to create a sense of belonging for newcomers by overcoming xenophobia. They attempt this

through the portrayal of newcomers as “economic assets who pay taxes, open businesses, and have purchasing power...This is a strategic move to frame refugees in an economic language embraced and mobilized by rural whites” (Hausermann et al., 2021, p. 12). Rather than framing newcomers as economic assets, newcomers’ skills and strengths can be used to teach others about the world to promote cross-cultural dialogue and exploration. According to Hausermann et al. (2021) the focus should be put “on the knowledge and talents refugees and immigrants can contribute to placemaking efforts that bridge refugees, immigrants, and established residents” (p. 13). In this case NGOs make use of economic, relational, and cultural factors to influence a newcomer’s sense of belonging.

However, describing an individual metaphorically as a resource can be driven by positive intentions and might not inherently be dehumanising (Weima, 2021). However, Hausermann et al. (2021) usage of framing newcomers as assets relies on hierarchical assumptions regarding the value of individuals, necessitating their framing as resources to be deemed “worthy” of refuge. Weima (2021) does not dispute the notion that newcomers can and indeed do bring meaningful benefits to the communities, countries, and the world at large. Instead, she states that “Being “a resource” or a “benefit” should not be the basis of refuge, as it does not inherently challenge exploitation and exclusion” (Weima, 2021, p. 27). She proposes in her article that people should accentuate and advocate the richness of these contributions without using dehumanising language that reduces people to non-human goods or by framing newcomers’ value to societies through solely an economic lens (Weima, 2021). NGOs should thus be careful and aware of the impact of the frames they use to portray newcomers.

Thirdly, NGOs also play a role in the cultural factor of belonging. As mentioned before, having language and sociocultural knowledge of one’s host society can help newcomers foster a sense of belonging (Bronstein, 2019). Bronstein (2019) notes that NGOs can broaden access to information sources and skills that are not available through strong ties within newcomers’ communities. For example, access to Dutch language classes. An example of how NGOs can broaden access to the sociocultural knowledge of a host society is through organising “welcome dinners” (Olivier-Mensah, 2019). These gatherings serve as meeting spaces focused on personal networking, community building and getting to know a host society’s food culture through food practices. Food, being a universal need yet diverse in its forms, serves as an effective way to get to know one another and learning about one’s culture. Having a meal together facilitates bridging between people. Moreover, communication issues due to different languages move into the background as it enables people to interact on equal footing (Olivier-Mensah, 2019).

Antonisch (2010) also notes the importance of expressing and staying in touch with one’s own identity. Moreover, NGOs can support newcomers to preserve and celebrate their cultural heritage

through diverse initiatives (FWEAP, 2021). In this way, newcomers can stay in touch with their past. An example of this is a festival named 'Tsudoi', which means gathering in Japanese, organised by the Foundation for the Welfare and Education of the Asian People (FWEAP) in Japan. This festival is organised to encourage newcomers and to facilitate the Japanese public to better understand the refugee community (FWEAP, 2021).

Fourthly, NGOs also contribute to the economic factor of belonging through job mediation, among other activities, bridging newcomers with employers. Newcomers can benefit from job search assistance offered by some NGOs, as newcomers often have limited access to similar services and are in some cases not able to effectively search for jobs by themselves (Battisti et al., 2019). Moreover, potential employers may disregard their applications due to perceived higher recruitment expenses (Battisti et al., 2019). NGOs can also provide access to information sources and skills that are not available through strong ties within newcomers' communities (Bronstein, 2019). NGOs can contribute to a newcomer's economic status as having Dutch friends and/or being part of a mainstream organisation are positively associated with a newcomer's occupational status and employment odds (De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010).

Lastly, NGOs also contribute to the legal factor of belonging through offering legal support to the newcomers. For example, information about the host country's legal system, asylum procedures and access to welfare provisions is given (Muraleedharan & Bryer, 2020; Togral Koca, 2019). Vluchtelingenwerk is an example of a Dutch NGO that gives expert, legal guidance to newcomers at all stages of their asylum procedure. Vluchtelingenwerk assists newcomers during their asylum procedure and (if applicable) the family reunification procedure (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.). Moberg Stephenson (2021) also mentions the importance of obtaining a permit to stay for the sense of belonging of newcomers (in her research she focuses on 'unaccompanied' young people). She notes that social workers can support these newcomers with their asylum claim, which can thus help develop a sense of belonging (Moberg Stephenson, 2021).

To conclude, literature about the contribution of NGOs to belonging is present to some degree. However, the number of articles discussing this in the international literature is limited. According to Hausermann et al. (2021), "Despite their importance in the resettlement process, there has been little focus on the critical role that NGOs play in creating belonging" (p. 14). The lack of research on the role of NGOs on belonging also has led to that policy and funding interventions aimed at supporting refugees and immigrants do not actively consider "experiences and expertise of existing local NGOs who are doing the complex work of building bridges between migrant populations and their receiving communities, often in adverse local environments" (Hausermann et al., 2021, p. 14). This shows that NGOs can indeed play a critical role in creating a sense of belonging, as mentioned

earlier. On the other hand, literature that criticises the ways NGOs contribute to belonging or any negative outcomes for belonging as a result of their actions is lacking too. It remains unclear how effective these organisations are at fostering a genuine sense of belonging or whether they may unintentionally reproduce exclusionary structures. This thesis will attempt to fill the knowledge gaps regarding NGOs' contributions to belonging and potential negative outcomes.

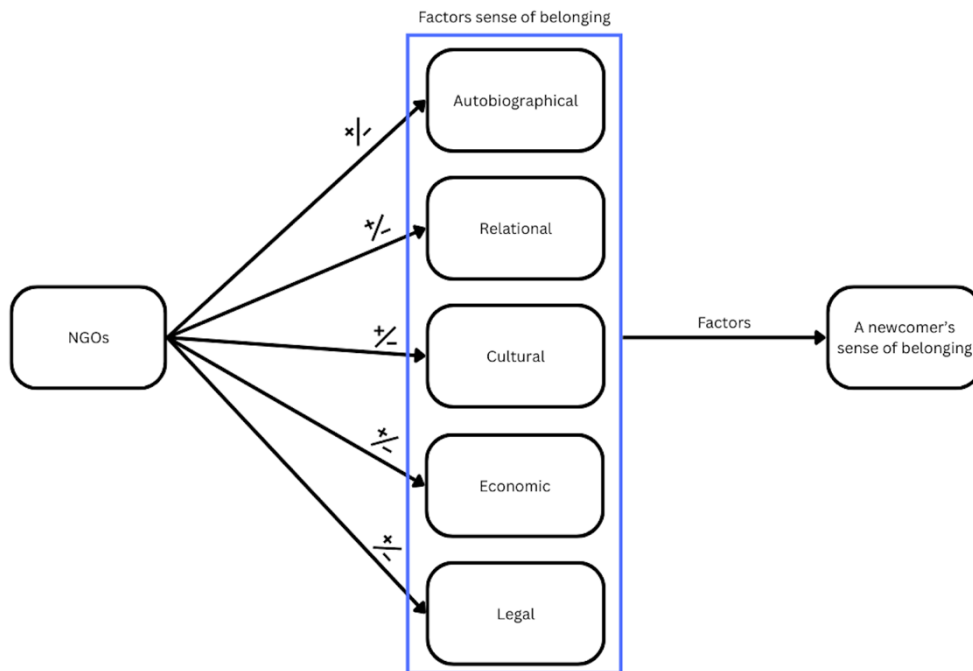


Fig. 1 Conceptual model of NGOs' influence on a newcomer's sense of belonging (The Author, 2026)

2.4 Conceptual model

A conceptual model is a schematic representation of the relationships between variables (x and y) as defined by the theory (UU, n.d.). Figure 1 brings together Antonisch's (2010) five factors that influence one's sense of belonging: autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal, with the role of NGOs on these. As shown above, extensive research on the influence of NGOs on these five factors of belonging is lacking, even though their importance in the resettlement process is significant. This thesis will identify the themes and relationships connecting NGOs with a newcomer's sense of belonging by answering the (sub)question(s) posed in the introduction. The emerging themes will be included in the conceptual model in the closing chapter.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology of this master's research will be critically discussed. It begins by outlining the methodological perspective underlying this master's thesis. This chapter will also provide an overview of the Buddy to Buddy program and the context of the research in Nijmegen, relating to the chosen methodological approach. Additionally, this chapter will present the research methods used to collect the data. Furthermore, it will discuss the data analysis method employed in this thesis, and finally, it will delve deeper into ethics and my positionality in the field.

3.1 Research philosophy

3.1.1 Paradigms

Kuhn (1970) states that a paradigm is essentially a theoretical framework. It entails the methodology, ontology, epistemology and methods used in scientific research (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Positivism and interpretivism are the two most common paradigms in research philosophy (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). The paradigm used in this thesis is interpretivism. To reinforce my point, I analyse both paradigms and explain why I chose one over the other.

Firstly, positivism is a paradigm based on measurement and reason (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; University of Nottingham, n.d.). Knowledge is acquired through measurable and neutral observations (University of Nottingham, n.d.). This enables researchers to draw universal laws and conclusions based on generalisations and repeated statistical results (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). In other words, the focus of positivism is on pure data and facts without being influenced by the "interpretation of bias of human" (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, p. 41). Quantitative methods of data collection are often used alongside positivism (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; University of Nottingham, n.d.).

The second paradigm, interpretivism, assumes that reality is socially constructed, multiple, and subjective (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022; University of Nottingham, n.d.). To understand someone's reality, this paradigm focuses on that person's experience of reality. This may differ from someone else's reality due to a person's social or historical perspective (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Junjie & Yingxin, 2022; University of Nottingham, n.d.). Interpretivism acknowledges differences such as circumstances, contexts, and cultures that lead to the development of various social realities (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Thus, it differs from positivism as it does not aim to provide a universal law that can be generalised. Qualitative methods of data collection are often employed with interpretivism (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; University of Nottingham, n.d.).

The research question of this master's thesis is: How do local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging in the Netherlands? This research question has a subjective nature, as

it focuses on a newcomer's reality and this individual's experience of that reality in a specific context. This aligns with the paradigm of interpretivism, as mentioned earlier, since interpretivism provides an in-depth understanding of particular contexts and an individual's perspective (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The newcomer's experiences, perspectives, and context are vital in answering this research question. These are inherently subjective and cannot yield a universal law that can be generalised as in positivism. Thus, the research philosophy best suited for this thesis is interpretivism.

3.1.2 Methodological perspective

In the section above, it is mentioned that qualitative data collection methods are used within interpretivism. This section will briefly discuss the qualitative methods chosen for this master's thesis. The selected research methods will be more extensively discussed after introducing the Buddy to Buddy program and the research context.

Qualitative research uses various data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation (Hennink et al., 2020). For this thesis, a mix of qualitative methods has been used to fully answer the main research questions and sub-questions. The focus group method has not been chosen because it can be challenging to preserve anonymity. Focus groups should consist of individuals previously unknown to each other, so that the discussion within the group does not reference existing relationships, and to avoid individuals outside the focus group but within a broader social circle from identifying the participants through deductive disclosure (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). This is not feasible in this master's thesis research, as the interviewees are all buddies who regularly meet at activities. The interviews contain sensitive topics, so anonymity and confidentiality are vital. The methods used are participant observation and in-depth interviews.

The idea behind participant observation is that to know other humans, the researcher should join the same daily patterns or activities as the study participants (Madden, 2010). In other words, "the researcher is immersed in the people's day-to-day lives and observes and interviews the group participants" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 143). The advantage of this method is that it is unobtrusive, can be conducted in many different situations and can give a lot of contextual information (Hennink et al., 2020). A disadvantage of this method could be that the interpretations of the observations can be subjective (Hennink et al., 2020). It is essential to keep that in mind while observing.

Interviews are the second research method used for data collection. Interviews consist of a series of questions asked during a meeting or dialogue, typically between an interviewer and a participant, "where personal and social interactions take place" (Jupp, 2006, p. 236). Interviews can take various forms, including unstructured, semi-structured, in-depth, and structured (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Jupp, 2006). The advantages of interviews include providing in-depth information and being useful for sensitive issues (Hennink et al., 2020). This contrasts with focus groups, which do

not necessarily seek individuals' experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). Since individuals' experiences are vital to answering the research question of this thesis, a focus group is not helpful in this case.

3.2 Fieldwork setting and sampling

The setting in which the qualitative research methods of participant observation and interviews have been used will be discussed. Furthermore, to better understand the context of the fieldwork, examining the Dutch integration law, the municipality's context of Nijmegen, and its demographics is essential.

3.2.1 Context of the fieldwork

In 2021, the Dutch Integration Act (in Dutch: Wet Inburgering) underwent significant reforms. Prior to 2021, the Act stipulated that newcomers were responsible for ensuring their integration by taking the necessary steps to complete the civic integration examination. However, the privatised language course system was too complex for newcomers to navigate independently, resulting in inefficiencies and delays in civic integration. This situation prompted concerns within the Ministry regarding newcomers' extended dependence on government financial assistance, which was regarded as undesirable (Blankvoort et al., 2023). Municipalities were responsible for the Participation Act, which aimed at facilitating refugees' participation in the labour market (Blankvoort et al., 2023; Fahham et al., 2020). Civic integration is now linked to the Participation Act, with the objective of assisting citizens in finding work. Unlike before, municipalities are now responsible for coordinating the integration process rather than expecting newcomers to navigate it independently (Blankvoort et al., 2023).

Municipalities are assigned this coordinating role under the idea that they maintain a close relationship with their (new) residents and have a comprehensive understanding of social services. Consequently, refugees can more swiftly connect with fellow residents and gain access to locations where they can acquire language skills, pursue education, and engage in (volunteer) work (Lysias, 2021).

Municipalities frequently collaborate with other regional municipalities to enhance the implementation tasks according to the new Integration Act. Furthermore, they engage with organisations in the social domain within their municipality. Much of the process of assisting newcomers in settling and participating in society is facilitated by civil society organisations, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), volunteer groups, sports clubs, and religious institutions (Lysias, 2021). For example, VluchtelingenWerk helps newcomers with the Dutch bureaucracy, like applying for permits, UAF (Foundation for Refugee Students) supports educated newcomers with study and career opportunities, and De Vrolijkheid Foundation provides psychological well-being

through art workshops and creative activities (De Vrolijkheid, n.d.; UAF, n.d.; Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.). Thus, strong cooperation with the social domain is essential.

The municipality of Nijmegen has a population of approximately 180,000 people, of which 10,4 per cent are newcomers of non-European origin (Gemeente Nijmegen, 2023; VZinfo, 2023). In contrast to the surrounding municipalities, Nijmegen has twice as high a percentage, whereas the others maintain a percentage below five per cent (VZinfo, 2023). Furthermore, Nijmegen accommodates two reception centres (in Dutch: asielzoekerscentrum, AZC). One centre has a capacity of 120 places, while the second centre can accommodate 325 places (COA, 2021). For a certain period, Nijmegen experienced an increase in the influx of newcomers within its municipality. From October 2015 to June 2016, approximately three thousand individuals from countries such as Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, and Afghanistan sought emergency accommodation in Heumensoord, Nijmegen (Hamer, 2015). Emergency accommodation reopened from the end of August 2021 to the beginning of January 2022, and approximately one thousand Afghans again utilised this facility (Vox, 2022). There are several (local) refugee foundations active in the municipality, such as Vluchtelingenwerk and Buddy to Buddy.

3.2.2 Buddy to Buddy

Buddy to Buddy was founded in 2015 when the founders identified social isolation among newcomers and recognised the openness of Dutch individuals towards these newcomers, albeit with a lack of knowledge on how to engage. The organisation states that initiating contact, fostering mutual understanding, and forming connections while preserving individual self-worth are critical in addressing social isolation (Buddy to Buddy, 2022). According to Buddy to Buddy, relationships and friendships enhance understanding, as familiarity promotes affection (in Dutch: 'bekend maakt bemind'). Consequently, Buddy to Buddy believes that they can positively influence individuals' well-being on an individual level and collectively within the societal level to which we all belong (Buddy to Buddy, 2022). The assertion that Buddy to Buddy will contribute to a society where we all belong suggests that newcomers are perceived as lacking belonging within the broader societal context. This observation highlights issues regarding the integration language, as it indicates that immigrants are somehow excluded from society, reinforcing a division between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Schinkel, 2018).

The name Buddy to Buddy was selected based on its fundamental principle of equality, facilitating human-to-human interactions. The organisation emphasises the importance of recognising individual differences and assisting individuals in navigating these differences. According to Buddy to Buddy, this will lead to an open path to equal encounters, even in unequal situations. Consequently, both participants in the buddy relationship expand their horizons and perspectives. Buddy to Buddy

plays a facilitating role in this process by facilitating one-on-one connections and organising group activities (Buddy to Buddy, 2022).

As of the end of 2022, Buddy to Buddy has fourteen active locations throughout the Netherlands. The organisation has set an objective to expand to twenty-two locations by 2025. Since 2015, 6,884 matches have been successfully made in the Netherlands, with 969 newcomers paired in 2022. The activities of Buddy to Buddy have not gone unnoticed; in 2022, the organisation was honoured with the Brouwer Vertrouwensprijs (Brouwer Trust Award), valued at €100,000, by the Koninklijke Hollandse Maatschappij der Wetenschappen, KHMW (Royal Holland Society of Sciences and Humanities). This prestigious annual award is designated for the social initiative that enhances mutual trust within Dutch society and is presented by the Dutch king. The jury noted: "Buddy to Buddy addresses an issue deeply felt in our society and one that will have an impact on our society for generations to come: the social isolation of (former) refugees (KHMW, 2022).

Buddy to Buddy emphasises five core values that form the foundation of their organisation. First, equality, as noted above, the name Buddy to Buddy is chosen because of the principle of equality. For both buddies, expanding worlds and perspectives are a shared experience, with Buddy to Buddy playing a facilitating role in this process (Buddy to Buddy, 2023).

The second core value is integration for everyone. Buddy to Buddy aims to allow newcomers to connect with their local citizens. They strive to reach all newcomers living in social isolation by collaborating with other organisations and initiatives to facilitate this inclusion (Buddy to Buddy, 2023).

The third core value is non-functional contact, which describes the interaction between newcomers and Dutch individuals. Buddy to Buddy does not aim to provide functional support regarding knowledge acquisition, study or career coaching, or language. They note that there is often a distance in the relationship between teacher and student or coach and trainee, which can lead to a lack of genuine human connection. They aim to increase the chance of lifting newcomers out of social isolation by facilitating non-functional human-to-human contact. Of course, mutual assistance may naturally arise from these established friendships; it is, however, not an explicit goal (Buddy to Buddy, 2023).

The fourth core value is being a politically neutral organisation. Buddy to Buddy is a non-religious and politically neutral organisation that does not engage in the public debate on whether to accommodate refugees (Buddy to Buddy, 2023).

The last core value is Buddy to Buddy's presence in the country. Buddy to Buddy aims to establish a complementary presence within the city and values collaboration with nearby organisations and initiatives. Buddy to Buddy strives to continuously seek opportunities to foster interactions and exchanges between longstanding and newly arrived residents (Buddy to Buddy,

2023).

A matching round at Buddy to Buddy comprises a four-month program in which participants, referred to as buddies, are paired according to shared interests. These matching rounds occur several times throughout the year, and prior to each new round, information and inspiration sessions are organised to allow interested individuals to pose questions. Before pairing, an intake session is conducted between the applicant and a representative from Buddy to Buddy. During this intake, applicants provide additional information about themselves to find a suitable match (Buddy to Buddy, 2023).

A matching dinner is arranged once a match is found and buddy pairs are formed. For this dinner, everyone is required to bring a dish to share with the other buddies. Participants are introduced to their matched buddy through various activities and can engage with different buddies. Subsequently, the buddies spend four months participating in weekly activities together. In addition to meetings with their designated buddy, Buddy to Buddy organises activities that allow buddies to attend together. This initiative allows buddies to meet other buddies and expand their networks. Furthermore, during these four months, buddies receive guidance from a Buddy Talk coach to discuss their match and assess the four-month program (Buddy to Buddy, 2023).

This thesis focuses on the Buddy to Buddy initiative within the municipality of Nijmegen. What makes Buddy to Buddy different from other buddy projects aimed at connecting newcomers with local citizens is that those projects also provide functional support, unlike Buddy to Buddy, which concentrates on facilitating non-functional human-to-human contact, as explained earlier. Buddy to Buddy started in October 2021 with a pilot phase, during which 30 newcomers were paired with 30 local citizens. The initial matching period lasted four months, ending in February 2022. The second round (pilot) of buddies started in February 2022 and ended in May 2022, involving an additional 30 newcomers matched with 30 local citizens. Throughout this four-month duration, participants became acquainted with each other and explored the city of Nijmegen, as the activities were diversified throughout the city. This thesis encompasses the data collected from both pilot phases. Following the pilot initiatives, Buddy to Buddy has continued facilitating matching rounds in Nijmegen (Buddy to Buddy, 2022).

3.2.3 Sampling

I volunteered at Buddy to Buddy in Nijmegen to identify potential interviewees for my thesis. This opportunity enabled me to introduce myself and establish my position as a research student. Through active participation in the organised events, I built rapport with the newcomers present and eventually asked if I could conduct interviews with them. I used the snowball or chain sampling method to achieve a more substantial sample size. With this approach, I asked interviewees if they could

introduce me to other newcomers who are buddies at Buddy to Buddy Nijmegen (Shaheen et al., 2018). The advantage of this sampling technique lies in the increased likelihood of participation, as individuals may be more inclined to engage when referred by someone they trust, thereby enhancing my overall trustworthiness.

According to Baker & Edwards (2012), there is no recommended sample size for qualitative interviews. It depends on the research's purpose and practical issues. Even one interviewee in some research is enough if it is a unique case. A small sample size can be valuable when researching difficult-to-access populations or sensitive topics, such as this thesis on belonging and newcomers (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Finally, I could interview fourteen newcomers who became buddies through Buddy to Buddy in Nijmegen. By examining differences in age, gender, and countries of origin, I sought to achieve a varied sample (see Appendix I). Five are women, and nine are men, aged 19 to 52. My interviewees were born in Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Guinea, Pakistan, Iran, and Myanmar.

3.3 Methodology

The previous section briefly introduced the selected qualitative research methods. This section further explores these methods and explains how each is applied.

3.3.1 Participant observation

As previously noted, in the context of participant observation, it is essential for the researcher to be immersed in the daily lives of the individuals involved and to partake in the same routines or activities as those being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Madden, 2010). In this master's thesis, observations of participants were undertaken during five specific activities of Buddy to Buddy.

These observations occurred from early February to the end of May 2022. The activities included a matching dinner, closing events, a sports activity, and a buddy meeting called Buddy Café. During the participant observations, notes were taken of the personal items the newcomers brought and explained. This is "evidence of the way lives are lived and how the social world is engaged with by individuals and social groups at different times and in different places" (Jupp, 2006, p. 127). Immediately after each participant observation, I summarised the activities, conversations, and how the newcomers experienced the events.

The objective of conducting participant observations relates to my research question, which focuses on how NGOs, through social relations in Nijmegen, affect a newcomer's sense of belonging and the challenges that emerge. To acquire information regarding these social relations, I needed to join activities organised by Buddy to Buddy to observe the interactions between buddies. My role varied between a participating role, like actively joining sports activities or having an informal talk, and a more observing role, where I listened to buddies engage with each other and the staff.

Even though I did not actively take notes while observing, the buddies and staff knew my role as a researcher. As I introduced myself to them, I explained the reason for my presence.

Conducting the observations over an extended period increased the chances of connecting with many different newcomers. Additionally, I could attend and observe how these various activities were organised. Both factors contributed to a better understanding of how the organisation Buddy to Buddy operates and provided a more comprehensive view of the newcomers' experiences. Lastly, the observations not only provided information on their own but also inspired the interview questions and served to cross-check the information given during those interviews and vice versa.

3.3.2 Semi-structured interview

Fourteen newcomers were interviewed for this study. Semi-structured interviews were used for this master's thesis. This kind of interview often uses a schematic presentation of questions or topics the interview will cover (Jamshed, 2014). For this research, a topic list has been made with the help of the theory gathered.

The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one format, with the setting depending on the preferences of the interviewees. I allowed them to determine the location where they felt most at ease for the interview. The settings varied from an individual's home to a café or the local library. Not every interviewee had the opportunity to meet in a private room for various reasons, as some were residing with multiple individuals in one house or were still accommodated in reception centres. To ensure that interviewees lacking access to a private space felt more comfortable, we opted for a quiet café or a secluded area within the library. It was not the first time I met the interviewees; I had already built rapport to a certain degree, which might have made them feel more comfortable talking to me. Before starting the interviews, I would inform participants that their identities would remain confidential and seek their consent to take notes during the interview. Further details regarding ethics will be elaborated upon in a subsequent part.

Moreover, I used a set of 'conversation cards' during the interviews. To give the interviewees more control over the interview topics, I provided a stack of question cards for them to review and select from. This method, introduced by Poelen (2025), granted the interviewees agency over the topics discussed and allowed them to filter out uncomfortable questions, such as those that might trigger memories too emotional to discuss. The text on these cards was presented in Dutch, English, and Arabic to ensure that the interviewees understood the questions and could respond accordingly. The interviewed newcomers could speak any of the three languages. I collaborated with an acquaintance fluent in English and Arabic, and had a basic understanding of Dutch, to translate these cards. For each question, I asked my acquaintance to explain the meaning behind the question to verify whether the questions were straightforward and comprehensible.

Furthermore, I used a social mapping exercise to address my research question regarding the role of NGOs in influencing a newcomer's sense of belonging through social relations. The interviewees were also requested to complete a social map in which the newcomer could indicate where their friends, family, or acquaintances were. Positioning an individual at the circle's centre signifies a highly valued relationship. The diagram utilised for this social mapping exercise was designed by Poelen (2025) (see Appendix III). This diagram provided insights into their social relations and the potential connection between Buddy to Buddy. Another tool utilised during the interviews was the home mapping exercise, which Poelen (2025) introduced in her research on 'homemaking'. For each interview, I provided geographical maps of the world, the Netherlands, and the municipality of Nijmegen. Interviewees were able to indicate where they had experienced feelings of 'home' on these maps. The objective of this tool was to enhance the understanding of the newcomers' experiences, their feelings of belonging, and the factors that contributed to these sentiments. I cannot publish the mapping exercises in my thesis due to the inclusion of personal data.

Furthermore, as noted by Poelen (2025), a benefit of the mapping exercises and the conversation cards is that they made the interviews less formal and appeared to have an 'ice-breaking' effect. Interviewees were eager to show where they lived on the maps and share their memories associated with those locations. Moreover, reading the questions in their mother tongue facilitated more extensive responses in some instances compared to when the same questions were posed in English or Dutch.

3.4 Data analysis

There are different types of analysis to examine the large amount of written data from participant observations and interviews of this thesis's research, such as the narrative analysis, grounded theory analysis and the thematic analysis. The narrative analysis method is not suitable for this thesis as it often focuses on one or two individuals and reports their individual experiences. This makes it challenging to compare or generalise to other newcomers' experiences with local refugee foundations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While the narrative analysis focuses on individual stories, the grounded theory analysis method is about generating or discovering a new theory. The main aim of this thesis is not to develop a new theory, but to gain in-depth insights into the newcomers' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The thematic analysis, however, does focus on that by analysing these experiences and reporting themes within the dataset. It helps to organise and describe your dataset in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The chosen data analysis method for this thesis is thus thematic analysis.

Braun & Clarke (2006) describe six phases of thematic analysis. The first phase involves familiarising yourself with the data and examining the data actively (searching for patterns, etc.)

before coding. The second phase focuses on generating the initial codes from the data. Once all the data have been coded, the third phase begins: searching for themes by analysing the codes and combining them into an overarching theme. In the fourth phase, it is crucial to critically evaluate the created themes and ensure all themes are clear and distinguishable. The fifth phase involves defining and naming the themes, and the sixth phase is dedicated to producing the report, which is the final phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For the coding process, I started with open coding, which is the initial phase of the process. During this stage, I identified distinct concepts and themes for categorisation by creating units from parts of the data that shared a similar topic. The second level of coding is axial coding, where I further categorised emergent themes from the first level (open codes) into more specific codes, also known as major codes (Williams & Moser, 2019). The program ATLAS.ti was used for thematic analysis and coding to analyse the data from participant observations and semi-structured interviews (see Appendix IV).

3.5 Ethics and positionality

When conducting qualitative research, it is essential to consider the ethics involved and the researcher's positionality in the field. This section will delve deeper into this.

3.5.1 Ethics

Ethics focuses on the responsibilities of researchers toward their participants, audience, society, and the academic community (Mirza et al., 2023). An essential principle in qualitative research is autonomy, which emphasises the importance of respecting individuals' rights in research (Orb et al., 2001). Examples of these rights include an individual's right to be informed about the study, the freedom to participate or withdraw, and the necessity of informed consent. The principle of autonomy involves an ongoing negotiation of trust between researchers and participants, as consent is not a singular occurrence but a dynamic process (Orb et al., 2001). I applied this principle during my interviews and participant observations by asking for consent.

Furthermore, I recognise that participants may not have been continuously aware that they were being observed during the participant observations. It was not always possible or desirable to remind them continuously, as this could have disrupted the authenticity of their behaviour. I aimed to manage this responsibly by anonymising participants and allowing them to withdraw or clarify their consent.

Another important ethical issue is confidentiality and anonymity (Mirza et al., 2023). Since the interviewees spoke about sensitive topics, all their names have been anonymised, and specific personal information that could identify them has been omitted. The interviews were not recorded for

this reason. Instead, anonymised notes were taken in a notebook, as using a laptop could create a sense of distance. In this thesis, all interviewees will be referred to by their assigned pseudonyms rather than numbers. Using names acknowledges a person's identity and prevents them from being de-personalised while still maintaining their anonymity. Furthermore, consent was obtained before each interview, and the interviewees were informed that they could stop at any time or indicate when they did not want certain information to be used.

3.5.2 Positionality

Being conscious of your positionality is crucial for researchers because it influences your observations, interpretations, and interactions with participants. My identity as a Dutch woman without a migration background may have led me to interpret conversations differently from participants with other backgrounds. I addressed this by reformulating the same questions and asking them again or requesting that they elaborate further on their answers. Furthermore, my different background might have resulted in them sharing fewer of their experiences compared to someone who has gone through the same situation or is currently experiencing it. However, I established rapport with the interviewees by spending time with them at organised events, allowing us to meet multiple times.

This brings me to my next point regarding my positionality, specifically that it is shifting. During the fieldwork, I was initially perceived as a 'student researcher.' However, my role may have evolved, as some interviewees might have begun to view me as a friend. I reminded them multiple times about my position, as consent is not a singular occurrence but a dynamic process.

Furthermore, due to my position as a researcher, there was a power imbalance as I had more control over the interviews, data use, etc. Through informed consent, I tried to minimise the power imbalance regarding the data use. Additionally, I minimised my control as a researcher during the interviews by using participatory methods like the mapping exercises and conversation cards.

4. Findings: A Newcomer's Sense of Belonging

4.1 Introduction

Home sweet home in Nijmegen. I even have that written on a sign at my front door. I feel something when I walk around Nijmegen. A nice, warm feeling, but I can't really explain exactly what that feeling is. (Omar, Interview 3)

This quote shows that Omar feels a sense of belonging in Nijmegen. However, he finds it hard to describe exactly what these feelings are or why he feels this way. The question is what influences a newcomer's sense of belonging? This chapter is structured around the five factors that influence one's sense of belonging, as outlined by Antonisch (2010): autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal. Some newcomers' experiences overlap with various factors, leading to choices being made about their position in the chapter. This chapter will, furthermore, explore the themes and relationships linking NGOs with a newcomer's sense of belonging.

4.1.1 Belonging in Nijmegen

This section provides the foundation of the rest of the thematic analysis into the five factors that influence a sense of belonging. The newcomers interviewed all live in and around the municipality of Nijmegen, either in their own housing or in reception centres. It is, thus, essential to analyse how the environment of Nijmegen influences their sense of belonging. Some parts of the analysis will be discussed further in the sub-sections on each factor, as this section focuses on belonging in Nijmegen itself.

“I love all of Nijmegen”, as stated by Zayd (Interview 6).

The interviewees cite several reasons for feeling a sense of belonging in Nijmegen. Firstly, seven newcomers say they like Nijmegen's manageable size (Interviews 1, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13 & 14). Lina and Yahir note that Nijmegen is not too big, making it easy to navigate and helping them quickly learn their way around (Interview 13 & 14). Hana further explains:

The city is not too crowded, but still has a large enough city centre. At first, I thought I would prefer the big cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, but now that I live in Nijmegen, I realise how nice it is to be able to easily and quickly get everywhere by bike, on foot, or by public transport. (Hana, Interview 8)

Having access to the city and easy transportation can grant these newcomers more independence, allowing them to meet others more easily, explore their new home city, and so on, thus fostering a sense of belonging. Nimra agrees with the manageable size of the city and adds to the possibility of meeting others:

I like that Nijmegen is not so big and that I can come across people that I know. The people in Nijmegen often greet me on the street. I enjoy that. (Nimra, Interview 1)

Several other newcomers also highlight how easy it is to meet people in Nijmegen and note that the activities organised by Buddy to Buddy are held at different places in the city each time, so newcomers get more familiar with Nijmegen. Furthermore, the international atmosphere of the city, due to it being a student city and the presence of diverse cultures, contributes to the ease of meeting others, as Arham notes:

Nijmegen makes life feel simple because everything I need is close by, and there are enough opportunities for my career, studies, and to make connections..... Nijmegen has an open culture vibe. I like that there are many students in the city with whom I can chat. I love the people here in Nijmegen. (Arham, Interview 2)

The examples above show that the “friendliness of local people” plays “a central role in making refugees and migrants feel 'at home' in a new social environment” (Hebbani et al., 2017, p. 89). Being greeted and recognised by others in the local neighbourhood has a positive impact on the neighbourhood's image and on the host society.

To further analyse feelings of belonging in specific areas of the municipality of Nijmegen, the interviewees were asked to conduct a home-mapping exercise (Poelen, 2025). A map of the municipality of Nijmegen was provided, and interviewees were asked to indicate places they often visited or with which they had a connection. The objective of this tool was to enhance the understanding of the newcomers’ experiences, their feelings of belonging, and the factors that contributed to these sentiments. What stood out was that all interviewees repeatedly noted that the natural spaces in Nijmegen were important places to visit. Especially, the river Waal was mentioned by nine interviewees. For instance, Nimra explains, during the home mapping exercise, with the map of Nijmegen:

I feel comfortable in Nijmegen. I live close to the city centre. Now that I've received a bicycle from the refugee organisation, I cycle to various places in Nijmegen to explore them, such as the forest and the market. Kronenburgerpark is the most beautiful park in Nijmegen, and I love

going there to relax or meet people. I also find the city centre and the Waal river pleasant places to walk around. I wouldn't want to live in any other city than Nijmegen.

(Nimra, Interview 1)

And Omar notes:

I enjoy walking along the Waal river. I find it very relaxing, and I love being in nature. Nijmegen is a perfect mix of city and nature. (Omar, Interview 3)

And Nasir, furthermore, explains:

I really enjoy the nature here. I love walking at night because of the beautiful lights in Nijmegen. Beautiful memories in Nijmegen give me a sense of belonging. (Nasir, Interview 5)

These experiences in Nijmegen's natural spaces demonstrate how physical environments can foster a sense of belonging. Lastly, two newcomers interviewed, furthermore, compared Nijmegen to their countries of origin, indicating a form of autobiographical belonging which will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter.

4.2 Autobiographical factor

The autobiographical factor relates to personal experiences and memories that bind a particular person to a place. Examples are childhood memories and memories of one's ancestors. This section will delve deeper into these personal experiences and show how NGOs can create a space for sharing memories.

Omar tells me he owns two phones, one broken and the other working well. He continues by showing me a broken iPhone given to him by his mother in Syria. Though the phone no longer works properly, he explains that he keeps it close as a cherished keepsake of his mother.

(Omar, Interview 3)

Personal items, such as an old phone given by a family member, can highlight the emotional connection that reinforces a sense of belonging. The old iPhone used and given to Omar binds him to his mother in Syria. This reflects the autobiographical factor: memories and past relationships influence how newcomers establish their sense of belonging in a new country.

Besides memories of personal items, memories of a place can also foster a sense of belonging. All newcomers interviewed arrived in a host society that was physically and culturally different from where they came from. However, some newcomers noted similarities between the

cities they grew up in and the new city, Nijmegen, where they live now. Nasir explained how the city of Damascus, where he is from, is similar to Nijmegen:

I am from Damascus, which is an ancient city, and I feel those same emotions now in Nijmegen. Nijmegen is the oldest city in the Netherlands, and I feel a connection because of that. (Nasir, Interview 5)

Maira also compares the city she grew up in, in Pakistan, with Nijmegen:

Nijmegen feels like home to me. The city of Nijmegen resembles the place I come from in Pakistan; not too big, but not too small either. It gives me nostalgic feelings. I think it is a peaceful place. (Maira, Interview 7)

It shows that even when newcomers are in a different environment, certain familiar aspects, such as the size or historical background of a place, and memories of a place, can offer newcomers a sense of recognition and help foster a sense of belonging. Learning more about someone's 'past history' can thus give insight into what influences one's sense of belonging in a particular place.

Sharing (childhood) memories with others can also contribute to the autobiographical factor of a sense of belonging. As part of my participant observation, I attended a buddy event in which a game designed by Buddy to Buddy was introduced. Below is an excerpt from my diary of this event:

There was also a game they could play with their buddy in the future. The game, designed by Buddy to Buddy, is called Storytwister. It is a large map with various icons like a guitar, a dog, and so on. The youngest player starts by closing their eyes and placing their finger randomly on the card. They then have to share a memory about the icon they are touching with the other players. After sharing the memory, it is the next player's turn. The game manual is available in Dutch, English, Arabic, and Farsi, so all buddies can understand it.

(Participant Observation, February 23, 2022)

The game Storytwister allows newcomers (and other buddies) to share their personal experiences and childhood memories. In this way, Buddy to Buddy gives newcomers a space to share their autobiographical experiences with others. This Storytwister game, furthermore, fits the cultural factor as aspects of one's culture can be shared, and the relational factor as sharing personal experiences can deepen relationships between buddies.

In conclusion, the autobiographical factor played a role for several interviewed newcomers in fostering a sense of belonging. The interviewed newcomers shared their stories and memories of personal objects and places where they resided. This section demonstrated that even when

newcomers are in a different environment, familiar aspects such as a place's size, historical background, and memories can provide a sense of recognition and foster a sense of belonging. Furthermore, Buddy to Buddy provided a medium for buddies to share autobiographical experiences in an approachable way with others, also influencing the cultural and relational factor of belonging.

4.3 Relational factor

The relational factor refers to the social and personal ties that enrich an individual's life in a certain place. These connections between individuals in this thesis, newcomers and others, vary in terms of frequency, intensity, and closeness. To get a clear overview of newcomers' social relations, interviewees were asked to complete a social map, introduced by Poelen (2025), in which they could indicate where their friends, family, or acquaintances were positioned. Positioning an individual at the centre of the circle signifies a highly valued relationship. This section will use the created social maps to show a newcomer's sense of belonging through social relations and the possible influence of NGOs on this sense of belonging.

4.3.1 Family

The social maps showed that the interviewees positioned their family at the centre of the circle, emphasising the importance of the relational factor in their sense of belonging. This aligns with the relational factor, as relationships and the desire for emotional proximity to one's family were crucial to having a sense of belonging in Nijmegen or the Netherlands. Even though the social mapping exercise was introduced as an approachable way for newcomers to discuss their relationships, most interviewees were hesitant to share extensively about their relationships with their family:

I find it very difficult to complete. It makes me emotional. I feel too much pressure to complete it, so I'm not stating more than my family in the centre. (Omar, Interview 3)

Yahir (interview 14) also kept it brief, as he would rather not do the social mapping exercise, as his family was all that mattered. This hesitation to complete the social mapping exercise or unwillingness to share information about the family makes it challenging to provide an extensive excerpt of the interviews.

However, one interviewee, Nasir, offered a unique and reflective perspective on the social mapping exercise and how he perceives relationships (Interview 5). Rather than placing himself at the centre, as was usually done, he positioned himself on the outer edge of the circle (indicated by number 1). He explained that working from the centre outward gave him the uncomfortable feeling that he was supposed to need all the people in his life to feel complete. For him, this contradicted

something he had worked very hard to achieve, learning to be emotionally independent and content with what he has. Having arrived in the Netherlands after deeply traumatic experiences, including time in the Syrian military, he shared how soldiers were systematically broken down until they believed no one cared about them and that they were worthless. They were made dependent on the military to survive.

In contrast, his journey over recent years has been about rebuilding his mental health and reclaiming a sense of self-worth that is not based on dependency. By placing himself on the outside of the circle (1), he felt he could symbolically embrace the people in his life. This allowed him to express that he supported others rather than needing them to complete him. In this reversed structure, the people who occupy the most space in his life, his family, are positioned in the outermost ring, closest to him (indicated by number 2). Just inside that ring are his best Dutch and international friends, who play an essential but slightly less prominent role, indicated by number 3 (Nasir, Interview 5). This reinterpretation of the social mapping exercise emphasises his resilience and reveals how deeply he values his family and friends.

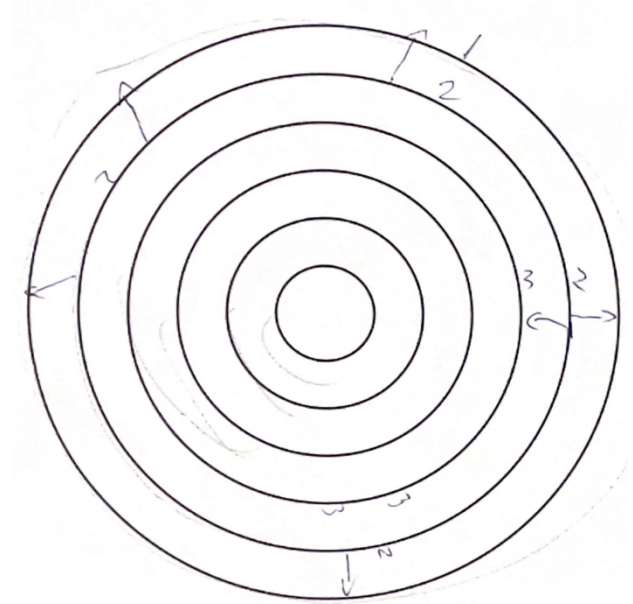


Fig. 2 Social mapping exercise (Nasir, Interviewee 5)

4.3.2 Friends

The social maps, furthermore, showed the presence of friends at the exact location as one's family or just one ring removed. These relationships are crucial since they often provide psychological and social support, which is vital for newcomers who are often isolated from their families. Some newcomers mention their buddy from the Buddy to Buddy program as their (close) friend. While pointing to the social map, Nimra notes that:

I have a best friend in the Netherlands. She was my buddy in Wageningen at Buddy to Buddy Wageningen. She was also the reason I wanted to live in Nijmegen, because my buddy was going to study there. She feels like my little sister. When I heard that Buddy to Buddy was also starting in Nijmegen, I signed up immediately. (Nimra, Interview 1)

Twelve out of fourteen interviewees indicated that their buddy and other buddies they met through Buddy to Buddy are part of their friend group now. Buddy to Buddy Nijmegen pairs newcomers with

locals, one-on-one, to build friendships. These matched pairs typically engage in various activities together. Omar, for example, often meets his buddy for a drink or a bite to eat (Interview 3). Maira, on the other hand, frequently goes for walks with her buddy as a fun activity (Interview 7). Another example is Yahir, who often volunteers with his buddy (Interview 14).

Moreover, newcomers value the emotional support they often receive from their new buddies. For instance, Rafi wanted to join Buddy to Buddy to make new friends and find a companion. By this, he meant a best friend, someone with whom he can share everything (Interview 9). The interviewees noted that through Buddy to Buddy, they not only met their buddies but also connected with their buddies' friends and family via those relationships. For instance, Hana was invited to her buddy's birthday and met all her buddy's friends. This remains her most enjoyable memory with her buddy (Interview 8). This is not always the case, as Cyra observed that:

Most Dutch people my age already have a close group of friends and a family, so they are usually not looking for or open to new friendships. (Cyra, Interview 4)

This highlights a challenge faced by newcomers: although they may be willing to connect, they often feel social spaces are already 'full', making it hard to build close relationships.

Buddy to Buddy also organises group activities, like buddy cafés, dinners and sports events, in which buddies can mingle with other buddies. All interviewees were optimistic about the organised activities. Rafi called these group events his "favourite memories" as they provided a space where he could talk with different people and easily meet new people (Interview 9). In May 2025, I attended a volleyball event in Nijmegen for buddies. Below is an excerpt from my diary of this event:

Several picnic tables were set up around the volleyball net. The buddies could choose whether they wanted to chat or play volleyball. There was a lot of laughter during the volleyball matches. It didn't matter whether someone was skilled at the sport or not; everyone was welcomed and encouraged by others. Playing volleyball helped everyone learn each other's names quickly. Stories were also shared about their experiences with volleyball. The Dutch participants mentioned they had learned volleyball in high school, but that the sport is not very popular in the Netherlands compared to football or field hockey. The newcomers from Syria and Pakistan were the most skilled at the sport. They explained that volleyball is very popular in their home countries. Some Syrians and Pakistanis tried to teach the Dutch the techniques and rules of the game. (Participant Observation, May 13, 2022).

As mentioned in the theoretical chapter, leisure time can play a crucial role in the lives of newcomers. Engaging in recreational activities, like sports, provides a temporary break to the various challenges

and feelings of deprivation they may encounter in the host society (Olivier-Mensah, 2019; Togral Koca, 2019). These activities help to connect with others, particularly in the beginning phase of settling in a new country (Olivier-Mensah, 2019). These kinds of events show how shared activities, such as playing sports, can strengthen social ties and foster a deeper sense of belonging among newcomers.

However, several newcomers interviewed were also critical of the matches made by Buddy to Buddy and its process, as contact was infrequent or the relationships remained superficial. For instance, Lina explained:

I find my buddy very kind, but I haven't seen her often because she was busy. I found this very unfortunate. I would have liked to build a friendship with her. (Lina, Interview 13)

Clear communication and commitment between both buddies are vital to building a lasting relationship. Four interviewees raised a significant issue regarding equality within buddy relationships (Interview 4, 7, 9 & 12). One of them, Rafi, suggested having a brief workshop before signing up as a buddy to discuss the expectations for the four-month buddy programme. Rafi emphasises this by focusing on the primary goal of Buddy to Buddy's primary goal: forming friendships. He notes that some buddy relationships are unequal, including his own:

Dutch people should not see being a buddy as just an opportunity to help for a few months, and then it's done. When you make a friendship, it lasts longer than four months if you connect.....Equality between buddies is very important. Therefore, the emphasis should be on the fact that the goal of Buddy to Buddy is to build friendships and that it is necessary to take it seriously. Questions about what someone truly values and what they expect from their participation should be asked at the start. (Rafi, Interview 9)

While he and other newcomers are seeking genuine friendships, he observed that some local participants fail to realise this and mainly want to help and listen, but are not open to forming genuine friendships themselves, which undermines fostering a sense of belonging (Rafi, Interview 9). Rafi also noted another imbalance in intercultural dialogue:

At the culture café, I have to tell my story again to every new Dutch person... Meanwhile, the Dutch barely share anything about themselves... I don't think it's an equal relationship. (Rafi, Interview 9)

Rafi's words demonstrate how even well-meaning initiatives can fail to establish reciprocal or equal relationships, thereby reinforcing the process of "othering".

4.3.3 Everyday interactions

Lastly, as mentioned earlier, the “friendliness of local people” plays “a central role in making refugees and migrants feel 'at home' in a new social environment” (Hebbani et al., 2017, p. 89). Lina noted the importance of these casual, everyday interactions, like greeting people on the street or talking to neighbours. Nimra notes how the people she meets in Nijmegen are very kind:

I like that Nijmegen is not so big and that I can run into people I know. People in Nijmegen often greet me on the street. I enjoy that. (Nimra, Interview 1)

Nimra even added “the rest of the Netherlands” on her social map in the outermost circle, as most encounters with people in the Netherlands were positive. One newcomer, Malik, found a creative way to connect with people in the Netherlands. He was often asked if he had a lighter to light a cigarette. He never had one because he does not smoke, so:

Now I always have a lighter in my pocket. If someone wants a smoke, I can give them my lighter and have a conversation. I enjoy these conversations. (Malik, Interview 8)

These casual, everyday interactions can thus also influence one’s sense of belonging. Moreover, the location and living conditions of newcomers can significantly influence their ability to form new social connections and engage in everyday interactions. Adama highlights this:

I still live in the reception centre. I think that once I have my own place, it will be easier for me to meet other Dutch people. For example, my future neighbours. (Adama, Interview 10)

Malik notes the importance of neighbours and having a place for himself as well:

I am currently still living in the reception centre, so for me, home will only truly begin once I have my own place and privacy. In the future, I hope to have good neighbours. I find that very important, because in Syria, neighbours always help each other and are good friends. (Malik, Interview 11)

Having one’s own fixed residence or neighbourhood can promote natural interactions, and it enables them to invite people to their homes; without this, newcomers may feel isolated.

In conclusion, the social maps showed that all types of personal ties, either close or more distant, influenced a newcomer’s sense of belonging in the Netherlands. NGOs, in this case Buddy to Buddy, can strengthen social ties and foster a sense of belonging among newcomers by organising

shared activities, such as playing sports. However, clear communication and commitment among newcomers, local people, and NGO(s) (Buddy to Buddy) are vital to positively influence a newcomer's sense of belonging.

4.4 Cultural factor

The cultural factor focuses on forms of cultural expression, such as language, “traditions and habits, related, for instance, to religion and cultural practices like, for instance, food production or consumption” (Antonisch, 2010, p. 648). These forms of cultural expression influence one's sense of belonging; being in a space that allows this is therefore essential. However, the cultural factor can also hinder a sense of belonging. Many newcomers express a desire to connect with people, learn more about Dutch culture, and feel part of the local community in Nijmegen, but they often encounter a range of barriers that hinder their sense of belonging. These obstacles include language difficulties, cultural misunderstandings, and limited opportunities for contact. In this section, the cultural factor will be explored in greater depth by drawing on the interviewees' own words.

4.4.1 Language

Language is seen as a crucial element by Antonisch (2010) to be able to feel like you belong in a particular place. Language can evoke a sense of community (Antonisch, 2010). All fourteen interviewees indicated that one of the reasons for joining Buddy to Buddy, besides making new friends, was to learn more about Dutch culture and language. Malik explained that being a buddy and participating in Buddy to Buddy events helped him speak more often in Dutch (Interview 11).

Despite many newcomers being highly motivated to learn Dutch, the process of acquiring the language can be long and challenging. The newcomers expressed how their limited Dutch proficiency restricted their ability to engage in meaningful conversations and to express themselves fully. For instance, Omar explained that:

In Syria, I was often at the centre of the conversation, and people would immediately listen to me when I entered a room. I was also the joker among my friends and was very loved. Now I struggle to express myself in Dutch, even though I already speak Dutch well, because I still feel like I am less myself when speaking Dutch. Now I listen more to my Dutch friends instead of talking a lot in group settings, which I was used to in Syria. (Omar, Interview 3)

This linguistic challenge not only affects the content of conversations but also influences a newcomer's social relationships. The loss of self-expression directly impacts the relational and

autobiographical aspects of belonging. Omar further explained that he only talks about “basic topics” and finds it difficult to determine how close his friendships are because he is unable to express himself clearly in Dutch (Omar, Interview 3).

Some newcomers note that even though they can speak Dutch reasonably well, others do not want to engage in conversation with them or switch to English when they hear that they are not native (Interview 6, 8, 11 & 12). For instance, Zayd explains that:

Most Dutch people switch to English when they hear I cannot speak Dutch perfectly. I find this difficult because I cannot practice Dutch like this. (Zayd, Interview 6)

Cyra further notes that:

It is difficult to get Dutch friends because often they would rather speak in Dutch than in English, all the time when in a group. (Cyra, Interview 4)

Language, while being a bridge to inclusion, can also become a dividing line between “us” and “them”. As shown by the examples of the interviewees, newcomers often experience a deficit approach, where their limited language proficiency becomes the main factor through which they are perceived, thereby reinforcing their outsider status.

4.4.2 Cultural practices

Even when language is less of a barrier, cultural differences and uncertainties can still make it hard to feel a sense of belonging. Nimra explains that she struggles to know which topics are acceptable to discuss with Dutch people because she does not fully understand the cultural context.

I don't know exactly what the cultural differences are between my culture and the Dutch culture. It makes it difficult for me to guess what topics I can talk about. (Interview 1)

Besides not knowing what topics are acceptable to discuss, what you can or cannot discuss about each of these topics can also be challenging. This uncertainty can lead newcomers, like Nimra, to hesitate in making contact or result in sudden misunderstandings. An example of a cultural misunderstanding Nimra had with her Dutch friend is:

She had made a dish with bell peppers. Only, I am allergic to bell peppers. I didn't dare to say I was allergic, because in Syria, people beat around the bush, and if you don't like something, you are expected to finish it. After a while, my friend asked if I liked the food, and she told me

that I could be honest with her. Then I finally admitted I was allergic to bell peppers, because I was starting to get spots on my face. I had to promise her to be honest and direct next time, because it's not insulting to her. I think it's nice that in the Netherlands you can be honest if you don't like something. (Nimra, Interview 1)

The directness of Nimra's friend helped Nimra to manage the cultural misunderstanding, learning about each other's ways of communication.

Religion is also a way of practising culture and influences one's sense of belonging. During my participant observation, it was Ramadan, and the buddy café organised by Buddy to Buddy adjusted to the Ramadan schedule to allow buddies who were fasting to have a meal together. Below is an excerpt from my diary of this event:

Around 20:17, we shared an Iftar meal together with the food we brought. Several people had fasted for a day with their buddies to experience what that's like and learn more about each other's cultures. (Participant Observation, April 12, 2022).

Others also indicated that they value the cultural exchange between the buddies (Interviews 1, 2 & 13). Below is an excerpt from my diary of an example of a cultural exchange during a Buddy to Buddy organised party:

A mix of international dishes was served, from bitterballen (Dutch meatballs) to pizza and baklava. A Syrian newcomer secretly preferred the Dutch bitterballen, he said, while his Dutch buddy preferred the baklava. The Syrian buddy described sharing dishes from different countries as: "Sharing is caring." (Participant Observation, May 30, 2022) d

Nimra also values mixing cultures by combining her belongings with Dutch, Syrian, and Palestinian objects, "Not mixing means not feeling at home." She believes that mixing is crucial for having a sense of belonging. By mixing all cultures, she can incorporate the best of each culture into her life and better understand and connect with the people around her. She hopes that Dutch people will also make an effort to learn more about her culture. "In this way, we have respect for each other, and that's important.", according to Nimra (Interview 1).

An event frequently organised by Buddy to Buddy was the Buddy Café. At the Buddy Café, buddies could meet each other and other buddies, and occasionally these cafés had a theme. The theme of the Buddy Café I attended was centred on cultural exchange and sharing memories about one's past. Below is an excerpt from my diary of this event:

Everyone was asked to bring something from the country of their birth, such as food, a picture, an object, or a story. In small groups, we discussed these items to learn more about each other's interests and backgrounds. Because this event took place during Ramadan, everyone was welcome to bring food, allowing us to share an Iftar meal at 20:17. One newcomer buddy began by sharing a picture he had brought. The photo showed a type of clog, also known as Syrian bath slippers. He explained that most people in Syria used to wear these slippers to walk to the public bathhouse, since not everyone had a bathroom at home in the past. He thought this was a great example of how clogs are not unique to the Netherlands, as other countries have them too. According to him, "Countries and people are often more similar than one might think at first. (Participant Observation, April 12, 2022).

These types of events foster cultural exchange amongst buddies relating to both the cultural factor and autobiographical factor of belonging.

Newcomers also experience adverse reactions when expressing their culture or religion.

Nimra experienced these kinds of reactions when wearing her hijab:

I am regularly told, mainly by older Dutch men, that I should not wear a hijab because I am in the Netherlands. Sometimes they insult me and call me a foreigner. These kinds of experiences make me question whether I should continue wearing my hijab. (Nimra, Interview 1)

Such negative comments reflect processes of "othering", in which newcomers are seen as outsiders who must conform to dominant norms (or those loudly expressed by a certain minority). These reactions weaken her sense of belonging, affecting her feelings of safety and self-confidence. Cultural expression, thus, becomes a site of negotiation, where newcomers must balance authenticity with safety and acceptance.

In conclusion, despite many newcomers being highly motivated to learn Dutch, the process of acquiring the language can be long and challenging. This linguistic challenge not only affects the content of conversations but also influences a newcomer's social relationships. Participating in NGO events, such as events of Buddy to Buddy, can create opportunities for newcomers to practice their Dutch. Furthermore, even when language is less of a barrier, cultural differences and uncertainties can still make it hard to feel a sense of belonging. Types of events organised by NGOs, around cultural exchange, can influence a sense of belonging. However, cultural misunderstandings and adverse reactions to one's culture can hinder a newcomer's sense of belonging.

4.5 Economic and legal factors

4.5.1 Economic factor

The economic factor refers to a newcomer's economic embeddedness in society. This is not only important from a material outlook, but also "in relation to make a person feel that s/he has a stake in the future of the place where s/he lives" (Antonisch, 2010, p. 648). In this analysis, the economic factor was limited in its presence.

Most interviewees did not work as they had been in the Netherlands for less than the required six months to be allowed to work or due to their studies. Instead, a few newcomers started to volunteer like Malik:

At the reception centre, I do some small tasks for the COA to earn some money. This also helps me to feel less bored. I hope to do some volunteer work in Nijmegen to meet more people and help others. (Malik, Interview 11)

Thuta also volunteers as a way to keep busy:

I often go to Nijmegen to help others. I assist people in the AZC with limited English in their hospital appointments. I also regularly come to Nijmegen to help with Buddy to Buddy activities. (Thuta, Interview 12)

Yahir volunteers with his buddy from Buddy to Buddy:

I volunteer with my buddy at the Leger des Heils in Nijmegen. I think it's important to give back to the Netherlands and help others in this way. (Yahir, Interview 14)

Volunteering can make newcomers feel that they have a stake in the future of the place where they live, influencing their sense of belonging. The economic factor of a sense of belonging is less evident in the rest of this analysis because the interviewed newcomers are part of the local refugee organisation, Buddy to Buddy, which aims to connect newcomers with locals to form friendships rather than help them find jobs.

4.5.2 Legal factor

The legal factor refers to a residence permit/citizenship, which is essential for people to create a sense of belonging. This sub-section will be explored, and examples will be drawn from the interviewees'

own words.

Not having a residence permit can add to feelings of uncertainty. Adama explains that:

A residence permit would give me a greater sense of belonging. Now, I still live with the uncertainty of whether I will be allowed to stay or not. I feel at home in Nijmegen, but I am not sure if Nijmegen or the Netherlands can be my future home. Only once I have my residence permit will I allow myself to dream about that. (Adama, Interview 10)

Other interviewees who already have the certainty of a residence permit say that it was an essential factor to feel a sense of belonging in the Netherlands. Malik mentioned that he will truly feel at home in the Netherlands once he gets his residence permit. He has been waiting for it for over three years, hindering his sense of belonging.

The legal factor of a sense of belonging is less evident in the rest of this analysis, as with the economic factor, because the interviewed newcomers are part of the local refugee organisation, Buddy to Buddy, which aims to connect newcomers with locals to form friendships rather than assist them legally.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings of the qualitative data gathered through participant observation and semi-structured interviews of fourteen newcomers. The five factors of Antonisch (2010) were used to structure this chapter.

Firstly, the autobiographical factor played a role for several interviewed newcomers in fostering a sense of belonging by being able to share their stories with others. For example, through Buddy to Buddy, which provided a medium for buddies to share autobiographical experiences through events and their own-made game, Storytwister.

Secondly, the social maps used in the interviews highlighted the relational factor of belonging; all types of personal ties, either close or more distant, influenced a newcomer's sense of belonging in the Netherlands. NGOs, in this case Buddy to Buddy, can strengthen social ties and foster a sense of belonging among newcomers by organising shared activities, such as playing sports. However, clear communication and commitment among newcomers, local people, and NGO(s) (Buddy to Buddy) are essential to positively influence a newcomer's sense of belonging.

Thirdly, the analysis showed the influence of the cultural factor on a sense of belonging. Despite many newcomers being motivated to learn Dutch, acquiring the language can be challenging. This linguistic challenge not only affects the conversations but also influences a newcomer's social relationships. Participating in NGO events, such as events of Buddy to Buddy, can create opportunities

for newcomers to practice their Dutch. Furthermore, even when language is less of a barrier, cultural differences can still make it hard to feel a sense of belonging. Types of events organised by NGOs, around cultural exchange, can influence a sense of belonging. However, cultural misunderstandings and adverse reactions to one's culture can hinder a newcomer's sense of belonging.

The two final factors, economic and legal, were less evident in the rest of this analysis because the interviewed newcomers are part of the local refugee organisation, Buddy to Buddy, which aims to connect newcomers with locals to form friendships rather than help them find jobs or assist them legally. However, volunteering can make newcomers feel they have a stake in their community's future, strengthening their sense of belonging. Furthermore, newcomers who already have a residence permit say it was essential to feel a sense of belonging.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

This section will use the findings from the thematic analysis in the previous chapter to address the sub-questions and, ultimately, answer the main research question. The main research question posed in the introduction chapter of this thesis is:

How do local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging in the Netherlands?

To answer the main research question, it was divided into four sub-questions. These sub-questions will be addressed and discussed in the following part.

5.1.1 Sense of belonging for newcomers

To understand how local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging, it is essential first to define the components that contribute to it. Without this, it would be difficult to determine how local refugee foundations influence this feeling. This section will answer the first sub-question: *What does a sense of belonging mean for newcomers in Nijmegen, and what key components contribute to it?* Moreover, by focusing on Nijmegen, this sub-question will fill a gap in the literature on how refugee foundations promote a sense of belonging among newcomers, particularly within a local context. While numerous studies have examined belonging broadly, there has been limited research on its meaning in specific cities, particularly from the perspectives of newcomers.

The interviewees cite several reasons for feeling a sense of belonging in Nijmegen. Firstly, Nijmegen's manageable size makes it easy to navigate and helps newcomers quickly learn their way around. Having access to the city and easy transportation can grant newcomers more independence, allowing them to meet others more easily, explore their new home city, and so on, thus fostering a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, the international atmosphere of the city, due to it being a student city and the presence of diverse cultures, contributes to the ease of meeting others as well. Daily interactions with people in Nijmegen show that the friendliness of local people influences the sense of belonging of newcomers in a new social environment. Being greeted and recognised by others in the local neighbourhood positively influences the neighbourhood's image and the host society, fostering a sense of belonging through the relational factor for newcomers. These encounters in public spaces can be referred to as weak ties or as bridging social capital, as defined by Putnam (2000).

In addition, the home mapping exercise further analysed feelings of belonging in specific areas of the municipality of Nijmegen. What stood out was that all interviewees repeatedly noted that the natural spaces in Nijmegen were important places to visit. These experiences in Nijmegen's natural spaces demonstrate how physical environments can foster a sense of belonging.

Lastly, even when newcomers are in a different environment, certain familiar aspects or memories of a place can offer them a sense of recognition and help foster a sense of belonging through the autobiographical factor. Interviewees noted similarities in size and historical background between the cities they grew up in and the city, Nijmegen, where they live now.

5.1.2 Social relationships

The second sub-question, *How do social relationships influence the sense of belonging for newcomers?*, examines the role of family, friendships, and community in fostering a sense of belonging for newcomers. By investigating how newcomers establish and sustain social relationships, we can highlight for NGOs, local governments, and policymakers the importance of prioritising relationship-building, identifying the types of social ties that matter, and supporting newcomers more effectively.

To get a clear overview of newcomers' social relations, interviewees were asked to complete a social map. The social maps showed the importance of the relational factor of a sense of belonging for newcomers and the presence of Putnam's (2000) bonding social capital. The interviewees positioned their family at the centre of the circle, emphasising that the desire for emotional proximity to family was crucial to having a sense of belonging in Nijmegen or the Netherlands. Often, interviewees did not specify their families in the social mapping exercise. The family was mentioned as a whole, indicating that they see their family as a collective and do not distinguish among individuals.

The social maps, furthermore, showed the presence of friends at the exact location as one's family or just one ring removed. These relationships are crucial since they often provide psychological and social support, which is vital for newcomers who are usually isolated from their families.

Moreover, newcomers value the emotional support they frequently receive from their friends, as they value someone with whom they can share everything. Lastly, as mentioned earlier, the friendliness of local people in daily interactions, bridging social capital, plays a central role in fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers in a new social environment.

5.1.3 Challenges

The third sub-question, *What challenges do newcomers face in establishing social connections?*, aims to understand how NGOs influence a newcomer's sense of belonging, as it is vital to examine the

challenges they encounter when forming social connections, both with and without NGOs' influence. Understanding the experiences of these newcomers can offer valuable insights for NGOs, local governments, and policymakers regarding the importance and impact of their support in tackling the newcomers' challenges.

First, newcomers face linguistic challenges that affect not only the content of conversations but also their social relationships. The loss of self-expression directly impacts the relational and autobiographical aspects of belonging. Furthermore, some newcomers note that even though they can speak Dutch reasonably well, others do not want to engage in conversation with them or switch to English when they hear that they are not native. Language, while being a bridge to inclusion, can also become a dividing line between "us" and "them".

Secondly, even when language is less of a barrier, cultural differences and uncertainties can still make it hard to feel a sense of belonging. Newcomers addressed the difficulty of knowing which topics are acceptable to discuss and what they can or cannot discuss about each topic. This uncertainty can lead newcomers to hesitate in making contact or result in sudden misunderstandings.

Third, another challenge is that newcomers often feel that social spaces are already 'full', as contact is infrequent or relationships remain superficial. This makes it hard to build close relationships. In addition, not having one's own fixed residence or neighbourhood makes having social interactions also more challenging.

Lastly, some newcomers reported experiencing adverse reactions to cultural aspects, such as wearing a hijab. Such negative comments reflect processes of "othering", in which newcomers are seen as outsiders who must conform to dominant norms (or those loudly expressed by a certain minority). These reactions weaken a newcomer's sense of belonging, affecting their feelings of safety and self-confidence. Cultural expression, thus, becomes a site of negotiation, where newcomers must balance authenticity with safety and acceptance.

5.1.4 Role of Buddy to Buddy

The last sub-question, *What role does the Buddy to Buddy program in Nijmegen play in mediating the social and material aspects of belonging for newcomers*, explains how Buddy to Buddy in Nijmegen fosters social relationships and its material support (e.g. resources and access to information) regarding a newcomer's sense of belonging.

Firstly, the events organised by Buddy to Buddy Nijmegen were held at different places in the city each time, so newcomers got more familiar with Nijmegen. Secondly, these events also strengthened the social ties and fostered a sense of belonging among newcomers, as engaging in recreational activities, like sports, provides a temporary break from the various challenges they may encounter in the host society. These activities helped to connect with others, particularly during the

early phase of settling into the Netherlands. In addition, the interviewees noted that through Buddy to Buddy, they not only met their buddies but also connected with their buddies' friends and family via those relationships. The Buddy to Buddy program thus helped bridge social capital, especially within the Nijmegen community, by broadening newcomers' social relationships.

Moreover, all fourteen interviewees indicated that one of the reasons for joining Buddy to Buddy, besides making new friends, was to learn more about Dutch culture and language. My participant observation during Buddy Cafés centred on cultural exchange showed that through games Buddy to Buddy gave newcomers and other buddies space to share their personal experiences and childhood memories. This cultural exchange between buddies was valued and deepened their relationships.

Furthermore, the analysis shows little direct influence of Buddy to Buddy on material support (e.g. resources and access to information). The economic and legal factors were less evident in the analysis because Buddy to Buddy aims to connect newcomers with locals to form friendships rather than help them find jobs or assist them legally. Indirectly, the presence of bridging social capital through the buddy matches made, newcomers got access to resources because of a broadened network. This, however, was not Buddy to Buddy's focus, as relationships should be based on reciprocity or equality.

Several newcomers interviewed were also critical of the matches made by Buddy to Buddy and its process, as contact was infrequent or the relationships remained superficial. Clear communication and commitment between both buddies are vital to building strong ties or bonding social capital. Some newcomers raised a significant issue regarding equality within buddy relationships. While newcomers are seeking genuine friendships, some local participants failed to realise this and mainly wanted to help and listen, but were not open to forming genuine friendships themselves, which undermined the fostering of a sense of belonging. It demonstrates how even well-meaning initiatives can fail to establish reciprocal or equal relationships, thereby reinforcing the process of "othering".

5.1.5 Main research question

The main research question is: *How do local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging in the Netherlands?*

In the introductory chapter, the research problem and its relevance indicated a gap in NGOs' role in fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers. This thesis sought to examine the influence of these foundations in fostering a genuine sense of belonging or whether they may unintentionally reproduce exclusionary structures. It, furthermore, aimed to give voice to the stories of newcomers (like in Warshan Shire's 'Home'), highlighting their experiences, the challenges they faced, and

ultimately, the search for a sense of belonging.

This thesis has shown that a local refugee foundation that aims to connect newcomers and locals directly influences newcomers' sense of belonging by empowering them through language practice and providing space and opportunities to exchange memories and cultures.

Secondly, the local refugee foundation, Buddy to Buddy, fostered a sense of belonging by offering newcomers opportunities to strengthen their social ties through group activities that expanded their social networks and bridged social capital. Also, the buddyship led newcomers to receive emotional support through new friendships. However, it showed that well-meaning initiatives can fail to establish reciprocal or equal relationships, thereby reinforcing the process of "othering". When clear communication and commitment between both parties are lacking, it can lead to relations being non-reciprocal or unequal in their basis.

Thirdly, the organised events by Buddy to Buddy at various locations across Nijmegen showed that newcomers became more familiar with their surroundings, which helped them foster a sense of belonging in their environment.

Lastly, the analysis showed little direct influence of Buddy to Buddy on material support (e.g. resources and access to information). The economic and legal factors were less evident in the analysis because the analysed local refugee foundation, Buddy to Buddy, aims to connect newcomers with locals to form friendships rather than help them find jobs or assist them legally. Indirectly, through the buddy matches, newcomers could access resources through a broader network.

In conclusion, local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging through empowering them with opportunities to practice languages and by providing space and opportunities to exchange memories and cultures. Secondly, local refugee foundations provide support by offering newcomers opportunities to strengthen their social ties through group activities and friendships. However, emphasis should be put on reciprocal and equal relationships to avoid the process of "othering". Thirdly, local refugee foundations can help foster a sense of belonging in a newcomer's environment. Lastly, local refugee foundations, like Buddy to Buddy, offer little direct influence on material support due to their focus on friendship. However, newcomers could get access to resources because of a broadened network.

5.2 Reflections

In this section, the research process will be critically discussed. First, the conceptual model introduced in the theoretical framework will be revisited. Afterwards, the research process itself will be reflected upon.

5.2.1 Conceptual model

The first version of the conceptual model (Figure 1) brought together Antonisch’s (2010) five factors that influence one’s sense of belonging: autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal, with the role of NGOs on these. As mentioned earlier, research on the influence of NGOs on these five factors of belonging was lacking. This thesis identified the themes and relationships connecting local refugee foundations with a newcomer’s sense of belonging: empowerment (language practice, sharing past and culture, etc.), support (emotional support, social relations, etc.), environment (belonging in host society), and access (resources through networking).

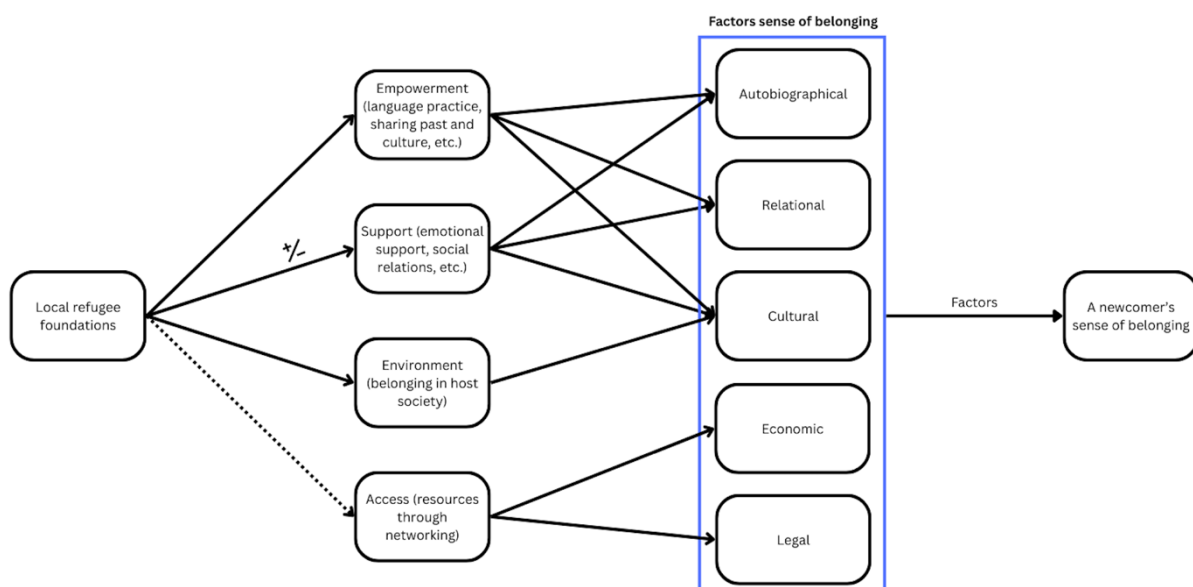


Fig. 3 Revised conceptual model (Author, 2026)

In the revised conceptual model, NGOs have been replaced by local refugee foundations, as the term NGOs is too broad and diverse, and this thesis has focused on local refugee foundations such as Buddy to Buddy. Furthermore, as local refugee foundations, like Buddy to Buddy, offer little direct influence on material support due to their focus on friendship, the line has been dotted, indicating a weaker link. Through the expanded social network, newcomers can indirectly access resources. A +/- sign is added between local refugee foundations and support, because the process of “othering” can be reinforced if there is insufficient focus on reciprocal, equal relationships.

5.2.2 Reflections on the research process

This sub-section will reflect upon the research process, and it will discuss its possible limitations.

The main research question is subjective in nature, aligning with the interpretivist paradigm, which does not aim to provide a universal law that can be generalised. However, similar local refugee

foundations or NGOs can still learn from the outcomes, as this thesis aimed to give voice to the stories of newcomers, highlighting their experiences, the challenges they face after arriving in their host society, the Netherlands, and ultimately, their search for a sense of belonging. Furthermore, it can also be helpful for (local) governments and policymakers to develop inclusive policies and support systems that truly meet the needs of newcomers and strengthen their sense of belonging in society.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Findings: A Newcomer's Sense of Belonging, most interviewees were hesitant to share extensively about their relationships with their family. I had taken several measures (no recordings, pseudonyms, a social mapping exercise, etc.) to guarantee the interviewees' anonymity and to make them feel at ease with me, and I explained these measures thoroughly to them. I aimed to conduct the interviews at a location where the interviewees felt comfortable. However, the settings varied from an individual's home to a café or the local library. Not every interviewee had the opportunity to meet in a private room for various reasons, as some were residing with multiple individuals in one house or were still accommodated in reception centres. This could have resulted in the interviewees sharing less extensively about their families, as it is a sensitive topic. Nevertheless, I could still gather enough data through triangulation, and this limitation was not present in the other interview topics.

Lastly, the economic and legal factors of Antonisch (2010) in Chapter 4 have been less extensively discussed compared to the other factors. This is because the nature of Buddy to Buddy is focused on creating non-functional contact between buddies, emphasising equality and building friendships. As I conducted this research at Buddy to Buddy, my results lacked extensive findings on the material aspects of a sense of belonging, as that is not their primary aim.

5.3 Recommendations

In this section, recommendations for further research and for the local refugee organisation Buddy to Buddy (in Nijmegen) will be discussed.

5.3.1 Recommendations for further research

In this sub-section, recommendations for further research will be presented.

This thesis researched how local refugee foundations influence a newcomer's sense of belonging in the Netherlands. However, a new case study could turn it around and focus on how local refugee foundations influence the local population's image of newcomers. As seen in Buddy to Buddy, newcomers get matched with locals. The perspectives of locals on this matching process and the possible learning outcomes for them might help educational institutions, (local) governments, and policymakers set up programs that aim to foster understanding, reduce stereotypes and prejudices, and, lastly, celebrate each other's differences.

A second suggestion is to research different NGOs or refugee foundations with different aims, such as Vluchtelingenwerk, which helps newcomers with material aspects (adding to the legal and economic factors noted by Antonisch (2010)), whereas Buddy to Buddy does so to a limited extent. An extensive case study can also be conducted to compare different NGOs and examine how they influence newcomers' sense of belonging across various domains.

5.3.2 Recommendations for Buddy to Buddy

In this sub-section, recommendations for Buddy to Buddy (Nijmegen) will be presented to improve their matching process.

During each interview, I asked the interviewees how Buddy to Buddy Nijmegen can help future buddies (and themselves) better. As explained earlier in the findings chapter, several newcomers were critical of the matches and their process, as contact was infrequent or the relationships remained superficial. Of course, it is possible that people do not match. People noted that through activities, they could meet other buddies, which led to new friendships. However, I recommend emphasising the aim of Buddy to Buddy, which is friendship, clearly to minimise the possibility of wrong expectations on both sides. Explicitly telling buddies to be direct and honest with each other, or to ask for help from Buddy to Buddy, can help avoid (cultural) misunderstandings.

The most significant issue the interviewees raised regards the equality within buddy relationships. Miscommunication or misrepresentation of the primary goal of Buddy to Buddy, which is to form friendships, is also essential to this issue. Several newcomers noted that some Dutch buddies see being a buddy as just an opportunity to help for a few months and are not open to forming a real friendship. For some newcomers, it was confusing to hear that the buddy process lasts only four months, since friendship is supposed to last longer. This might give off the wrong impression about the buddy project. Clear communication and commitment between both buddies are vital to building a lasting relationship. I recommend again to emphasise the aim of Buddy to Buddy, which is friendship, clearly to minimise the possibility of wrong expectations on both sides during the intake interviews of the matching process.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Interviewees³

Interview	Pseudonym	M/F	Origin
1	Nimra	F	Palestine
2	Arham	M	Yemen
3	Omar	M	Syria
4	Cyra	F	Iran
5	Nasir	M	Syria
6	Zayd	M	Syria
7	Maira	F	Pakistan
8	Hana	F	Syria
9	Rafi	M	Yemen
10	Adama	M	Guinea
11	Malik	M	Syria
12	Thuta	M	Myanmar
13	Lina	F	Syria
14	Yahir	M	Syria

³ To guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees, I have removed their age and given them a pseudonym.

Appendix II: Interview topic list⁴

Introduction

- Can you tell me something about yourself?

Personal relationships (Social mapping exercise)

- Can you describe your contact with your family/friends?
- Can you describe your contact with Dutch locals?
 - What activities do you undertake with Dutch locals?
 - What are challenges you face?
 - With contacting locals? With maintaining contact?
 - How do you deal with these challenges?
 - What could help you to overcome these challenges?

Nijmegen/Netherlands (Home mapping exercise)

- Can you describe your life in the Netherlands/Nijmegen?
 - How do you define “home”?
 - What do you need to feel at home in the Netherlands/Nijmegen? And why?
 - What do you do to feel at home in the Netherlands/Nijmegen? What withholds you?
 - Where is home to you at this moment? Why and why not in “place”?

Buddy to Buddy

- How did you know about Buddy to Buddy Nijmegen?
- Why did you want to become a buddy?
- Can you describe your relationship with your buddy?
 - What are the underlying reasons for the activities?
 - Want to get to know the Dutch culture?

⁴ Consent was obtained before each interview, and the interviewees were informed that they could stop at any time or indicate when they did not want certain information to be used. I reminded them of this before, during and after the interview.

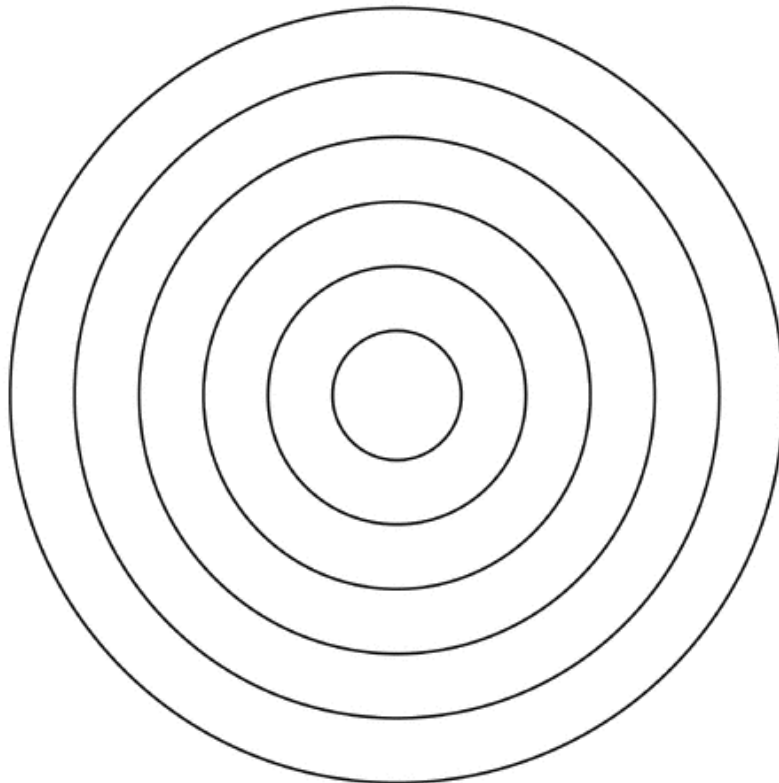
- Getting to know new people?
- Getting to know the environment?
- Just fun? Combination?
- What are your concerns? And why?
- What are you most looking forward to?
- How can Buddy to Buddy Nijmegen help future buddies (and you) better?
 - More activities?
 - What kind of activities?
 - More interaction with other buddies?
- What is your best memory with your buddy or Buddy to Buddy so far?

Closing

- Do you have any questions?
- Is there something else you would like to share or find important to discuss?

Appendix III: Social mapping exercise

This diagram, introduced by Poelen (2025), was used for the social mapping exercise. The interviewees were asked to complete a social map where the newcomer could indicate the location of their friends, family, or acquaintances. Placing an individual at the centre of the circle signifies a highly valued relationship. This diagram offered insights into their social connections and the potential link between Buddy to Buddy.



Appendix IV: Code groups ATLAS.ti

ATLAS.ti Report⁵

Master's thesis Julie Smeets

Code groups

Report created by Julie Smeets on 19 Nov 2025

◊ Acquaintance with Buddy to Buddy

Members: ● ACQUAINTANCE WITH BUDDY TO BUDDY ○ Buddy before ○ Heard from a buddy

◊ Activities with buddy

Members:

● ACTIVITIES WITH BUDDY ○ Cooking and eating with Buddy ○ Dancing with Buddy
Exploring Nijmegen with buddy ○ Walking with Buddy ○ Watching movies with Buddy

◊ Agency home creation

Members:

● AGENCY HOME CREATION ○ Dutch language ○ Education ○ Job ○ Meeting people with similar backgrounds ○ Mixing cultures ○ Studying ○ Understanding Dutch culture

◊ Benefits Buddy

Members:

● BENEFITS BUDDY ○ Against loneliness ○ Buddy helps newcomer ○ Learn Dutch culture ○ Learn Dutch language ○ Making new friends ○ Meeting family/friends Buddy

◊ Benefits Nijmegen

Members:

● BENEFITS NIJMEGEN ○ Positive towards Nijmegen/Netherlands ○ Small city ○ Studying possibilities

◊ Buddy cafe/dinner/activity

Members:

● BUDDY CAFE/DINNER/ACTIVITY

⁵ To guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees I have not published any Atlas.ti documents.

◊ Difficulties sense of belonging/home

Members:

- DIFFICULTIES SENSE OF BELONGING/HOME ○ Difficulties contact Dutch locals ○ Difficulties Dutch culture ○ Difficulties expressing own culture

◊ Home

Members:

- HOME ○ Family to NL ○ Own place ○ Permit to stay ○ Privacy

◊ Positive NL

Members:

- POSITIVE NL ○ Dutch locals direct ○ Positive towards Dutch locals

◊ Tips Buddy to Buddy

Members:

- TIPS BUDDY TO BUDDY ○ Tip explanation Dutch subjects ○ Tip learn language ○ Tip match families with families ○ Tip more activities ○ Tip more guidance